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COMMUNITY

A Reunion Postponed

As refugees streamed out of Ukraine, an Israeli man offered shelter to the descendants of the people who once saved his ancestors from the Nazis. It wasn't quite as simple as it seemed.

BY HILLEL KUTTLER

This was shaping up to be a poignant, poetic-justice, what-goes-around-comes-around story of two Ukrainian men who fled Russia's bombardment of their hometown for shelter in Israel at the home of a Jewish man whose family their ancestors had rescued during the Holocaust. It would have covered the trio's likely chats in the Israeli's living room, their commiserating about war and demonizing and mass killings of civilians, their pondering survival and sacrifice and dedication.

The Ukrainian men's forebears had saved the Israeli's kin from 1941 until the Nazi occupation ended in 1944, and now the Israeli anticipated hosting them until Russia's war in Ukraine ends. He'd already done so much for them. He'd urged them to leave the war zone, paid for their extended hotel lodging in Poland while they awaited a flight to Israel, and pledged to open his home to them. His daughter even installed new appliances—a mini-refrigerator and stove—in the bedroom where they'd be staying.

But then a grave, last-minute crisis postponed the reunion. It still hasn't happened, despite the Ukrainians reaching Israel more than three weeks ago. Still, the principals adamantly affirm

that they'll see each other soon, that they'll close the circle.

They just don't know when.

In the early-morning darkness of April 8, the Ukrainians—Vladimir Kuklin, 68, and his son Sergey, 36—landed in Israel on LOT Polish Airlines flight 151 from Warsaw. They'd expected to stay with Boris Fradkin and decompress from the war's trauma. Their world began collapsing at 6 a.m. on Feb. 24, when booming missile strikes woke Sergey in the bedroom of the house he and Vladimir share in Starokostiantyniv, a town of about 35,000 people in western Ukraine.

Sirens sounded plenty in the war's first week to warn the town's residents about Russian bombs, each wail sending the Kuklins racing to their basement. Not quite racing, really, since Vladimir needed to help move Sergey, who's had cerebral palsy since birth and walks haltingly. Once, with the power out, Sergey fell going to the kitchen to fetch a flashlight. He hurt his back, making walking more difficult. Next siren, he feared, he might hit his head or fall down the stairs.

That's when, prodded by Fradkin, the Kuklins decided to leave Ukraine—and so they did on March 8, riding a bus westward to Krakovets and from there crossing into Poland, where they stayed the first week with a friend.

Russia was targeting Starokostiantyniv because of its air force base, seven miles from the Kuklins' home. The base is where Vladimir worked as an aircraft technician before retiring. His son-in-law Alexei, an air force captain, is now serving there. Vladimir's daughter and grandson remain behind with Alexei, even as more than 5 million of their countrymen have fled Ukraine.

Russian bombs also hit an oil depot in the village of Straklov, about 100 miles to their northwest. On that property, beneath barrels arrayed as camouflage, the Jewish owner of the depot, Ben-Zion Binshtok, and his wife, Sara, hid in a pit for more than a month following the Nazis' occupation in June 1941. A watchman there, Ivan Romaniuk, saw to his employers' needs, all the while building a bunker under the pigpen next to the home he shared with his wife, Alexandra, and their daughters Tatiana and Olga.

That autumn, Ivan moved the Binshtoks to his bunker, where the Romaniuks cared for them. Ivan traded some of the depot's benzene and kerosene for the extra food needed. The girls brought the Binshtoks their meals and emptied their pails of body waste. The danger multiplied during the time a German officer lived with the Romaniuks and met there with fellow Nazi soldiers. Whenever they approached, Tatiana called out, ostensibly to the family's dog, to warn the Binshtoks.

The Jewish couple survived there for two and a half years until being liberated after the Germans retreated, and later resettled in Saltykovka, near Moscow. Ivan had been killed while serving in the Soviet military. The other three Romaniuks and, later, the daughters' families would sometimes travel to Russia to visit the Binshtoks in the 1950s and '60s.

Those gatherings included Vladimir Kuklin, Tatiana's son; and Boris Fradkin, the Binshtoks' great-nephew—the grandson of Ben-Zion's murdered brother, Yisrael Dov. The Binshtoks' children were murdered during the war: one by the Nazis and the other by fellow partisans.

"I remember the warmth with which they honored them," Fradkin recalled of the Binshtoks' hosting of the Romaniuks,

"Every few years, Ben-Zion would sell another of his family's homes and send the proceeds to the widow."

"and the love with which [the Romaniuks] spoke with the Binshtoks. They were good people, with each taking care of the other during the war and after the war, people who remembered the good done to them and didn't hesitate to do good themselves."

The young Fradkin witnessed his great-uncle Ben-Zion's gratitude. He remembers the 20 or so fruit trees dotting his great-uncle's yard and how every summer he and Ben-Zion walked for miles, pulling a wagon heaped with boxes of apples and other produce to the post office. That's where Ben-Zion mailed the boxes to Alexandra, Vladimir's grandmother. Every few years, Ben-Zion would sell another of his family's homes—they retained three or four from before the war, although the Soviets seized the depot—near Starokostiantyniv and send the proceeds to the widow.

The lesson stuck. Like Ben-Zion, Fradkin has assisted the Romaniuk clan.

Fradkin, a 74-year-old retired engineer, moved to Israel in 1977. When he was in Ukraine in the 1990s to see the Kuklins—he's made about seven such visits—Fradkin bought a new computer for Sergey, a technology whiz as a child who repairs and builds computers for a living, although his degree is in law. Other times, he covered some of Sergey's college tuition and gave Tatiana money for

dental work, repairs to her house's boiler, and cardiac and cataract medications.

"I just felt that they deserve it. My moral debt is to be concerned for them," Fradkin explained. "The circle is being closed. They saved my grandfather's brother and [his] wife, and now I'm saving them."

Fradkin was speaking a few hours after the Kuklins landed at Ben-Gurion Airport and Vladimir wheeled a small red suitcase containing some clothes for him and his son off the plane. It also held important documents: the men's college diplomas; a record of their coronavirus vaccinations, all occurring in March during their month long stay in Poland; the travel documents that Israel issued, also in Poland; and the Ukrainian military's documents exempting Sergey from service due to his disability.

They carried, too, the medallion and certificate awarding Ivan and Alexandra Romaniuk, Vladimir's maternal grandparents, official designation as Righteous Among the Nations—non-Jews who rescued Jews during the Shoah, often at great peril and with no expectation of reward. Yad Vashem, Israel's foremost Holocaust-commemoration institution, has bestowed the award on 27,921 people since 1963.

The minivan they entered outside the terminal took the Kuklins to a Jerusalem hotel, though, not to Fradkin's home in Oranit, a small community near Petach Tikva.

The joyful reunion of gratitude I expected to witness still hasn't transpired because, shortly before the Kuklins' flight departed Poland, Fradkin entered Petach Tikva's Beilinson Hospital with a circulatory problem.

"Come and speak with me instead in my hospital room," Fradkin said before leaving home.

And so that Friday I went to the third floor, room 20, the front bed of three, and pulled my chair next to Fradkin's mattress. He seemed fine. His legs and feet stuck out below his gown's hem. He turned his smartphone to display a photo of his left ankle, the side out of sight. It appeared several ugly shades of purple.

"The doctors will run some tests and

treatments, and hit me with antibiotics,” he said. “They’ll know within 30 days whether everything is OK. If it’s not, they’ll amputate my leg below the knee.”

That Sunday, I telephoned to check on Fradkin. He sounded groggy. The doctors’ timeline had changed drastically since we’d met.

“Yesterday,” he said, “they amputated my leg.”

Post-op complications and infections have kept Fradkin at Beilinson and delayed his transfer to a rehabilitation hospital, where a month or so of therapy awaits.

“It’s terrible,” he said by phone in late April, in somewhat of an understatement, of the turn of events. “I’d prepared everything to receive them. I wanted to host them.”

Their reunion still may happen, depending on when the war in Ukraine ends and whether the Kuklins can visit him in the hospital. Fradkin said he prefers to look at the bigger picture.

“I did get them out of Ukraine. The most important thing is they’re not in danger,” he said. “Life continues.”

Meanwhile, the Kuklins are hardly living it up as tourists, even though their hotel in downtown Jerusalem sits less than three miles from the Old City. For the first 15 days, they were stuck in their fourth-floor room that looks onto the back of an apartment building. Both men had tested positive for coronavirus—then tested positive again. They watched a lot of television and talked. Sergey continued learning English online.

Finally, their COVID-19 tests turned up negative, so they took a brief walk outside. The next day, I met them in their room for an extended conversation. In the hotel’s lobby, a uniformed soldier stood at a whiteboard sandwiched between couches, teaching other new arrivals the Hebrew basics: the alphabet, days of the week, and how to say, “What is your name?”

Across the hall, Ukrainian-language pamphlets lay on a kiosk shelf of the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption. A representative at the booth, Anastasia, noted that 120 Jewish arrivals and five descendants of Righteous Among the Nations honorees are staying at the

hotel, one of several around the country secured for this purpose since Israel began welcoming the war’s refugees. Anastasia was there to direct them to off-site advisers on such services as employment, banking, health care, schools and housing. She’d been through something similar upon arriving from Ukraine 25 years ago.

As of April 28, 26,440 Ukrainians (8,047 of them Jews) have reached Israel since the war began. Twenty-three of the arrivals are, like Vladimir and Sergey, descendants of 12 people designated as Righteous Among the Nations.

“The fact that [the 23 refugees] sought shelter here, and saw the importance of coming here, shows their connection to the Jewish people,” said Tanya Manusova, a Yad Vashem official involved in the effort. “We see the importance of acting in an emergency for those whose ancestors saved Jews.”

The museum has played a key role in bringing rescuers’ descendants to shelter in the Jewish state, along with Israel’s Embassy in Warsaw, the Jewish Agency for Israel, and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. So have Israelis whose relatives the Ukrainians’ ancestors had rescued. Some other Righteous descendants even settled in Israel and now find themselves housing their relatives who recently fled Ukraine.

Seven of the 23 new arrivals wish to remain permanently in Israel, but that’s not a given that this will happen. Righteous honorees are eligible for citizenship—one 95-year-old woman is considering relocating to Israel—and their children and grandchildren may stay for up to five years and receive work permits. Great-grandchildren may come only as tourists and aren’t allowed to work in the country. Like all Ukrainian refugees, they likely will be allowed to remain until it’s safe to return home. Discussions are underway with at least one member of Knesset about amending the law to enable them to work if they wish.

Like most of the others, the Romaniuks’ grandson and great-grandson plan to go back to Ukraine when the war ends. They are in Israel on two-month visas that can be renewed.

“I want to return home to live—normally, without the bombing,” said Vladimir.

Said Sergey: “I really want to go home. It all depends on how events develop in Ukraine.”

Our conversation turned to Fradkin’s medical condition. The men can’t fathom the harsh news and unfortunate timing that took him away just as they arrived. They occasionally speak with him by phone. When Vladimir offered to visit the hospital to assist in his care once their coronavirus confinement ended, Fradkin assured him that the medical staff is attentive.

“Boris said he’s very happy we want to come, but he has two nurses,” Vladimir said.

“I feel like I will never be able to repay the debt to him. I am very worried about him now, about his health,” said Sergey, who calls him Uncle Boris or Uncle Borya.

“It always amazes me that the choice my great-grandparents made affects me now,” he said. “Imagine if they hadn’t done that, if they’d made another choice. I wouldn’t be sitting with you right now. When you save one life, you save the world. You see, this is how the circle is closed. I have never been a believer, and I did not believe in fate.”

By this time, we were all sitting on a bench on Jaffa Road. Vladimir stoically had pushed his son in the wheelchair provided free by a national organization that lends medical supplies. On the 10-minute walk, I’d twice asked whether I could lend a hand by pushing one of the wheelchair’s grips in the afternoon heat. Vladimir gently shook his head and continued pushing. I thought of the apocryphal Boys Town line, “He ain’t heavy; he’s my brother,” and how it applies to both sides of the Binshtok-Romaniuk/Fradkin-Kuklin equations.

Shoppers strode by, many entering and exiting Machne Yehuda, the capital’s main open-air market. The light rail trains whooshed by.

Out of the blue, Sergey turned to me and said, “Why is fate cruel to kind people?” ■

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The Equality of Sickness and Death

Working in Israel's health care sector reveals a country making precious progress toward lived coexistence

BY ANNE DUBITZKY

Those in the West who think they know what's best for Israelis and Palestinians generally demonstrate little knowledge or firsthand experience of life here. Heirs of the 20th-century Orientalists, they see the region in black and white: a century-long clash between authentic, indigenous Arabs and colonialist, European Jews. (Never mind that only about 30% of Israeli Jews are of European origin; the majority come from Arab and former Soviet lands.) They view the situation as an irreconcilable conflict that requires external intervention in the form of professional "peace processors" who, with their superior wisdom and talents, can impose a resolution on the benighted locals.

This top-down, outside approach has a massive blind spot, in which slow, incremental evolution toward a more peaceful future is happening on the ground without the intermediation of Western diplomats. The most high-profile example is probably Mansour Abbas, the leader of an Islamist party in Israel's current governing coalition, who has said, "The State of Israel was born as a Jewish state, and the question is how we integrate Arab society into it."

A less visible but even more salient example of natural integration is the health care system. Since I moved to Israel 2009, I've participated in the country's hospitals and rehabilitation facilities as a patient, a caregiver, and an administrator (I worked for several years for one of the country's biggest providers). In the waiting rooms of

every hospital and clinic, one sees Arab women in hijabs sitting next to Haredi men with *peyot* and big black hats sitting next to young women in tank tops and shorts. The staff of medical facilities—not only in mixed cities like Jerusalem, Haifa, and Ramla but in Tel Aviv, too—include a patchwork of religious and secular Jews, Muslim and Christian Arabs, and others. About 70% of the pharmacists at the largest Israeli drug store chain, SuperPharm, are Arab Muslims, who make up a similarly high proportion of the country's physical therapists and nurses. The families comforting and consoling one another in the ICUs and ventilator units are from every possible walk of life; differences in faith, dress, and culture all but evaporate in settings of suffering and loss.

For the last several years, I've worked as a gardening therapist at the Reut Medical Center in Tel Aviv, one of Israel's premier rehabilitation facilities. One young man I've been working with in recent months is from Ramallah in the West Bank, where he was operated on for a brain tumor. The surgery resulted in a coma, and when he emerged from it the Palestinian Authority sent him to Israel for rehab services. His mother, who is with him every day, has a room at the hospital where she can stay the night, to save her the daily commute from Ramallah. All of these arrangements are relatively commonplace and frictionless—and at odds with the myth of an "apartheid state."

One rainy afternoon, after a day of working with the young man from Ramallah, I took a cab home from work. The app told me the driver's name was

Mohammed, and I could only see the back of his head and a bit of his face over his COVID mask in the rearview mirror. Like many Israeli men in their 30s and 40s, he had a shaved head, dark eyes, and dark eyebrows. From what I could see of his shoulders, he appeared to be strongly built. "What do you do for a living?" he inquired. Israeli taxi drivers are notoriously talkative and curious; they often endeavor to extract as much personal information from their passengers and share as many opinions about politics and religion as possible during the ride—so I was neither surprised nor offended by the personal nature of this question from a man I'd met only a few seconds before. I told Mohammed that I worked at the rehabilitation hospital where he picked me up, treating patients using gardening therapy, and that I was also a photographer. I'd hardly stopped answering his question when he asked if I have children. I told him yes, three, and five grandchildren. "*Baruch Hashem, sh'yeh'e'u bri'im,*" he replied in Hebrew. "Thank God. They should be healthy."

I took advantage of the brief pause to ask him if he had children. He has four, he said, and he loves them so much and loves spending time with them, but they live with his ex in an Arab town in the north (whose name I didn't catch), and he lives in Haifa—Israel's famously mixed Jewish and Muslim port city. Then, without my inquiring, Mohammed told me the following story.

"My father is Muslim, and my mother is Jewish. We spoke Arabic at home. Both my parents' families came from Damascus. My mother's father was a tailor in Damascus and my father's father was a shoemaker. They were in business together and traveled all over the Middle East, to Lebanon and Palestine and Egypt, sometimes by horse or donkey and carriage, selling wares and doing business. It didn't matter that one was Jewish and one was Muslim, you see. They were partners." He paused for a brief breath. "As someone who works in a hospital, you know," he observed. "People are all the same inside. We all bleed the same red blood."

At some point before the 1948 war, he continued, his two grandfathers moved from Damascus to Haifa. They moved

into apartments in the same neighborhood and continued to do business together. Shortly thereafter, his mother and father were born. They fell in love and married.

“I was raised in a house where it didn’t matter what group you came from,” Mohammed said. “We were taught to treat everyone the same way. We all worship God, and it doesn’t matter what you call Him.” He went on to tell me about his Jewish girlfriend in Petah Tikva.

Mohammed’s story is not representative of Israel’s Muslim population as a whole, but neither is it so exceptional: It exemplifies the complexity of life in the religiously and culturally diverse society of contemporary Israel. Middle East envoys from the West seem to only be able to think about Israel as if it’s the (fictional) Upper West Side of 1958, with the Jets and Sharks engaged in a zero-sum competition for territory. For the majority of the ordinary people

who live here, though, that framing is delusional at best. Arab Muslims, both within and outside the “Green Line,” have been assimilating into Israeli society more and more: perhaps not quickly and smoothly enough for foreign diplomats who have their eye on a Nobel Prize, but enough to take advantage of increasing cooperation between Jews and Muslims in education, technology, business, health care, agriculture, and other fields. This is the kind of progress that cannot be decreed, codified, or imposed by law or treaty; it can only be achieved by working collaboratively, building on existing structures of prosperity within Israel and working to integrate the Arab Muslim population into them as much as possible.

I recall the Reut Medical Center’s Purim carnival from a couple of years ago, held annually for the children who are patients at the hospital. The kids were as diverse as the staff. One of them,

confined to a wheelchair, was being pushed from booth to booth by a Muslim therapist on staff who wore bunny ears over her hijab and a cotton tail pinned to her tunic. Another handicapped child was accompanied by an Eritrean staff member, a gold cross hanging prominently from a chain around her neck. A man was there playing an accordion and singing, “Oh today we’ll merry, merry be, and nash some hamentashen.”

As I surveyed the scene, I remember wondering if there is anyone in the world outside of Israel who actually knows what life looks like here for so many of us—that it is, in fact, one of the very few places in the modern world where large numbers of Muslim and Jewish people interact, cooperate, collaborate, and do more than simply coexist. ■

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ARTS & LETTERS

Leonard Cohen’s Songs of the Yom Kippur War

In an appearance that has never quite been explained, the legendary singer came to the desert to perform for the troops during one of the bloodiest weeks of the battle

BY MATTI FRIEDMAN

There was always something cryptic about “Lover Lover Lover,” the 1974 classic by the Canadian music icon Leonard Cohen, the “poet of rock.” The song might not be as famous as Cohen’s “Hallelujah,” but it was beloved by fans and important to the singer, who was still playing it in concert four decades later. But what did it mean? Why, in the song’s first line, did he cry “Father, change my name”? That

didn’t sound like a love song. Neither did the observation that a body could serve as a “weapon,” or the hope that the song itself would serve as a “shield against the enemy”? Who was this enemy? And who was the audience?

In 2009, Cohen ended a world tour with a show in Israel, where I live. At 75, he put on one of the greatest last acts in music history. This came after he’d emerged from a Buddhist monastery in California to find that a former manager had cleaned out his bank

account, went back on the road, and discovered that he’d ascended to the pantheon of popular music. Maybe you were lucky enough to catch one of those concerts. I grew up in Canada, where Cohen has always been considered a national treasure, but until then I hadn’t quite appreciated that his status in Israel was the same. When tickets went on sale here the phone lines crashed within minutes. Fifty thousand people showed up in Tel Aviv.

I didn’t know the reason for the intense connection until an article in a local paper suggested one explanation. It had to do with an experience Cohen had shared with Israelis long before, in the fall of 1973. My attempt to figure out what happened turned into years of research and interviews, and eventually into a book called *Who By Fire*, which is about how a war and a singer collided to create an extraordinary moment in music. One strand of this story turned out to be linked to “Lover Lover Lover,” and to the struggle of a great artist, or of any of us, to reconcile the pull of the universal with the magnetism of our own particular tribe and past.

The second week of October, 1973, was one of the worst in Israel's history. At 2 p.m. on October 6, which was the Jewish fast day of Yom Kippur, Egypt and Syria launched surprise attacks. Sirens sounded across Israel, an Egyptian bomber fired a guided missile at Tel Aviv, the border defenses crumbled, the air force began hemorrhaging planes and pilots, army fatalities climbed from the hundreds into the thousands, and Israelis were struck with despair. At that moment, out of the smoke of battle in the Sinai Desert, on some quest of his own devising, strode a wry bard from Montreal.

Leonard Cohen's appearance seemed as strange then as it does now, and has never really been explained, although in Israel this has become one of the stories everyone knows about the Yom Kippur War, just like the famous battles. Cohen was already an international star. Three years earlier he'd played for a half-million people at the Isle of Wight festival, which was bigger than Woodstock, and where wild fans heckled Joan Baez, threw bottles at Kris Kristofferson, and burned the stage with Jimi Hendrix on it, but settled down when Cohen came onstage after midnight and hypnotized them. He was one of the biggest names of the Sixties. And now here he was in the Middle East, at the edge of a desert strewn with blackened tanks and corpses in charred fatigues, playing for small groups of soldiers without an amplifier and with an ammo crate for a stage. Some soldiers didn't know who he was. Others did and couldn't understand what on earth he was doing here.

How he got to the war and what drew him, or drove him, to Israel is a different story, one which I unraveled with the help of a remarkable manuscript he wrote about the experience and then shelved. By the time he reached the front in Sinai, he was with a pickup band of four Israeli musicians. In one description from a long-defunct magazine that was the Israeli equivalent of *Rolling Stone*, soldiers were sitting on the sand at night after a day of fighting. Some of them smoked. Cohen arrived wearing khaki. He addressed them in solemn English, which not all of them understand. "This song is one that should be heard at home,

"They knew death was waiting for them when the concert ended."

in a warm room with a drink and a woman you love," he said. "I hope you all find yourselves in that situation soon." He played "Suzanne." The audience for this strange tour was a cross-section of young Israelis at the worst moment of their lives—shaken infantrymen, half-deaf artillerymen, teenage girls from a destroyed radar station who'd just seen five friends killed. I spent a lot of time tracking them down to hear how it felt.

One of the concerts was at an air base called Hatzor, where pilots flying American Phantom jets and French Mystères were being shot down by Soviet SAM missiles at a rate the Israeli air force had never seen. Pilots would zip up their flight-suits, leave their quarters, and vanish for good. This tour drew its unique potency from the fact that a singer whose themes were human imperfection and transience, and the brief pleasures that can sweeten your night, found himself playing for people for whom those fleeting forces weren't abstractions floated into the air of a dorm room. They knew death was waiting for them when the concert ended. Everyone was sober. No money changed hands. People were paying attention.

At the air base, Cohen played the hits that everyone knew, "Suzanne," "So Long Marianne," "Bird on the Wire." The show went over so well that one of

the officers begged the musicians to perform again, and in the break between the two performances Cohen wrote a song.

One of the pleasures of researching this book was spending time with the pocket notebooks Cohen kept during and after the war, preserved by the singer's estate. Here I found scribbles, half-thoughts, throwaway lines, and the first glimmers of songs eventually known to millions. On one page of a little orange notebook that he had with him in Israel he wrote (and your breath catches, if you know Cohen's work, because you're watching the birth of something famous):

I asked my father I asked
him for another name

It's the embryonic version of "Lover Lover Lover." It's an interesting idea to open with, especially since the Israelis say that Cohen asked to be called not Leonard but Eliezer, his Hebrew name.

Cohen introduced the song in the second show at the air base, according to two of his bandmates—the balladeer Oshik Levy, who was standing by the stage listening, and Matti Caspi, the 23-year-old who played guitar on the very first rendition of the song, now an Israeli music legend in his own right. Cohen finetuned it as the band progressed through the war. In his unpublished manuscript, Cohen mentions the idea that he could actually keep the soldiers safe: "I said to myself, Perhaps I can protect some people with this song." That might explain the lyric about the song being a "shield against the enemy."

So "Lover Lover Lover" is a war song. It's not clear what "lover" he's referring to in the chorus, which simply intones that word seven times and implores, "come back to me." But if we understand the song as a kind of prayer, maybe the word appears in the sense of the biblical Song of Songs, where God's presence is described in terms of erotic love. Few require this presence as urgently as soldiers. Cohen grew up in a Jewish community, the grandson of a learned rabbi, and he knew the Bible (and knew the erotic parts, one senses, better than the others).

Or maybe it's just a classic war chorus,

an expression of longing for someone far away, like Konstantin Simonov's "Wait For Me," the favorite poem of the Red Army *frontoviki* of World War II. In that song each verse starts, "Wait for me and I'll come back." Cohen's mother, Masha, was a native Russian speaker, and maybe she sang him Simonov when he was a child in the years of the world war. Anyone who's been a soldier knows that sentiment is the most powerful one, far more than patriotism or anger. Researchers studying the music of GIs in Vietnam found that although movies after the war made it seem like the in-country soundtrack was political, with songs like "For What It's Worth" and "Fortunate Son," the songs the troops actually loved were the ones about loneliness and longing, like "Leaving on a Jet Plane."

A mysterious detail in the story of "Lover Lover Lover" first appeared when I interviewed Shlomi Gruner, who in 1973 was a young officer in a make-shift unit of infantrymen who saw some of the toughest fighting in Sinai. He and his friends were on the far side of the Suez Canal one night, camped under a tent made from the parachute of an Egyptian pilot they'd shot down. He was out combing the desert for gas for the unit's jeep, coming back empty-handed, when he saw a figure with a guitar sitting on a helmet turned upside-down on the sand. He knew the voice; Leonard Cohen was here. This made no sense, but it was true. He was singing "Lover Lover Lover."

When we spoke, Shlomi particularly remembered one verse that identified with the Israeli soldiers, calling them "brothers." At the time, the Arab states were arrayed against Israel, and most of the countries of Europe were refusing even to allow supply flights to refuel on their way here. Israelis had a feeling of acute isolation. It touched him to know that someone like Cohen had come all the way to Israel and traveled to Sinai to be with them. The singer wasn't a plane full of weapons or reinforcements, but his presence meant something, and so did his words: "brothers" left no room to speculate about where Cohen stood. The problem is that there is no such verse in the song.

At first I thought Shlomi was

mistaken. Memory is an unreliable resource, particularly in moments of extreme stress, as I know from my own experiences in uniform. But then I found a newspaper article, published in an Israeli daily during the war, in which the reporter noted that Cohen had just written a new song called "Lover Lover Lover" and quoted a verse that sounded like the one Shlomi was talking about.

It was Cohen's little orange notebook that solved the mystery. After the first draft of "Lover Lover Lover," under the heading, "Air Base," eight lines appear in the singer's handwriting:

I went down to the desert
to help my brothers fight
I knew that they weren't wrong
I knew that they weren't right
but bones must stand up straight
and walk
and blood must move around
and men go making ugly lines
across the holy ground

To help my brothers fight. No wonder that line stood out to the Israelis. And no wonder Cohen quickly caught himself and began to step back. The backpedaling was certainly related to his understanding that whatever his personal allegiances in those weeks, as a poet he had to be bigger than the Israelis, and bigger than this war. If you asked him who his enemy was in those weeks, I think there's a good chance he'd simply say—inhumanity.

The change may well be linked to a specific moment in the war that seems to have been a breaking point. This is how he described it in his manuscript:

Helicopter lands. In the great wind soldiers rush to unload it. It is filled with wounded men. I see their bandages and I stop myself from crying. These are young Jews dying. Then someone tells me that these are Egyptian wounded. My relief amazes me. I hate this. I hate my relief. This cannot be forgiven. This is blood on your hands.

His tribal identification had gone too far. In the notebook you see that soon after writing that verse of "Lover Lover Lover," he was already having second thoughts. The words "to help my brothers fight" are crossed out and replaced

with, "to watch the children fight." Now he's an observer looking from the side, maybe even looking down. But that must not have sounded right either, and when the song was released a few months later the entire verse was gone. Later, when Cohen performed "Lover Lover Lover," he'd acknowledge where he wrote it, but say it was for soldiers "on both sides." By the time three years had passed, at a concert in France in 1976, he claimed to have written the song for "the Egyptians and the Israelis," in that order.

In those years, with the American army still in Vietnam, most popular artists weren't going to play for troops, because it might seem they approved of war. You needed to be sophisticated enough to see through the politics to the humanity of the soldiers. Johnny Cash and his wife, June Carter, went to Vietnam in 1969, spending a few weeks at an air base called Long Binh, singing for men heading into the bush and for the ones coming back on the medevac helicopters. "I almost couldn't stand it," Cash wrote, but he went. And James Brown went out with a few bandmates in 1968, despite the unpopularity of the war and despite the racial hatred that threatened Brown and America itself; the tour began just after the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. He told the story in interviews with *The Washington Post* and *Jet*, and might have been speaking for Cohen as well.

Brown first played the airfield at Tan Son Nhut, near Saigon, then toured for 16 days, two shows at every stop, rehydrating between gigs with an IV drip. He claimed that even the Viet Cong snuck up to hear the music. "We didn't do like Bob Hope," Brown said. "We went back there where the lizards wore guns! We went back there where the *Apocalypse Now* stuff was going on." Lots of people didn't like the war. "Well, I don't like the war, either," he said, "but we have soul brothers over there." ■

Who by Fire: Leonard Cohen in the Sinai was published on April 5 by Spiegel & Grau.

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THE REST

→ Tuesday night's big win for J.D. Vance in the Republican Senate primary race for Ohio shows that two years out of office, **Donald Trump remains the most important figure in a party that continues to shift away from big business and toward its new working-class base.** Vance's own trajectory reflects that arc. The *Hillbilly Elegy* author and Iraq war veteran worked as a venture capitalist for tech billionaire Peter Thiel, who later funded his campaign, before turning into a populist champion of working-class-focused conservative politics. But that alone was not enough to push Vance ahead in the crowded six-way race—it was a last-minute Trump endorsement that clinched his victory. The pro-big-business group, Club for Growth, a stalwart of the pre-Trump GOP, spent millions on ads attacking Vance. Trends in Ohio, a manufacturing hub that lost hundreds of thousands of jobs to offshoring in recent decades, reflect the larger realignment of the United States' political parties. After voting for Obama in both 2008 and 2012, the Rust Belt state flipped for Trump in 2016 and stuck with him in 2020.

→ Millions of children could become infected because of **widespread measles outbreaks:** The World Health Organization and United Nations issued a report yesterday showing that the number of cases had skyrocketed to 17,338—a 79% increase compared to 2021. The jump was driven by 21 large-scale outbreaks largely occurring in African and the Eastern Mediterranean region, a surge in the preventable disease that the report attributed to resources diverted to thwart the pandemic and other pandemic-related distractions, which significantly decreased the access children previously had to measles vaccinations.

→ Democratic pollsters quoted in a Politico article are skeptical that a **Supreme Court ruling overturning Roe v. Wade** and rescinding the nationwide right to legal abortion will galvanize voters enough to propel the party to victory in the midterm elections. The court's ruling is **still widely seen as a net electoral gain for Democrats but not enough to offset concerns over inflation and dissatisfaction with President Biden.** "Midterm voters care about affordability first and foremost, and they are not people who are worried every single day about losing access to abortion," the Democratic strategist Julie Roginsky told Politico. "My fear continues to be that sometimes we as Democrats run on things that we wish the voters cared about, rather than what the voters do care about."

→ The price of **diesel hit \$5.32 per gallon**—an all-time high—this weekend. While the financial impact of gasoline prices has been widely covered, with newscasters interviewing "Average Americans" at the gas pump, the effects of diesel are less immediately visible but far more impactful on the cost of everyday goods. While gasoline gets most American drivers around, diesel moves everything else: Diesel is used in **97% of the United States' largest freight trucks**, almost all of our freight trains, and 80% of container ships.

→ By the numbers: **34,000 abandoned car complaints in Philadelphia**, a fivefold increase in the number of calls to the city's help line since April 2020. The city has struggled to adequately staff the police unit that handles abandoned vehicles, and towing companies have been restricted from removing cars to give owners more time to make repairs.

FROM THE BACK PAGES

In 1984, still fuming over the American-led boycott of the Moscow Olympics four years earlier, the Soviet Union attempted revenge. Under the heading, "The Olympics—For Whites Only," a team of forgers from the KGB's Directorate A penned a viciously racist tirade, signed it "Ku Klux Klan," and sent copies postmarked from Maryland and northern Virginia to the Olympic organizing committees of African countries. "The highest award for a true American patriot would be the lynching of an African monkey," the missive warned. "Blacks, welcome to the Olympic games in Los Angeles!"

The task of exposing this particularly crude "active measure," a form of political warfare practiced by the Soviet Union since the days of the Bolshevik Revolution, was left to a U.S. government body known as the Interagency Active Measures Working Group. Behind the name was a scrappy collection of cold warriors committed to exposing and rebutting the avalanche of lies the Soviets and their satraps excreted. Perhaps the most infamous of these deceptions was "Operation Infektion," which began with a story planted in a pro-Soviet Indian newspaper, claiming that the United States had invented HIV/AIDS as part of a biological weapons program. Like the disease whose origins it lied about, belief in this conspiracy theory spread all over the world before the working group's "truth squads" could catch up to it.

—James Kirchick

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A Woman's Liberation

I spent my life trying not to be like my mother. But maybe she had everything she'd always wanted.

BY SUSAN SHAPIRO

“G o get your old man a cup of coffee,” Dad told me in his den when I was 13.

“You already have one subservient female in this household,” I teased.

“I pay the tuition that’s allowing you to learn all that feminism crap,” he said, only half-joking.

“Dad wants coffee,” I told Mom in her airy Michigan kitchen, rolling my eyes as she rushed to pour him a cup, adding cookies with sprinkles, his favorite, to the saucer for me to carry back downstairs.

She enjoyed the division of labor I’d viewed as sexist. While I adored my mother, I just wanted to escape her life.

When *she* was 13, my mom was an orphan on New York’s Lower East Side. At 15, she met my dad at the Educational Alliance, a nearby settlement house. She felt blessed to have four older siblings to take care of her, hoping to have her own big family. Dad wanted to be a doctor to help his mother and sister survive breast cancer. “Just got into med school in the Midwest—ya coming or not?” was his gruff proposal four years later. She was 19 at her wedding.

The author’s mother at 20 as a secretary at the Merchandise Mart in Chicago. Courtesy the author

She supported him by working as a secretary through his years of training as they struggled with money and quotas that kept Jews out of top programs. Her boss didn’t think “a freckle-faced Jewish girl” could handle being office manager—until she surprised him with her grit and wit, doubling her

paycheck. Then, when Dad landed a decent job, she quit at 27 to have kids.

I was the oldest, the only girl. By the time I was 8 months old, Mom was pregnant again. By the time I was 7, I had three smart, loud, competitive brothers. With my father on call at the hospital, I was “mommy’s little helper” as she changed diapers, wiped away mud, fed and calmed screaming boys. I was expected to help her shop, serve meals, and clear the table as my brothers talked science with Dad. I felt bad for her, but wanted out. In my mind, Dad had an exciting mission: leaving in the morning, coming home late, regaling us with tales of stupid bureaucrats he’d fought to heal sick patients. Why, I wondered, did Mom leave her fun-sounding job to stay home, clean, cook, and do laundry all day? It bothered me that she felt the need to ask Dad if she could buy a dress or a bracelet like the housewives on TV.

In my teens, I was jealous of my brothers’ grand bar mitzvahs, since our Conservative temple offered only “consecration” ceremonies for girls when they graduated Hebrew school. At 13, the boys put their gelt into the stock market. I was supposed to join my female classmates who were planning their fantasy weddings. While my siblings watched macho cop shows and wrestling, I was enthralled by Rosalind Russell’s fast-talking newspaper reporter in the old movie *His Girl Friday*. I longed to be a working woman, like the ones on *That Girl* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, living alone in the big city.

Mom convinced my father to let me attend the liberal, artistic high school I’d chosen. Yet I revolted against their conventional values. Escaping to college early and getting a graduate degree,

I became a left-wing feminist dismissive of female domesticity. Mom was a great cook; I burned water and preferred takeout. She dressed in bright colored designer clothes and loved Sinatra. A Dylan-freak, I had black hair, black eyeliner, black jeans, T-shirts, and cowboy boots. I chronicled my craziest dates and breakups in *Cosmopolitan* a decade before overidentifying with *Sex and the City*’s child-free dating columnist, Carrie Bradshaw.

Like my mother, I also fell in love with a brilliant, bespectacled Jewish guy, but compared to her, I married late. At 35, I wore a black dress to say “I do” to a TV comedy writer who was 10 years my senior, wanting to make my own rules and money. I withstood years of rejections as an aspiring author, not selling my first hardcover until I was 43. After I fixed up my oldest brother with a colleague from my magazine job, they married and had four kids in the suburbs, making my sister-in-law the daughter my parents had always pictured. Visiting one summer, I was stung when Mom said I sounded like a broken record talking about the film option for my book, as she kept repeating my nephew’s highest math score in second grade.

In therapy, I unraveled my rebellion. My shrink wondered if I’d felt inadequate that I could never live up to my mother. After all, she was a domestic goddess with a rags-to-riches love story, a quartet of kids she was close to, and a beautiful home. Analyzing why I’d fought to be skinny, she guessed, “When your mom got fat, something terrible happened: A brother usurped you. Then a second. And a third. No wonder you prefer your body to be like a 13-year-old boy’s.” Was that why I’d reinvented myself as a black-clad struggling artist urbanite, her opposite? I knew why I’d chosen my profession when I heard the line “writing is a way to talk without being interrupted.”

Having a warm, hilarious husband was healing. Finally able to afford it, we tried for a baby. I was heartbroken when we couldn’t conceive, unable to play the role I’d never wanted to be cast in. Eventually I flourished as an author and professor. But with 100 pupils

a term, some nicknaming me their “Jewish mom,” I worried I was making a living taking care of *other* people’s children. I loved my dual careers, but setbacks were draining, teaching me that your job won’t love you back. While I laughed at the “Oops I forgot to have children” T-shirt a fellow childless friend sent, I felt regretful for missing that milestone. But by the time I had the desire, freedom, and financial security to have a child (through surrogacy, fostering, or adoption), my spouse wasn’t up for it. In my 50s, as he faced medical issues, I fed and doted on him, relieved I’d inherited a little of Mom’s nurturing side.

The author, at left, with her mother in front of the family’s Michigan home—Courtesy the author

Meanwhile, when she was my age, she’d launched her second act professionally after my youngest brother went to college. I asked Dad why—of all

professions—she started a party-planning venture. “As a poor little girl with a sick mom, she never had birthday parties,” he said. Delighted to deliver Mylar balloons and bonbons, she was more popular than my illustrious father. Then, at 65, instead of expanding her company, she retired so they could focus on being joyful grandparents.

“But you could be so successful!” I told her.

She already was a success, she insisted, having everything she’d ever wanted, unwilling to change the dynamic of her miraculous marriage. My mother enjoyed letting her husband handle the bills and buy her clothes and jewelry; it made her feel adored and special.

After losing my 85-year-old father to heart failure four years ago, I worried Mom wouldn’t function well without him. Yet she showed an acute business sense, expertly managing their affairs on her own, leading me to wonder if

she’d always steered the family finances while empowering my father in his role of breadwinner.

Visiting my still-energetic mom, I saw how lucky I was to have parents who supported my dreams so different from their own. I regretted the condescension I’d shown for her choices when I was younger. Remaining devoted to her four kids and five grandkids, she still had great memories of her two decade-long careers, while I never achieved my mother’s patient balance between parenthood, working, and living. Maybe she’d figured out the whole female body clock and knew what I didn’t: that you *can* have it all, just not simultaneously. Although I’m fulfilled by Freud’s “essential forces” of love and work, lately I find myself wishing my life had been more like hers. ■

This article was originally published on May 5, 2022.

COMMUNITY

King of the Negev

How an awkward German refugee helped liberate southern Israel in the 1948 War of Independence

BY ARON HELLER

It was a crucial turning point in Israel’s fight for survival. After 10 days of intense fighting, the warring parties agreed on July 18 to the second, and final, cease-fire of the 1948 Mideast war. The ensuing three months would prove to be the decisive window in which Israel would regroup and rearm before coming back for the final phase of fighting that would drive it to victory the following year.

But there was a major problem. At the break of fighting, the Egyptians controlled the road from Ashkelon to Beit Govrin, cutting off the isolated villages

of the Negev desert from any land connection to the rest of the Jewish-controlled areas. The frontline outposts were choked of vital supplies. Efforts to transport convoys failed and the light aircraft that landed in makeshift fields were far from sufficient.

The Negev was to make up most of Israel’s land mass and was central to Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion’s dream of “making the desert bloom.” Without it, there was no Israel.

On Aug. 18, Ben-Gurion convened the military’s top brass to discuss the crisis. The prognosis was dire: The soldiers and residents caught behind enemy lines had enough food to last them just

a week. For the Negev to survive, 2,000 tons of food, fuel, and equipment was urgently needed. For that to happen, suitable landing grounds were needed for emergency airlifts.

It fell to the newly established air force to find a solution. And the air force, as usual, turned to its mysterious go-to guy in the Negev to figure something out. The man had no official job and no defined assignment. He was a fixer, and most people didn’t even know his full name. But if something had to get done in the desolate southern frontier lands of young Israel, the man for the job was a shadowy figure known simply as Michael, King of the Negev.

Michael Weimers was a strikingly handsome, English-educated immigrant from Germany who earned the moniker “King of the Negev” because of the airlifts he orchestrated to besieged Jewish communities in the south. His efforts to erect vital airfields ultimately helped liberate Israel’s vast Negev desert at that key turning point in the war.

He was a pioneering meteorologist and air force officer who in his day enjoyed the admiration of his peers. But

for some reason his memory suddenly disappeared upon death. Unlike ace pilot Modi Alon, the commander of Israel's first fighter squadron and hero of its first aerial assault, who crashed to death after a bombing mission, and David "Mickey" Marcus, Israel's first modern general and architect of the Burma Road to Jerusalem, who was accidentally shot dead by a local sentry and later immortalized in film by Kirk Douglas, Weimers' legacy simply vanished.

Though still shrouded in much mystery, the outlines of Weimers' stunning biography can now finally be told after decades of anonymity—decades during which he remained conspicuously absent from even the air force's own vast memorial project.

The journalist in me was naturally drawn to captivating and widely unknown stories such as his. But there is far more to the bond I have since developed with the ghost of Michael Weimers. He's become for me a symbol of Israel's plucky and ingenious generation of fighting founders. Not the grizzled sabras in the vein of fellow 1948 heroes like Yitzhak Rabin and Ariel Sharon, who later went on to define Israel's military and political leadership, but rather the traumatized immigrants who sought to reclaim a Jewish home after 2,000 years of exile.

My path to Weimers began as a quest to discover the roots of my grandfather's own WWII experience in the Canadian air force. His reluctance to share the details of that defining period evolved into research about his friends and fellow airmen that culminated in a pair of articles I published in 2019 for *The New York Times Magazine* and Tablet. The first focused on the WWII flying heroics of his old friend and classmate Wilfred Canter, while the second delved deeper into Canter's service as a foreign volunteer in Israel's War of Independence and his eventual, untimely death.

With the assistance of two fellow sleuths, ample biographical research, and interviews with distant friends and relatives, I managed to piece together the life stories of Canter and the fellow volunteers who crashed to death with him on Oct. 24, 1948, aboard his Douglas C-47 Dakota transport plane: copilot

“When the Nazis came to power in 1933, the institution faced near immediate recriminations.”

Fred Stevenson, navigator Willy Fisher, and radio operator Leon Lightman. Together, these four made the nucleus of an extended feature about the outsize influence of the overseas “Machal” volunteers who helped tip the scales in Israel's favor in that existential war.

But there was a fifth passenger on the plane that fateful night and tracking down his full story has become a sort of fixation for me these past few years. Weimers was neither a foreign volunteer nor a member of Squadron 103 like the others. In fact, he wasn't even supposed to be on board. He hitched a ride on the supply mission moments before takeoff, heading to a separate mission near the besieged Negev community of Sdom, at the southern tip of the Dead Sea.

The crash was one of the first fatal aerial accidents in Israel's history. But it barely registered, coming right between the two major offensives that turned the tide on the battlefield: Operation Yoav, the Oct. 15-22 campaign in the Negev in which Israel captured Beersheba, and Operation Hiram, from Oct. 28-31, in which Israel captured the Upper Galilee.

Still, those four foreign volunteers were ultimately memorialized overseas, in “Machal” ceremonies and at the squadron's vast memorial hall at the Nevatim air force base.

The same cannot be said for Weimers.

But he was more than just another nameless victim of Israel's most consequential war. He was a complicated, multi-faceted character who both reflected his chaotic times and starkly contrasted with the early Israeli prototype. From a bohemian family well-rooted in Germany, Weimers and his siblings were displaced by the Nazi rise to power and made their way via England to pre-state Israel, where they rebuilt a family but lost Michael along the way—not before he left his stamp on Israel's origin story.

In short, he's a historical figure worth knowing and remembering. And this is my modest attempt to do him justice.

Ernst-Moritz Weimersheimer, the future Michael Weimers, was born in Harlingen, Germany, on April 3, 1920, to a secular, Jewish family. His father, Moritz, was a doctor who died four months before his birth, and he grew up in a youth village run by his widowed mother Klare and her sister, renowned educator Anna Essinger.

It was a special establishment, focused on a free and eclectic learning environment in nature, and it drew children from all over Germany, including those of diplomats and actors and those with special needs. Inspired by his surroundings, Ernst-Moritz became a vegetarian at a young age and developed an intense, life-long interest in music, animals, the outdoors, and meteorology. It was a place where his gentle, dreamy nature flourished alongside his two older siblings, even as the family struggled financially in the inflation-ridden Germany of the 1920s.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, the institution faced near immediate recriminations and was ordered to fly a Nazi flag atop the youth village in honor of Hitler's birthday. The shocked sisters refused and decided instead to uproot, with Essinger relocating the school to England, along with

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66 children, while Klare searched for a more permanent home.

She found her way to Palestine, where in 1935 she negotiated with Zionist leader Henrietta Szold about moving her youth village there. She eventually bought a plot near Pardes Hanna and then returned to Germany to shut down her school property. With much of the land confiscated, she ended up selling it for just one-third of its value.

Ernst-Moritz, meanwhile, went with his aunt and spent his early, awkward teenage years in England, where he became a boy scout, began studying agriculture and became fluent in English. He bounced between foster families and struggled to make friends. He was educated near Kent at the New Herrlingen Country Home School, which his aunt established.

Inspired by her exposure to American Quakers, Essinger served as a hands-on school principal known as both a strict disciplinarian but also a beloved figure affectionately known as “Tante Anna” (Aunt Anna), or TA for short. Even more significantly, her progressive school later became a destination for thousands of Jewish students who fled Germany before the war began, thus sparing them the atrocities to come.

In a report on April 10, 1934, marking Ernst-Moritz’s first half year there, his group teacher, Adolf Prag, graded his development as “favorable,” noting that while he had fallen behind in English, German, and history he was serious and reliable.

“At times he is still dreamy and childish,” the teacher wrote. “His interests are entirely practical, and he takes his duties very seriously, often neglecting his schoolwork on account of them.”

A later letter summarizing his education and signed by his aunt, hints at a possible diagnosis of dyslexia, which

afflicted other family members. Moreover, it offers deeper insight into these formative years and provides a glimpse into the kinds of qualities that defined his later contribution to Israel.

“He developed very slowly and was not systemic in his schoolwork. He was, however, very much interested in everything connected with nature—sun, moon and stars, animals, flowers and grasses—and acquired knowledge of these things in an unusual way,” she wrote.

“He was not worldly wise, but his character was above reproach. He never lied, and he was reliable and trustworthy in big and little things alike.”

In 1936, at age 16, he joined his mother in Palestine, changed his first name to Michael, and shortened his last name to Weimers (sometimes spelled Wymers). Socially, he struggled. He had difficulty adjusting to the local schools and eventually dropped out to seek employment. He briefly worked in the fields before his amateur interest in meteorology caught the attention of Rudolf (Reuven) Feige, an aviation pioneer and founder of Israel’s meteorological service. Feige hired Weimers as a meteorological scout at the airports in Lod, Ramle, and Haifa. More consequentially, the fellow German refugee became a mentor and father figure to Weimers in his new home.

Weimers’ family friend Zohar Vilbush recalled a bright-eyed, pale-skinned, and rosy-cheeked kid nicknamed “Brody” who stuck out from his fellow peers and had trouble connecting at first with the local Zionists. He struggled with Hebrew and mostly kept to himself, choosing to spend his free time with Feige at the airports, where he would often listen to music and play his flute. With his mother busy with her school and his brother and sister immersed in local life, he became a bit of a loner. Still, he was gentle and patient as Vilbush would speak for hours about the romantic aura of life in pre-state Israel.

“He listened and he absorbed, but he didn’t ‘feel’ this type of life. He couldn’t find his way to it,” Vilbush recalled in a postmortem tribute.

When war broke out in Europe, Weimers attempted to join the Royal Air Force and sought out contacts in



Album of the Week

Hatchie, *Giving the World Away*

Harriette Pilbeam, a 28-year-old from Brisbane, Australia, is the latest Millennial to take on the dream pop mantle. Performing under Hatchie, her new album, *Giving the World Away*, follows acts like Beach House and Carly Rae Jespen in transforming the original dream sound into something that the modern listener can get lost in. That means more synths and less guitar shredding, but the effect is the same.

It’s a dreamy, happy album at a time when things don’t feel particularly dreamy or happy (although the weather is getting nicer). What keeps Hatchie grounded, perhaps, is her double life. Speaking to *The Guardian* earlier this year, she noted that “I don’t think people realize how difficult it is to be that kind of artist who can quit their job and spend months on end in a studio.” Rather, her experience of work is one with remarkable variation: “I did tours with Kylie Minogue, but then went home and worked a random cafe job.”

Hatchie’s dream pop may not express a loud political message. But it does get across the hopes and dreams of a working person in a particularly gorgeous fashion. It is overwhelming with kindness, an album for good times. And that’s worth celebrating.

—David Meir Grossman

COMMUNITY

Our shared Jewish life, at
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England to vouch for his character. A 1940 letter from the department of civil aviation to a RAF recruiting officer, states that Weimers is “a reliable meteorological officer of good character. His experience includes upper air observations, and he has some knowledge of wireless telegraphy, electrical wiring and carpentry.”

In a subsequent handwritten letter to his mother in 1942, though, Weimers says he “did not get any definite reply from the RAF.”

He ultimately opted to stay with the Palestine Meteorological Service until 1944. Upon his release, his supervisor reported that “he did a lot of extra work, constructed and installed instruments and introduced upper air observations on his own initiative. He was an excellent observer, and I must say that I am very sorry to lose a man like him.”

But it was time for Weimers to move on and take a more active role in laying the foundations of the Jewish state. He completed several professional courses, including welding, and attempted to join Kibbutz Alonim in the north. But with his Anglo sensibilities and eccentricities—some locals suspected he was a spy after he unspooled wiring across the kibbutz for meteorological testing—he failed to fit in and was rejected. So, he gave it another shot in the south, descending upon Revivim—the first Jewish kibbutz established in the Negev.

Kibbutz member Yoel de-Malach recalled in his memoir how an attractive, blond man with green-blue eyes arrived by foot with just a backpack and sat down in the communal dining room where he began eating. He then announced his intention to stay.

“My name is Michael Weimers,” he declared. “I’m almost a pilot, almost an engineer and I have a lot of experience with meteorology. If you don’t want me, I will leave.”



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In Revivim, Weimers fell in love with the barren Negev landscape. He began working to establish a meteorological center that measured temperatures three times a day and researched the phenomenon of artificial rain. He was completely devoted to the task. Thanks to his connections to top meteorologists, Weimers was able to procure sophisticated equipment from various sources, including those that the British had left behind when they abandoned Lod airport.

At first the locals were suspicious of the European oddball, but it was “the girls” who, charmed by his dashing appearance, successfully lobbied for him to be accepted as a member.

Though Weimers didn’t appear to reciprocate amorously, he quickly also found favor with the rest of the community and became renowned for his technical skills, ably wiring connections and fixing irons, typewriters, and other appliances. He figured out how to capture radio signals by balancing an antenna in his mouth, and he famously assembled the radio transmitter that allowed kibbutz members to hear David Ben-Gurion declare Israel’s independence on May 14, 1948.

Two weeks later, his mentor, Feige, was killed by a Jordanian shell that slammed into a meteorological center in Jerusalem.

The outbreak of war steered Weimers’ decision to enlist. He believed the best way to help link his beloved Negev to the central heartland was to serve in the burgeoning nation’s nascent air force.

“I’m going—the air force needs me,” he proclaimed, according to the account of de-Malach, a botanist and agricultural researcher. But as in other chapters of his life, Weimers wouldn’t be taking a direct route there either.

Israel’s newly formed military also didn’t quite know what to make of the strange outsider with English and German mannerisms. But the Wild West atmosphere of the times suited Weimers perfectly. Rather than being formally drafted, he did the Israeli thing and created facts on the ground. He simply showed up and got to work. According to de-Malach’s memoir, Weimers zigzagged on foot within sight

of Egyptian outposts across the sandy terrain in search of hard, dense land. When he found it, he declared: “I will build an airport!”

And he did, clearing out a landing ground adjacent to his Negev kibbutz for light aircraft arrivals.

“It seems unrealistic today, but that was the mindset in ‘48,” explained Uri Dromi, a former navigator and editor of the air force magazine. “The air force was in its infancy. It was haphazard and disorganized. The focus was on building a staff at headquarters and erecting major bases. No one paid attention to the periphery. If someone like him showed up with initiative and ability to execute, the higher-ups just took what they could get.”

Though not a pilot, Weimers still stumbled into air action, where his creative thinking came in handy. On one of his sorties aboard a Piper aircraft, an Egyptian aircraft appeared and began to circle. The light-skinned Weimers with his European features confidently saluted the Egyptian pilot who apparently mistook the Israeli for a United Nations pilot and let him go.

On another mission, Weimers’ plane came under attack from anti-aircraft fire. With no ammunition to respond, Weimers began dropping empty bottles to the ground. Their loud shattering apparently did enough to deter those firing to cease and take cover.

When Weimers transitioned to military service, the meteorological station he set up in Revivim was forced to shut down. But he still made sure to care of his adopted home with repeated supply runs.

With his air force connections, and the modest landing pad he helped erect, Weimers was a frequent flier who arrived bearing much-needed food and clothing. Because of his unique access, he became a key conduit for the besieged residents and was known to arrive bearing modest gifts, like battery-powered radios and ice cream—amenities otherwise unavailable in the south. Gestures such as these helped carve out his persona, and his nickname, as the “King of the Negev.”

Weimers shuttled frequently between the Negev and air force officials in the

heartland, repeatedly lobbying for more assistance.

“He was an extraordinary person,” 101-year-old Dan Tolkovsky, a former commander of the Israeli air force, told me. “Very determined, with a particular goal of creating a purposeful connection with the Negev.”

On July 3, Weimers wrote to headquarters saying that “the responsibilities at the airfield in Revivim are growing by the day” and members of the kibbutz were no longer able to “provide all the necessary services.”

He appealed for a jeep with a trailer and for a deputy commander to assist him in running the airfield and overseeing flight control since he was mostly preoccupied with other operational activities.

Though he wasn’t formally air force personnel, and it often remained unclear under whose approval he was acting, his requests were usually granted, and he somehow became the air force’s de facto resource for all things Negev. His fluency in English, from his years in Britain, also made him an ideal liaison to the foreign volunteer airmen with whom he ultimately shared a final flight. But it was the crucial airfields he established, and the airlifts they enabled, that were to become his true legacy.

By the time the second cease-fire kicked in on July 18, 1948, Weimers’ reputation was well established. To the locals, he was the “king” who delivered goods during difficult times. To the air force, however, he was even more essential—a unique guru of the barren, remote lands. So, when the air force started carrying out Ben-Gurion’s order, Weimers was immediately called into action. Within days, he helped convert a modest airfield between Ruchama and Shoal into a 1,100-meter-long and

“Israel’s newly formed military also didn’t quite know what to make of the strange outsider with English and German mannerisms.”

40-meter-wide dusty road landing strip that could handle aircraft weighing up to 30 tons.

On Aug. 23, at 18:00, the first such airlift arrived raising so much dust that the airfield and, in fact, the entire operation bore its name: Mivtza Avak—Operation Dust Bowl. Over the next month, some 200 flights landed at the Avak I airfield. It became more than just a supply route. To some 2,200 soldiers, it was also their only way out for a reprieve, a good meal and a hot shower.

Soon the frequency of flights increased to about 10 a night. In a letter dated Sept. 8, Weimers dispatched a list of his needs for the overworked airfield: a generator, 4 kilometers of electrical wire, tents, beds, blankets, thermoses, and cash. With fighting set to resume on Oct. 15 and Israel preparing for Operation Yoav, the emphasis shifted to military supplies. Ben-Gurion was determined to recapture the Negev and the order came down to construct another airfield further south. Here Weimers’ role was even more critical as he located the strip and laid the foundations for the second airfield—Avak II—near Imra, or present-day Kibbutz Urim.

Weimers vouched for the 1,600-meter strip and sought approval to operate it from Gen. Tolkovsky, then the air force chief of operations. The OK arrived on

Sept. 14 to begin construction based on Weimers’ recommendation. Weimers arrived at the field on Oct. 9 to line up the petrol-filled tins along the landing strip that he would light up upon hearing the engines approaching for nighttime arrivals. The following night, the first planes indeed began arriving.

Such precautions were needed, since the conditions at Avak II were even harsher than at Avak I. The field was within Egyptian artillery range and the planes were loaded with fuel, weapons, explosives and ammunition. However, the Israeli forces managed to deflect the Egyptian attacks, and the airfield proved decisive in the weeklong Israeli offensive that turned the tide of the southern front.

The prolonged airlift allowed the military to swap out its exhausted forces in the Negev and replenish them with fresh troops from the center and north. Overall, some 2,500 tons of food, fuel, and military supplies were flown to the Negev and more than 5,000 people transported back and forth before the operation was completed on Oct. 21, 1948.

“What Michael did single-handedly is amazing,” said Dromi, who in air force history literature has chronicled much of Weimers’ exploits. “He was a man with remarkable resourcefulness and an ability to improvise something out of nothing.”

Friends and family who came across Weimers at this time say it was his finest hour. His eyes would twinkle when he spoke about the Negev and about his role in the campaign. He seemed to have found his calling. His old friend Vilbush said Weimers was transformed.

“I found a ripe young man, tanned from the rays of sunshine who had been absorbed by the land. It was Michael, not much was left of ‘Brody,’” she wrote in 1949, referring to his old nickname. “I think he finally found that balance. He gave the most of his knowledge, of his talent and ultimately of himself to the war effort.”

Despite his dizzying array of activity, Weimers largely remained an untethered freelancer who unilaterally took on responsibilities that were formalized only in retrospect, a Forrest Gump of

FOOD

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sorts who kept uncannily showing up at key moments.

In fact, only on Oct. 14 did the air force head of operations finally dispatch a written statement to the head of the southern front stating that Weimers “serves at the air force representative” regarding the airfields.

By then, the effort was all but complete. Ten days later, Weimers was dead.

With the Negev essentially liberated, Weimers’ attention turned to Sdom, the ancient Jewish settlement near the Dead Sea that remained besieged. The task was to oversee the paving of a new runway for an airfield, since the current landing strips were susceptible to flooding and hazardous for the frequent flights that arrived to deliver supplies to the more than 350 soldiers stationed there, according to air force history literature.

On Oct. 1, Weimers reported that the engineers in Sdom had found an appropriate landing path, and on Oct. 19 he informed the air force that he had given the order to start paving it. He was heading to inspect the progress when he boarded the doomed Dakota flight on the night of Oct. 24.

The mission began with the four foreigners boarding in Haifa with a joyrider and his dog. The joyrider and dog disembarked at Sde Dov military airport in Tel Aviv, where the supplies were loaded for Sdom. Weimers signed the delivery papers and then drank a cup of tea at the canteen before hopping aboard the aircraft with the others at 22:40. After a delay because of foggy conditions, the plane took off smoothly.

Almost immediately, though, the right engine began to overheat and spit out flames. The pilot redirected for an emergency landing at the Tel Nof air base, but the engine exploded within sight of the airfield, breaking off the right wing and sending the plane spiraling to the ground at 23:55, when it exploded into a ball of fire. Firefighters who arrived on the scene found debris scattered for miles and “burned body parts.”

Weimers was identified by the “three-to-four day” stubble on his face. Unlike the others, who were cleanshaven,

Weimers had recently begun growing a beard.

“I have never witnessed such destruction. There was nothing left of the plane,” Squadron 103 commander Danny Rozin wrote in his report.

An investigation could not determine the exact cause for the crash. The Dakota was 100 hours overdue for servicing and criminally overused. The squadron’s chief mechanic had begged to have its engines replaced and a nagging oil leak fixed. He also repeatedly warned against flying without proper fire extinguishers on board. But on the eve of the fateful flight, he was granted a rare 48-hour leave and the flight took off without his consent. The crew had neither fire extinguishers on board nor emergency parachutes and IDs, as required.

The following day, flight orders were clarified so that flights had to have parachutes for each of those departing, under penalty of court martial. The devastating crash led safety concerns being taken more seriously. More flights were canceled, and pilots more often refused to take off if they felt unsafe.

Upon his death, 28-year-old Michael Weimers, military ID 81338, was promoted to the rank of lieutenant. He was the ninth, and final, war casualty of Kibbutz Revivim out of its 30 members. He was buried at the military cemetery in Rehovot in a joint bloc alongside two of the Canadian volunteers who crashed with him: pilot Wilfred Canter and navigator Willy Fisher.

“Only after he died did we fully realize who this man was and how vast were his talents,” wrote his kibbutz mate de-Malach.

“He was a special sort of character. Just very positive,” added Tolkovsky, the former air force chief. “Just a very nice man. Energetic, humble and constantly running about dealing with things about the Negev.”

After Weimers’ death, the war pressed on and he, like the others, was slowly forgotten. There was nothing glamorous about the overloaded, rickety plane long overdue for servicing that crashed while delivering flour, coffee, and soap to besieged Israelis when

heroic military sacrifices were happening all around.

When the fighting ultimately subsided, and Israel finally came around to telling its story, there weren’t many around to tell his.

The airfield in Sdom was eventually named after Weimers, and his name appeared on a few long-forgotten war monuments scattered across the country. In 1978, Kibbutz Revivim renamed the meteorological center he founded in his honor. The kibbutz also casually mentioned him as one of its fallen at its annual Memorial Day remembrance service.

Because of Weimers’ murky status, and a puzzling lack of outreach from his extended family, there remained a loophole: He wasn’t formally commemorated at any military facility. As far as the air force was concerned, he had essentially vanished.

Though the four foreigners who died alongside him had no local advocates for their commemoration, they were included in the annual memorial ceremonies honoring the 123 casualties among the overseas volunteers. But Weimers was not. Only in 2008, when a formal remembrance hall was established at the Nevatim air force base in southern Israel, did its curator, Tal Landman, begin looking for the so-called “orphaned fallen soldiers” who hadn’t been formally commemorated.

He and his partners, Efrat and Gideon Gal, methodically put the puzzle together until, they thought, only one missing piece remained: Wilf Canter. That’s how they got to me, and the connection to my grandfather. Eventually all four were commemorated in photos and biographies that were included in Nevatim’s vast memorial hall.

Weimers, though, once again, was the odd man out. Because he wasn’t officially a member of their squadron, he was not

HISTORY

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included. However, he still wasn't recognized anywhere else either, leaving him as one of just 26 "orphaned fallen soldiers" among the 1,520 casualties in the history of the Israeli air force.

Once Landman, the reserve air force officer, became aware of this slight, he set out to rectify it.

"I believe no one deserves to die twice. No one deserves to fall into the abyss of obliviousness," he explained. "These people gave their lives for the country, and we can't have a situation where no one knows that they ever existed."

He began lobbying the Nevatim base for Weimers' inclusion and, in parallel, began digging up Weimers' file and searching for any relatives.

A lengthy paper trail led to an interview in the early 2000s in an obscure newsletter of a nonprofit called the Association of Israelis of Central European Origin, in which a certain Yoav Tsur described his upbringing in Germany. In the interview he disclosed that his original family name was Weimersheimer, and that he had a younger brother who died in the 1948 war, and for whom his youngest son was named.

A phone directory search led to Landman placing a late-night phone call in February 2021 to a stunned Michael Tsur who suddenly discovered that the Israeli air force was looking for the next of kin of his namesake and long-lost uncle who died more than 72 years ago.

On April 9, 2021, I joined Landman, other air force officials and Efrat and Gideon Gal in the coastal city of Herzliya for a meeting with more than 20 members of Weimers' extended family across four generations.

Weimers' now-deceased siblings—older brother Yoav Tsur and older sister Michal Yaffe—each had four children of their own, and their children were just as curious as we were to learn more about their mysterious great-uncle.

Tsur's daughter, Noa Schendar, came armed with pictures, scrapbooks, and documents showcasing the family's journey from Germany via England to Israel. The detailed records of Weimers' life and death she provided proved essential in crafting this article.

Among the findings was the only known media reference to Weimers'

wartime contribution. In 1964, an Israel radio trivia show did a segment on Weimers and his role in "Operation Dust Bowl." In a letter to the show's producers on May 29, 1964, his sister Michal Yaffe noted how happy he was in the final months of his life. She said he was consumed by his service and would arrive exhausted for brief stays with her, during which he could sleep for 24 hours straight.

Among the material was also the testimony of Yoav Tsur's wife, Shulamit, who recalled Weimers' last visit with them during the first cease-fire of the 1948 war. She said he arrived for the circumcision ceremony of their firstborn son bearing as gifts cigarettes and a jerrycan of petrol that could be swapped for great value. Their next son, Michael, was named for him.

Michael Tsur, born 15 years after Weimers' death, said that on the rare moments his father would painfully open up about his late brother, he would remark to his son about the similarities between the two of them, how both were determined men of action who overcame obstacles.

"He would say things like, 'That's something only my brother Michael would have said,'" Tsur recalled. "My father didn't say much but he missed his brother. And my name, and these similarities, helped us grow closer. It gave me great pride to carry that name."

Most insightful, though, was the firsthand recollection of Shulamit's elderly sister, 93-year-old Yehudit Milo. She told me she had warm memories of her brother-in-law. She said Weimers was very handsome, gentle and polite. Once, he had asked her out to a movie and was a perfect gentleman.

But she also described an awkward man who had trouble connecting with others and who, had he lived today, would likely be diagnosed with a learning disability or placed somewhere along the autism spectrum.

This description of Weimers, and of his often-detached family, help explain some of Weimers' lack of recognition. Yes, the Israeli military was less scrupulous in those days about honoring its dead and keeping in close contact with their survivors. But it seems that

Weimers' family had little interest in delving into the past either.

"They were a German 'Yekke' family who didn't indulge in emotions," explained Weimers' niece Noa Schendar. "They didn't invest in his memory and didn't discuss it. They weren't religious and ascribed no significance to Jewish traditions. It wasn't in their culture. As far as they were concerned, what happened with Michael happened and they moved on."

Schendar, who inherited the family archive from her aunt Michal, said it was typical of the family's inability to cope with emotions. When she discovered Landman's outreach she was overcome with a deep sense of regret.

"How could Michael be considered an 'orphaned fallen soldier?'" she asked. "We have a large family. We just didn't know."

In retrospect, however, she says there is symbolism in how it all played out.

"All his life he was an outsider, someone that people didn't quite understand or know how to handle," she said. "It's fitting that he would remain so in death."

More than 70 years after his passing, Weimers is now officially recognized at the Nevatim airbase for his crucial role as the liaison between the air force and Negev villagers. Several folders of material detail his life and career and honor him for "establishing the landing pads that provided for besieged residents and laying the foundations for the landing of Squadron 103's Dakotas."

His siblings' descendants have since visited the site and have been included in various air force alumni events. The story of Michael Weimers is one the family now celebrates and shares.

Last Memorial Day, Michael Tsur also made the pilgrimage to his uncle's gravesite in Rehovot. There he felt a sense of guilt over all the lost years in which Weimers was forgotten.

"I asked for forgiveness," Tsur told me. "This was a very special and unique man who we didn't know anything about, and we made no effort to find out about either. But now there is a feeling that we are righting that wrong." ■

This article was originally published on May 3, 2022.

Shakshuka

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

- 4 red bell peppers
- 1 medium eggplant
- 2 tablespoons olive oil (about)
- 5 cloves garlic, chopped
- 12 medium tomatoes, roughly chopped
- 1 tablespoon smoked Spanish paprika
- 2 teaspoons salt, or to taste
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, or to taste
- 1 tablespoon sugar, or to taste
- 1 bunch cilantro or parsley, chopped
- 4 large eggs
- Crumbled Bulgarian feta cheese, for garnish (optional)
- 3 sausages (plant-based), sliced in rounds (optional)

PREPARATION

Step 1

Preheat the oven to 450 degrees and line a jelly roll pan with parchment paper. Cook the peppers and the eggplant, pricking them first with a fork, turning occasionally with tongs, until slightly soft and blackened, about 20 minutes. You can also grill the vegetables, turning every 5 to 7 minutes, until they are very soft, about 20 minutes. Do not cook them until they are completely soft, though, as they will finish cooking in the shakshuka. Set aside to cool in a plastic bag for about a half hour, then remove the stem and seeds, peel, cut the peppers roughly into 1/2-inch squares, and just chop the eggplant.

Step 2

Heat the oil in a wide, heavy-bottomed pot over medium-high heat. Add the peppers and fry until warmed through, about 3 minutes, then add the sausage, if using, and garlic and cook for 6 to 7 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add the tomatoes and simmer, uncovered, over medium-low heat for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally, or until the juices are reduced.

Step 3

When the mixture is thickened, add the smoked paprika, salt, pepper, sugar, eggplant, and all but about 3 tablespoons of the cilantro. Stir to combine. Adjust seasonings to taste, especially the sugar, and add a little water if the mixture is too thick.

Step 4

With the back of a large spoon, make 4 shallow wells in the shakshuka. Gently crack the eggs into the wells, cover the pot and poach over medium-low heat for about 5 to 10 minutes, until the egg whites are set. Serve sprinkled with the remaining cilantro and if you like, the Bulgarian feta cheese.

Yield: 6 servings

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