

Chapter 20: The Reunion



It was the 5th discus throw at the 1960 Olympic trials in Israel which changed the path of my life. Without that throw, I would not be writing this book and might simply have become an excellent physical teacher at Wingate to this day. But what gave me the courage and the confidence and the drive to make that throw which led to a life of fulfilling and constant adventure? Eight years at Hadassim, and the friendships that were a lifeblood to me.

After 55 years I started looking back and remembering all these friends. I realized I did not know as much of their stories as I should have. When we were there, we did not talk about our pasts. Young people are not focused on looking backwards. We were in the present and we were building our futures.

The holocaust survivors certainly did not want to talk about how they had seen their parents killed. Nor did they want to go into the details of their dangerous survival in often unbearable conditions.

The children with family problems, such as myself, did not want to discuss the problems we had at home, our feelings of abandonment, or difficulties with parents.

Those at Hadassim who were there because their parents were in the government or were privileged in some way did not want to understand why they were sent away from their families to live at Hadassim. So we were quiet.

"כאן היינו יחד, משפחה אחת..."



הגברים שלנו, יפי הבלורית והתואר



טוב לו לאדם התולך על שניים,
אך טוב יותר לזה שרוכב...



The Hadassim family for years as we lived and grew together

There was a strategy behind mixing these three groups of children together. The three backgrounds integrated well: the rich kids grappled with the realities of others' struggles; the troubled kids were introduced to a positive environment, and learned in our guts that we could succeed if we would only make the effort; and the holocaust survivors encountered a new, healthy, open world of a free and thriving Israeli identity. In the end, these children of the Holocaust became Israelis, while the troubled kids transcended their backgrounds and ascended to the top strata of their professions, and the privileged learned to live uncorrupted by their bounty.

Many of the kids at Hadassim who'd lived through the Holocaust were, in fact, the moral and intellectual center of our generation. Not only had they been better cultivated in the European diaspora, but their hard-won battles for survival had endowed them with moral and psychological virtues of far greater reach. In order to harness their latent strength, however, they first needed a warm and understanding home; they needed friends who would keep close to them rather than labeling them "soaps" -- a cruel jibe at their near-immolation in the concentration camps -- as was given by some people in the cities and Kibbutzim. At that time, Jews wanted to distance themselves from the lambs to slaughter image, forgetting that the Jews in Europe had little to no choice in their slaughter. They could only choose which way to die, but never how to live. These children needed teachers who would be friends. The children of the Holocaust were given all of these things at Hadassim.

My generation of stories was not only about the past though. Our story was also the story of the Generation of the State, the generation forged during the founding of the State of Israel. Two generations of Zionist life in the land of Palestine had preceded ours: the Founding Generation led by Ben-Gurion, and the Palmach Generation led by Moshe Dayan and Yigal Allon. The iconic generals, Yitzhak Rabin and Ariel Sharon, were also groomed in the Palmach days.

We were the Third Generation, born in the Thirties and Forties. Our adolescent landscape was made up of the burgeoning influx of illegal refugees from occupied Europe, the struggle against the British, the War of Independence, a still more earth-shaking wave of Mizrahi and Ashkenzi immigrants and, then, to top it off, the continual Arab attacks on the newborn state. After the Suez War, in the Fifties, our leaders claimed that the era of war had given way to the era of peace. We, of course, took these claims seriously (though they had no basis in reality) so we never considered the army our highest calling -- as the Palmach generation had. We pursued other interests, namely science, business, sports and art.

This is what happened to my class of children at Hadassim.

Ann and I were now married and one day she asked me to tell her about the history of some of the children at Hadassim whom she had met during our trips to Israel. I did not know their stories, I realized. So, as usual the "kid with the dreams" began dreaming. Why don't we organize a big reunion? Invite all the "kids" that I grew up with to the best event I could create. Would they even come? I called my friend Hillel (known as Chile) and asked him. He thought it was a good idea but was doubtful that anyone would tell their beginnings.

I kept thinking and planning. It also made me start to remember details of my friends' lives at school with greater clarity. I recalled one of my classmates, Uri Milstein. In the 10th grade we had to prepare a composition each weekend on a selected subject. In the Sunday class, the teacher would at random ask two of the pupils to read their composition in front of the whole class. I would usually calculate the probability of the teacher calling me, so for a few weeks I would take the chance of not

writing the composition and use the time to practice throwing the discus! Luckily I was never caught, and when I was called, I had the composition ready.

However with Uri it was another story. One week we were assigned to write a composition regarding the War of Israel Independence in 1948. (That was one of my weeks not writing! But I was happy to hear others.) Uri was selected that Sunday to read his composition. It was a fabulous presentation, with all the detail and dates and amazing stories from the War which we had learned throughout the course. Uri's composition was so good that the teacher asked him to give him the notebook so we could publish it so that everyone at Hadassim could have a copy. The teacher insisted and actually approached Uri and extended his hand to receive the notebook. Uri handed it over. The teacher, Shalom Dotan, thanked him and opened the notebook. It was empty. Needless to say, Uri got in trouble and was required to write the whole speech again or to suffer an F grade in the class.

That incident fascinated me for years. So I thought if we are going to write down the stories of the "kids," no one could be better to write them than Uri Milstein. But I had not had any connection with Uri for 50 years, and knew nothing about him.

I called Hillel and asked him if he knew where I could get hold of Uri. He told me that Uri was a very famous writer by then and, in fact, had written over 20 books which were very popular in Israel. I told Hillel that he must find him. And, he did.

Then I called Uri from the U.S. "Hello Uri, how are you?"

"Who is that?" he answered in typical Israeli gruffness.

"This is Gideon."

Uri remembered right away and got very excited. We had a long conversation about the past and present, and then I suddenly said, "Uri, we must write a book about the kids at Hadassim. No one knows what they went through. We only knew the present and we now know the future, but we do not know how it all happened. We must write it and give the book to each of the "kids" at the reunion that I am planning."

At first, Uri thought it was an impossible task but told me that he would try. We agreed on the price and I told him that I wanted a hard copy, first class book with photos. He told me that this would cost a lot. I told him that I did not care and just to let me know where to send the checks.

After a week of research, Uri told me that it would take 8 months to do the job and he would have to interview each one of the classmates who were with us, as well as some who were above us and below us, since it was significant for the content. I agreed and the job started. We called the book, "Oasis of Dreams."

I would like the honor of including some of these amazing stories. Uri and I only learned the histories when we wrote the book, even after having lived with our friends as children for 10 years. It took 60 years for them to open up. They had never told these events to anyone but, for Hadassim,

they were willing. I would like to introduce you to some of these amazing “kids,” as edited from the writings of my friend, Uri.

A Child in the Closet



Ephraim Shtinkler

The five year old Ephraim Shtinkler-Gatwoud was a pale, blond child with brown eyes and Slavic features. He was alive by dint of his hair color and facial features, by dint of a Polish family’s superstition -- that Jesus had commanded them to save a Jewish boy at their doorstep from certain death. He remained alive by sheer discipline and plenty of luck.

Jews in the city of Bielsko-Biala exceeded 4,000 by the time of the Nazi occupation. Many prestigious artists heralded from that city which was divided by the Biala River. Besides Arthur Schnabel, other well-known Jews native to the city included Zelma Kurtz, one of the more renowned European divas tutored under Gustav Mahler’s baton in the Vienna State Opera; Herman Freishler, director of the Vienna Volksoper; and Jan Smeterlin, another accomplished pianist and Chopin interpreter. Thus, before the war Bielsko-Biala was a city of great culture, its high cosmopolitan threshold touching on the life of Jews and Poles equally, rich and poor. The baby Ephraim breathed it all in despite his modest roots (his father was a blacksmith) and working-class heritage – a heritage that proved potent indeed when it came time for him to survive.

Ephraim was born in 1938, in the city of Bielsko-Biala in West Galicia – the birth-place of Arthur Schnabel, the same Jewish pianist who had the generosity to give a rapturous performance of the “Phoenix” Beethoven sonata to us students at Hadassim on a magical Tikun Leil Shavuot night.

The Germans conquered the region encompassing Bielsko-Biala on the third day of the war, and two weeks later they had already burned the synagogues and looted the Jewish shops. Ephraim was the only child of Yaakov and Sara. He had only one genuine memory of the town: his father walking along with him as he showed him how to ride a bike. In 1941, his family moved to Zawiercie to live with his grandfather. Ephraim remembers the train-ride – the depressed passengers, their terror-stricken eyes longing to be both invisible and blind. The Shtinklers resided in the Jewish quarter of Zawiercie. In 1942 the Jewish quarter was converted into a ghetto, a kind of prelude to extermination, whose inhabitants needed permission to exit. Luckily Yaakov, a resourceful and self-sufficient man who by now owned his own smithy in the Polish workers’ quarter, had such permission. He’d also befriended the Novaks, a family that lived above his workshop, and did many of their house repairs for free.

Ephraim told us his first memory of the ghetto, “My father and I were directed to one group, my mother to another, with a road separating the two. My mother was chosen for the group that was to be exterminated. But she found the strength to approach one of the officers and ask to be allowed to join us and live, and he agreed, though it was probably a one in a million chance that he did. Mother got an extension on her life, while the others were sent away to be swallowed up by the earth. Not everything in life is black or white; there are hues of grey and dark brown, and in hell the grey stands for light and brown can mean salvation.”

His second memory: “We lived on the ground floor in the Ghetto. I remember lying on the bed, surrounded by chairs to prevent me from falling or bother my mom while she was doing house cleaning. I heard her washing the floors and singing in Polish, ‘All the fish are sleeping in the lake, though you are still awake...’ To this day I hum that song, always picturing her luminous face. As she kept cleaning I imagined to myself that she was a queen and that we would soon fly off back to King Boris’ palace.”

In August 1943, there were six thousand Jews in the Zawiercie Ghetto. The Germans eventually sent everyone they could get their hands on to Auschwitz, among them Rabbi Shlomo Rabinovitch, the last great rabbi of the town. Rumors of the liquidation began to spread the day before, specifically that the Germans were going to be killing a certain number of the children. Yaakov acted quickly to save his son. His own, quiet rebellion called for him to enlist his new Polish friends. Franchisek Novak agreed to send his two daughters Rosalia and Wislava out to the Ghetto’s border at a pre-arranged time, where they would pretend to busy themselves in games and wait for Ephraim. Once they recognized him, in his prearranged clothes, it was simply a matter of letting him into the game as casually as possible. Then they slowly moved back toward the workshop, careful not to alert any of the policemen – just two little girls and an even younger boy, strolling and giggling innocently together. It was a simple plan, and it worked brilliantly.

While the girls climbed back up to their apartment, Ephraim locked himself inside the smithy, where the darkness was complete. He sat on a lathe and softly hummed his mother’s song about the little fish sleeping in the lake, thinking of his parents as a knight and queen. The Novaks felt so much pity for the five year old, immersed in machinery and dust, that they risked their own lives sneaking him up the serpentine stairway up to their apartment.

“There are Christians who want the Jews to suffer for the murder of Jesus, and then there are those who wish them salvation. The Novaks belonged to the second group,” Ephraim told us.

The day after, when Yaakov confirmed that his son was alright, he decided to find somewhere even safer for him and asked the Novaks to keep him for another 24 hours. Unfortunately, Yaakov didn’t know at that point that he didn’t have 24 hours: the Germans chose the same day for their “liquidation,” and Yaakov and Sara Shtinkler were both sent to Auschwitz. Only eight Jews remained in the Zawiercie Ghetto, two of them children. Ephraim was one of them.

Ephraim explained what happened next, “The entrance to the Novaks’ house was through the kitchen, which led to the sparsest living room. The only bathrooms were in the courtyard, and since there weren’t any showers everyone was obliged to wash themselves in a large bucket. The living room had enough room for one bed (and a closet) for the parents, Franchisek and Genovepa, and two of the girls, while Genovepa’s mother and her dwarf sister slept in the kitchen. So besides me, kindly relegated to the eighty centimeters in the closet, there were six people altogether. I knew very well that the Germans would kill me in an instant, that I had to keep quiet even to the point of repressing the dimmest sneeze or cough, that the neighbors who strolled in day and night could just as easily turn everyone over to the authorities.

“That sustained condition dictated the next two years for me and my tiny capsule, disconnected from day and night. Still, I began to experience something akin to meditation, without either boredom or anxiety. My only friends were the spiders in the closet. I stopped asking when all of this would end, when evening or the next meal would come. Regardless, I was very attentive to all

the goings-on in the apartment. I tensed up whenever I heard a strange voice, or whenever a neighbor came by, and I kept as silent as mouse. None of that had to be explained to me. I was only allowed to relieve myself at night, when I would be rushed out of the closet to get cleaned up and then pushed back inside just as quickly. On one occasion, they'd taken me out to treat me for lice, when there was a sudden knock on the door that sent me back into the closet trembling and naked. Wislava threw herself into the bucket in my place, tearing her clothes off just in time for the neighbor to stroll in complaining about being made to wait in the hallway.

“As far as I was concerned, this situation could have gone on forever. Franchisek took seriously ill after a short while, and no amount of cupping his chest with hot glasses could help him without any other available level of care. He lay dying on the bed surrounded by candlelight for four days, and I kept breathlessly still in my little closet space as all manner of friends and neighbors came in to say their goodbyes. Without a breadwinner, it was left to Rosalia and Wislava to support the family, including me. So everyday they marched to the nearby village, where they could get milk and eggs for cheap and then sell them back for a profit in town. As young as they were, they still kept quiet about me –even with their closest friends.

“Two months before the Russian occupation, the Nazis appropriated the living room for two of its officers, and the family was moved into the kitchen, where I soon joined them -- covered by the sliver of cloth that hung around the dinner table. I sat there day and night on a low bench, where I could gaze at the officers' feet as they took their meals.”

As Russian soldiers replaced Germans, Ephraim was finally allowed out of the closet. He was every bit as illiterate as the mythical boys raised by Roman wolves. Genovepa, now a widow, smuggled him to her sister-in-law's in a nearby town for two weeks. The Novaks were afraid they had taken too great a risk even with their neighbors' lives, though Ephraim was now well-versed in the proper Christian prayers and rituals and could probably pass for a common Polish boy.



The Closet

He was now seven years old. After another several months, Genovepa met another Jewish survivor, a factory owner, and told him about the boy she had hidden for two years. When he came to visit, the man suggested that they send Ephraim to a Jewish orphanage, and the boy was soon traveling the escape routes, stopping in one of the refugee camps on the way to the children's camp in Furten, Germany. There, one of Hadassim's instructors, Masha Zarivetch, promised him that he would soon “reach Eretz Israel and be reborn in a new paradise.”

Avinoam Kaplan was Ephraim's first instructor at Hadassim. The first time Kaplan met with the eight Holocaust children he showed them a bunch of small animals, pulling them out of his pockets one by one, including spiders. "These are my best friends," Ephraim yelled out, and Kaplan chuckled because he thought the boy was making some kind of a joke. Kaplan would later tell us that he loved Ephraim as a son, and this is also one of Hadassim's miracles: teachers were to their students as parents.

While we were serving in a paratrooper unit together, I once asked Ephraim how he survived the Holocaust. "That's a long story," he answered.

"Well, I have time."

"Then use it for more constructive things."

"Like what, for instance?"

"To make plans for your vacation."

While we were growing up together, Ephraim thought it better not to tell his story, that there were more "productive" things to be getting on with. Now, at the age of 68, his edge softened a bit, he was more willing to explore his earliest trials.

Who would have believed that this Holocaust orphan could serve in one of the finest battalions, that he could spill blood with his brothers in '67 and '73, that he would go on to take a Bachelor's in chemistry and biology and Master's in botany (in Kaplan's footsteps), that he would then study computer science and attain a senior position within the sophisticated Israeli aviation industry? It was men like Ephraim, born of the Holocaust, but bred in Hadassim, that allowed the Israeli state to endure the multiple threats against her.

We asked him how Hadassim had helped him, how he made the transition to the "normal" Israeli persona. He answered, "We children came into an atmosphere where the past was dead, where we were now reborn in our true homeland. Almost nothing was said in Hadassim about the "thing" that happened. During the Holocaust, everything was forbidden but in Hadassim everything was permitted. So almost overnight we found ourselves in unadulterated freedom, something that even normal children rarely experience. That freedom neutralized the otherwise inevitable compulsions and fears -- of the unknown, of trying new things -- that children of our backgrounds would have. Unfortunately not many other survivors were so lucky. The nurturing and encouragement we received at the get-go from our first counselor, Malka Kashtan, helped us a great deal."

On our first Holocaust Memorial Day, Eizik Zarivetch, told us all about life at the Furten camp, and one of the other sabras (native Israelis) remarked, "So the Holocaust wasn't so bad, then." To which Eizik replied, "Furten was heaven compared to what this boy had to endure," nodding toward Ephraim. He turned to him and asked if Ephraim might tell his story. Ephraim looked up at him and went deathly silent.



Elisa Shwartzwald-Bar

Elisa Shwartzwald-Bar was also one of the orphans to arrive with the first eight children at Hadassim. She was born in 1938 in Lvov, the capital of Galicia, known as a “Paragon of Beauty” in Jewish parlance. Jews had been in Lvov since the 13th century; there were 150,000 of them there – a full third of the city’s population – up until the Holocaust. When the war erupted, the Soviet Union annexed the city to the Soviet Republic of Ukraine and took freely of its possessions, while the Germans would end up taking the rest when they came in July of 1941.

Elisa was the single daughter of a wealthy and established merchant family; she was two years old when the Germans occupied the city. As she recounts her first memory of it, “the Germans burst into the house and tore all the pictures out of their frames, tossing everything into chaotic piles and marking a bold X on every item worth looting.”

The family was thrown into the Ghetto in November, 1941, and from that day her father, Randolph, did everything he could to save her. For anyone who would doubt that a two year old girl could remember these things, we answer that no one was left to recount them to her: her parents and remaining close family were exterminated to the last man.

Elisa remembered her childhood, “Part of our family was smuggled out of the Ghetto to live with a Polish family. They’d received a handsome sum from my father in exchange for housing us, but the neighborhood Ukrainians, even more than the Germans, were always spying after families that sheltered Jews, were always suspicious that someone buying extra groceries could be a Jew-lover. So eventually the Poles threw us out, and we scattered about the town at night, my aunt Berta and I, knocking on doors and looking for shelter. For a while no one would let us in, and with fear ruling the streets, my aunt, in an act of desperation, left me behind in one of the back rooms of the house we’d been thrown out of. Fortunately, our Polish hosts discovered me in the morning and decided to keep me anyway. They were too devout to get rid of me. Father would send them more money from time to time, and eventually they saw that they could keep me openly – I was blond, had blue eyes and spoke Polish well enough, so it was easy for them to pretend I was their granddaughter. Father made a few rare, nightly visits, always bringing more money and occasionally leaving me brief notes. One of them read: ‘Remember that your name is

Elisa Shwartzwald, a Jew. Tell no one, but always remember.' We lost contact toward the end of the war, and I assume he was probably caught and murdered. During that period of shelter, I learned all the Christian practices and accompanied my hosts to church. They even gave me their surname, though I can't remember it today. The only friends I had were the few mice who would eagerly await my daily portion of yellow bread. I used to hide the leftovers underneath the sofa in the bedroom, then lie in the dark and listen to them twitter about underneath as they ate it up. I can hardly remember it ever being cold, really – I remember only the bountiful summer gardens, the wonderful pea pods and poppies. The Germans came to the house from time to time, but never suspected I could be a Jew. I was still very afraid, of the planes and bombs, of the secret I had to carry with me that I hardly even understood."

Only eight thousand remained of the original 150,000 Jews of Lvov after the German occupation. The rest were dispensed with in the Janovsky and Belzec death camps. When the occupation had ended, Elisa's caretakers kept expecting someone to come for her, but they waited in vain. Despite everything, they'd never really bonded with her; it was clear they had tended to her from religious and material motives. Now they were desperate to escape west, away from the Soviet occupied zones, so they sent Elisa to the Jewish community center where most of the effort to reunite families was concentrated.

So there she was, a six year old girl sitting alone, listening to reams of Yiddish gibberish passing wildly from one pathetic face to another, waiting politely for someone in the crowd to recognize her. Finally, a woman came to her and asked, "Can you give me any names of relatives? Any name you can think of." Elisa gave her one name that was familiar, 'Mandel,' and the lady sent a note on her behalf to the family listed under that name. Elisa's Polish caretaker took her to their address in the city, and as luck would have it they identified her immediately. That was the last Elisa saw of her Polish hosts.

The Mandels were distant relatives, and they gladly adopted her. Curiously, she continued to attend church in secret. When they asked where she was spending that time, she told them she'd gone out to play. They had their own suspicions after a while, though, and one day when she gave the same alibi they laughed and said, "Nah, you were seen in church, kneeling at Mary's feet and praying to the icons! Don't you know you're Jewish? You don't have to go there anymore." Soon enough, the Mandels were off wandering through Poland themselves to escape from the Soviets. They finally stopped at Lignitz, where Elisa met another little girl, Metuka, who would end up being a lifelong friend at Hadassim. From there, they came with the other children to Israel.

Elisa made an enormous success of her life. After graduating from a teachers' seminary at Hadassim, Elisa went on to do a bachelors in Bible Studies and Literature and then a master's in education at the Hebrew University. Today she works at the Council for the Sheltered Child in Israel, helping to rehabilitate some 550 children of broken homes, ages K-3, 92% who pass exams in reading and math with better scores than the current 8th grade national averages. "The current capital of Eastern Ukraine is where I have the only relative I have left, a very distant one. He used to tell me I'd end up as a seamstress. But for Hadassim, he could easily have been proven right."

Sixty years later, the little blond Jewish girl who knelt at Mary's feet in a Polish church is a senior officer of Israel's educational system -- another Hadassim miracle.



Alex Orlander and his sister, Metuka

Alex Orlander was born in 1935, near Lvov in the town of Zolkiew in Eastern Galicia. His sister, Metuka, was born four and half years later. Their mother, Rachel, came from one of the richest families in the area, the Reitzfelds, who owned a nearby oil and barley factory. Their father, Hirsh Leib, orphaned at a tender age, was a successful fur manufacturer – and Zolkiew was the center for Poland’s fur industry, center of fur manufacturing for the whole world. Hirsh’s aunt had adopted him and he had learned the fur business from his cousin.

The city was home to 5000 Jews at the outset of the war. Nobody then believed – certainly not the Reitzfelds or the Orlanders – that there was a safer or more pleasant place to live.

The Orlanders lived comfortably in the countryside. Several days into the war, the Orlanders welcomed several relatives who were escaping from Krakow into their home. Despite the nature of the visit, the atmosphere in the house was stubbornly happy and even light. With the din of war in the background, they actually played cards. No one saw the writing on the wall; no one even spoke of trying to escape, of finding real shelter from what history had promised all these years. They’d all thought of Uncle Manek, always harping about moving to Israel, as adorably neurotic. Sure, the Soviet border wasn’t far, but the Russians were easily dismissed as philistines, but the implications of the combined German and Ukrainian attacks against the Jews of Zolkiew, in September 1939, seems to have been utterly lost on this family. It should have been clear what was waiting for them if German and Ukrainian anti-Semitism would join forces.

The Germans turned the city over to the Soviets after only five days. “It was then that the population really began to feel the war,” Alex remembers. Members of the communist party, some of them Jews, readily handed the Russians the names of all wealthy citizens; relatives denounced relatives, each hoping to bring about utopia.

Everyone of substantial wealth was arrested, and by June of 1940 most of them were exiled in Uzbekistan. These included many members of the Reitzfeld family – the grandfather, the aging pater familias, included.

This prefatory exile seemed catastrophic, of course. But in the end, many of the exiled survived while most of those left behind in the city did not. With the Germans pressing against the Soviet Union in June 1941, many Jews fled east alongside the Russians. But the Reitzfelds and Orlanders stayed in the city.

On June 28, the Germans occupied Zolkiew, and by the next day they had already burned down its ancient synagogue. The mass abduction of Jews for forced labor began after a month, once they were properly sealed and helpless – and still they didn’t realize

what was going on, not fully. “It was common to hear that the ‘barbarians’ who had come in initially and exiled the rich were gone, that our German captors, the ‘civilized Germans’ had taken their place, and once Romanian allies entered the city some people thought we were saved. They [the Romanians] brought lemons with them, and we even bought lemons from them in exchange for food! Then the Gestapo arrived, and slowly rumors descended that they were going to kill Jews. As it turned out, there were no murders in the city, and people continued their lives, but trains were passing through, transporting Jews to the Belzec camp which wasn’t far. Some of them had been able to jump from the trains, and they started telling stories of horrible cruelty and random murder in the outlying villages. My cousin Clara and some of her friends knew first aid, so they treated some of these people. Mother had just then bought a cow for the family, so we’d have more milk for the kids.

“When the Germans began fighting Russia, Father was recruited into a Soviet Polish unit, and we eventually heard that he’d died near Ternopol, eastward toward the Soviet border,” explained Alex.

As German actions became frequent in the city, with Jews butchered in plain sight and others sent to the extermination camps, sixteen people from the Patrontch, Melman and Reitzfeld families holed up together under the Melman residence. But they refused to have Rachel, Alex and Metuka with them for fear that the two year old Metuka wouldn’t hold still and silent and that they would all be exposed. The three of them were therefore forced to leave and move in with Aunt Cohen in the Ghetto at the end of 1941. Overpopulation in the Ghetto eventually spread plague – typhoid fever – and the rate was atrocious, with one tenth of the population succumbing every day. Cousin Akiva lay dying right before their eyes, and then their mother’s condition began to deteriorate as well. Aunt Sara snuck out of the Melmans’ hole and came into the Ghetto temporarily to help her. Thankfully, Rachel soon recovered and the three of them moved into the Ghetto center to avoid the epidemic.

Metuka continued her story, “On my fourth birthday, April 3, mother went out with uncle Joseph searching for food, so that we would at least have something to eat on my birthday. My eyes followed her from behind the shutters. Most of the Jews had already been murdered at that point, or sent to the camps. Mother probably also intended to go and consult with her family on how to rescue us from this inferno, but along the way suddenly German cars burst through the streets and started shooting in all directions. It was one of their tricks: baiting with an announcement of food supplies, then switching once the Jews had crawled out from their hiding places. They drew them in and then shot them wholesale. This is what it meant, their ‘Judenrein’ – Jew cleansing. Some were killed right there in the streets, while others, some 3000 of them, were taken to the Borek Forest to be shot to death. The Germans left about sixty of them alive, my mother and uncle among them, to ‘clean’ the streets.

“Two days later, in the evening, mother and Joseph finally tried to come back to our hiding place, but they were captured and executed almost immediately. I didn’t see them hurt, but the sound of the bullets still pierce and echo in my ears to this day. Alex and I were left alone in the attic. He was seven years old, and I four.”

David Maneck was still busy along with fifty or so others in cleaning the Ghetto and carrying out corpses. After two days, he managed to sneak up to the attic and tell the two children that “Mama will be back in a few days,” and leave them some food. Several days later, on a Sunday morning, he led them out to the Ghetto gates. He instructed Alex to walk hand in hand with Metuka to his friend Igor Melman’s house, where they would meet Valenti Back and, when they got there, to ask for Aunt Sara.

So on they walked on the main road, and as it was indeed Sunday most of the Poles and Ukrainians, who were quite religious, were busy praying inside their churches, allowing for them to cross the city safely back to the Melman house.

Metuka remembers every little detail of this trip. “People in all manner of austere clothes were walking past us in the other direction; various higher-class Poles could be seen riding their carriages. I asked David Maneck, years later, if any of this had really happened or I’d dreamt it all. He told me, ‘No, you weren’t dreaming at all. Your only chance of getting past the Gestapo was that Sunday, when everyone was at church.’”

Valenti recognized Alex and Metuka as soon as he opened the door, and he was genuinely shocked. It was only a year since he’d refused to have Rachel and her children under his house, and her death was now clearly on his conscience. “What are you doing here?” he asked tentatively.

“We know that Aunt Sara is here. Can we see her?”

The Germans turned the Melman house over to the Back family during the occupation. Valenti pulled the children inside quickly, before any of the neighbors could notice, and he repeated his warning to Alex that Metuka would not be allowed to stay – that she couldn’t be trusted to stay silent. Alex already seemed to know what he would say. “I’m almost a man now. I’ll leave and join the resistance in the forest, so she can take my place. Please – just let her stay in the house.”

Valenti was expectedly moved by this. It was an astounding gesture, an unheard of thing for a boy of seven. So he took them both into the attic, handed them toys belonging to the Melman children, and then left them to talk to the family in the burrow.

“Are you willing to have these children?”

The families then held a long discussion, culminating in a disgraceful majority vote to the effect that it would be too dangerous to take Alex and Metuka in – that they should be sent away. It was left to a Pole of German ancestry – an unimaginable reversal of fate – to persuade them: “These children found their way here from all the way back in the center of town; no one saw them, no one harmed them. I tell you, it is God’s hand in this. Only God could decide to allow them here, it is his command. Therefore, as the owner of the house I veto your decision. They stay.” Then he brought Clara and Sara up to the attic, where they washed the two children, cut their hair off and led them back down where they joined the other cellar dwellers. Their number had now grown to eighteen.

It was very soon afterwards that a major catastrophe took place: a fire had spread through some twenty houses, and whole blocks were incinerated, including the nearby oil refinery. The Melman’s roof started burning, and as more and more smoke seeped into the house the residents began to suffocate. While their lives were in danger inside, their fates were equally vulnerable outside, where neighbors could easily spot them and report them to the Gestapo. Luckily the house had an extra underground sanctuary built at the start of the war, and only a wall separated them from this additional space. As the smoke grew denser everyone clawed harder at the wall, looking for a loose opening they could pry through. One of the girls, a fourteen year old girl by the name of Manya, couldn’t take the panic, and she decided to leave the house altogether. She ran upstairs and out to the courtyard, where she cried back, “Father, I won’t be buried alive – I want to live!”

The fire was extinguished shortly thereafter, but for Manya it was too late. She had already run out to the street from the courtyard, where some of her old peers from school identified her. When the Gestapo got wind of it, she was arrested and taken to their headquarters, where she was interrogated, tortured and died – but she revealed nothing about the location of the burrow or its inhabitants.

On July 10, 1942, two months after Alex and Metuka were accepted into the burrow underneath the Melman house, the Germans ended their liquidation of the Zolkiew labor camp and finished off the remaining forty prisoners in the nearby forest. The hunt continued for the last scattered remains

of Zolkiew's Jews, with the last victims executed on the grounds of the ancient Jewish cemetery. It was with this ultimate desecration that the Nazis declared the city "Judenrein".

The burrow and its dwellers, however, were still intact. There were four young children there now, including Alex and Metuka. Clara entertained them by drawing comical stick figures on newspapers, which they clipped out and goofed around with. She taught Alex how to read Polish, and eventually began reading all the books the families had brought down with them, along with those that Valenti occasionally smuggled in.

As for Valenti, his incessant drinking became worrisome. He worked at a local police station, so there was ample reason to suspect he could let something slip if he wasn't careful with his vodka. He even had his colleagues over at the house for weekly card games, in order to buy their trust. Local policemen and Gestapo men played gin and drank to their hearts' content while Alex and Metuka listened silently, inches below their feet. Some of them would occasionally stay the night, and towards the end of the war the authorities even appropriated part of the house for two of its soldiers. One of the latter was in charge of the nearby train station that saw the transport of Jews to the Belzec camp.

One of the things Valenti smuggled into the burrow was a globe, which the children could use to follow the course of the war while listening to BBC broadcasts through their ceiling. "Eretz Isreal was a frequent topic of discussion for us at the time," Metuka remembers. "Many of the adults argued bitterly about what the Jews might have been able to do if they'd only had a state of their own prior to the war."

On July 27, after days of constant bombardment, the Soviets finally entered the city. Some of the bombs and shells had exploded very close to the Melman house. Metuka describes it, "Shells were blasting heavily outside, and many were dying. I remember thinking how unbelievable it was that we could die now from some random explosion, after having made it this far. The only thing I wanted and looked forward to was a big slice of bread covered in butter and jam; it's all I could picture to myself then. Suddenly, there was dead silence. Valenti knocked on the burrow entrance and we let him in. 'The Russian are here. You're free...' We were stunned. It just didn't seem possible, it couldn't be happening – and we were hesitant to move at first. We waited another half-day to make sure it was really safe enough. The adults could hardly even move, as their muscles had atrophied after all this time. The light outside was piercing white. My eyes went straight to the Katopiski flower – big and yellow, smooth as silk on the inside and shaped like a duck's beak. I'd hardly remembered that there could be something so beautiful out there in the world."

Ukrainian gangs now took to wandering the streets at night and fell upon the survivors, while Russian soldiers could be seen taking freely and cruelly of defenseless women. It was an expression of the new regime's hostility, a regime that felt every bit as comfortable dealing in violence as were the Germans. Mass expropriation of homes and possession, along with implacable intolerance toward any criticism, was the order of the day. Valenti couldn't hold back his reams of obscenity at the soldiers who had come to strip bare the Melman house. He was immediately arrested and sentenced to death, and he fell to the ground pleading for his life. When his claims to have saved Jews during the war fell on deaf ears, Metuka and Alex came running to help him. The commander's heart softened at such a display from the children, and Valenti was released. He subsequently took his family west away from Soviet territory.

In 1945, when the whole region was formally annexed to the Soviet Union, Alex and Metuka, along with the rest of the families, found their way to the city of Lignitz in western Poland. There the families rehabilitated an oil factory, and their economic situation improved quickly. They had an accountant by the name of Moshe Altshuler-Eshel who eventually became treasurer of Hadassim.

Metuka described those days. "We lived in a big apartment, and as more money came in we started eating like crazy. Meanwhile, I kept hearing that mother was still in Russia and kept

expecting her to come back. It was really two years later that I realized she would never return to me, and I actually started calling Aunt Sara ‘mother’.

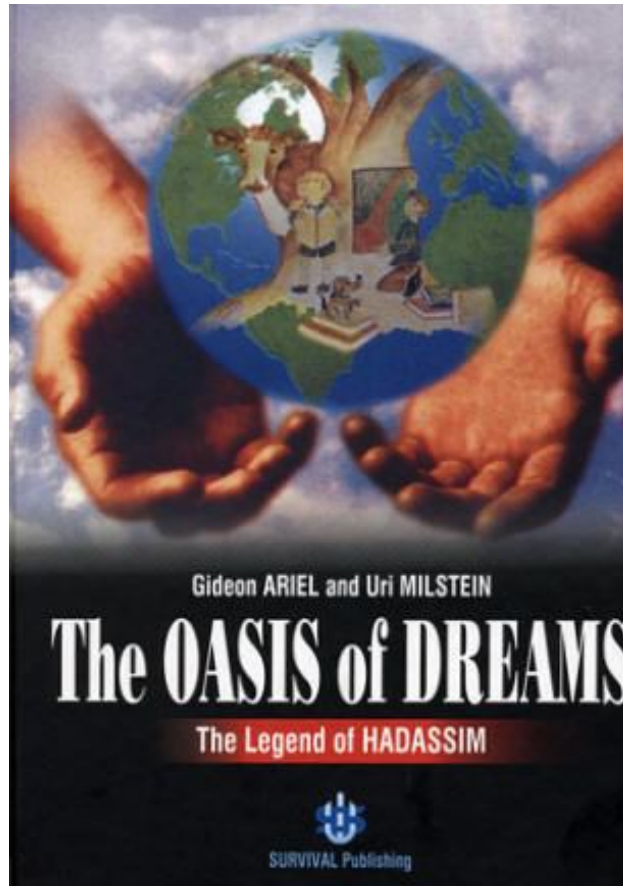
“Our building was solely occupied by Jews, and as I was five years old, the youngest, I had no one to play with. One day Elisa Bar and her relatives moved in. She was as thin as a matchstick, with little blue eyes. She looked pallid green with malnutrition. But it was great to have her with me, and we bonded immediately. We ended up taking the escape routes through Europe together on the way to Eretz Israel, where we grew up together at Hadassim.”

Alex, seventy years later, still nostalgically pines for his family’s estate at the city’s periphery which was ensconced in orchards and garden – the explosion of happy summers, the excitement of picking fruit off neighbors’ trees. He was rather hyperactive as a child in Zolkiew, but the overspill of energy became initiative as he became a man at Hadassim and an officer in the IDF.

After the army he became a businessman, and he has remained a successful one – affirming the tenacity of his grandfather’s genes. The Reitzfelds had always lived in prosperity, and Rachel, his mother, had been a benevolent and loving hostess and homemaker, always providing a joyful atmosphere. Both she and Hirsh had believed that God would take care of them and theirs. It was an infectious, steady loyalty to happiness, and even after sixty years, in spite of what they endured in the Holocaust, Alex and Metuka, along with their children and grandchildren, are still as optimistic and open-hearted, and just as generous with their guests.

We interviewed both of them several times for long hours, and we feel that their story is a microcosm of Hadassim’s success. Both of them affirmed this to the last, and encouraged us to make clear that very little would have been left of them without Hadassim.

These were the stories of just 4 of the 100 children that I grew up with. We had never heard these stories before but now we had all the details of every child in our book “Oasis of Dreams.”



Our book about Hadassim



Uri Milstein and some of the books in the Acadia Hotel

To organize the reunion that I could see in my mind, I needed a professional. I met with a few of them in Israel but was the most impressed with Dalia. Dalia had organized union events before and some meetings for government officials, one of her clients being Arik Sharon. She knew her business. At our meeting before signing the contract I told her, "Dalia, I have two requests for you when organizing this reunion. First is that it is going to be the best meeting you have ever organized. The second request

is you will never be able to organize a better one in the future.” She laughed with me and we started working on the reunion.

I started gathering photographs from over the years, a talent which you can see I have as you read this book! We designed the invitation to the 250 “kids.” We hired a Master of Ceremonies, Haiem Kinan, who was one of the students at Hadassim also. Another one of the “kids” who attended was Gila Almagor, the famous movie star who played the mother in Spielberg’s movie, Munich.

Of course, Dani Dassa, my Physical Education teacher, was invited from Los Angeles.



Dani Dassa and Gila Almagor the day before the Reunion

The hotel I chose was Acadia, one of the best in Israel, located on the Mediterranean sea. I made sure that the food was five stars and everything would be first class for everyone.

We started with the reception outside, with a party wafting over the ocean:



Acadia on the Sea

Emotions ran high. Some of we “kids” were hard to recognize! We are all in the vicinity of 65 years old. The last time we had seen each other was when we were around 18 years old! Some of the students had met over the years, but only a few of us (such as Hillel and me) did it with consistency. There were no dry eyes for the next few hours:



Preparing for the reunion in one hour



And now we are going to the meeting hall for the presentations:



Haiem Kinan conducted the Ceremony



Students and teachers tell their stories about the past



Signing the books

The reunion was a spectacular event. All of us were proud to be Hadassim “kids,” and all of us had accomplished so much in our lives. That educational system of creative dialogue and parental love to its students produced whole and healthy citizens who contributed greatly to their country and to their families.

I can summarize the reunion as a 360 degree circle in my own life. I started the circle at Hadassim which created my foundation and I finished with Hadassim since it was the reason I felt a sense of accomplishment. I know all the other “kids” felt the same way, too.

In fact, Uri and I wrote eloquently of Hadassim’s power in our Epilogue: From the Miracle to the Routine:

Sixty years have passed since the first eight holocaust survivors began their new journeys in the unparalleled marvel of Hadassim. We, as authors and as fellow travelers in that odyssey, view Hadassim as the one-of-a-kind experiment from which the world can – nay, must – draw lessons and inferences, in order to remap and rejuvenate their institutions of learning, now surely on the verge of collapse. The originals and the geniuses will flourish despite such collapse, and it is perhaps best that they remain outside the common fold, as in Einstein’s case. But the level of achievement possible for the everyman in every realm is far greater than what we have ever seen. The world needs the model of Hadassim, needs it badly; now, as we look to the horizon, we see no better solution for it than the one offered in this book.

Lessons can only be drawn from the *unordinary*, whether positive or negative, and only so long as one first has the proper foundations. The search for the unknown or the inventive or the uncovered is everywhere hindered or obstructed: Gideon Ariel learned it the hard way, in the course of his study in the US and later in the battle waged against him by the bio-mechanics establishment. I learned it during my long career uncovering the roots of human behavior and the truth about Israel’s wars. The Hadassim project was a success, in our opinion, primarily because of the complex, sometimes chaotic evolution of a radical idea: creative dialogue. The concept was given to its founders, Rachel and Jeremiah Shapirah, by Schwabe, Buber and Yehoshua Margolin – each implementing his ideas in practice, in his own realm, unsatisfied with mere theory. Creative dialogue meant that learning and living must not be done by rote, but by active participatory questioning, and integration of others’ ideas with our own. We all learnt from each other. Rachel and Jeremiah’s ability to fashion and crystallize that concept in institutional form – a rare perspicacity among educational professionals – was the sustaining pillar of Hadassim. They succeeded where others might have failed, because they took their philosophical masters both seriously and critically, giving authentic material form to their legacy.

Leaders conventionally plan and act in glorious, if bitter, isolation. Those surrounding them exhibit loyalty or sycophancy, as the case may be, but generally don’t engage them in meaningful dialogue. Yet history proves that a transcendent leader, he who departs from the march of folly, tends to share in valuable company, as a *primus inter pares*. The most iconic example is that of Moses and Aaron, who liberated the Israelites and lit the torch of Jewish, Christian and Islamic religion. According to the Torah, a dialogue between God and Moses preceded that of Moses and his brother. The Hebrew God did not command Moses, but rather deliberated with him on his mission – and only *after* his arduous trial in the house of the Pharaoh and in the desert.

Earlier still were the dialogues God held with the elder fathers Abraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov; the most salient of these concerned the innocent inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. The dialogue of all dialogues, between Socrates and his disciples, was eternalized in Plato’s corpus; there, the founding father of Philosophy showed that truth, unfettered by dogma, requires dialectic – i.e., a method of collaborative and creative dialogue. The twin fathers of the Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel, David Ben-Gurion and Berl Katzenelson -- the men most responsible

for laying the foundation of an independent Jewish state after two millennia of exile -- survived every threat on their leadership, and there were indeed many, by virtue of the survival energies generated from the creative dialogue enduring between them. The WIZO idea of appointing two directors for Hadassim, and those leaders' ability to maintain a creative dialogue between them, was a necessary condition for the success of the Hadassim experiment.

Rachel and Jeremiah chose teachers for Hadassim who were inexperienced, and this was by design: they believed experienced teachers would bring their educational baggage with them and either distort or disrupt their unique, Schwabian conception. Hadassim was a place of learning not only for students, but for the teachers as well. At the head of the pyramid stood Schwabe, whom the Shapirahs continued to visit in Jerusalem -- when he wasn't visiting their educational teams in Hadassim -- and whose spirit was pervasive in the dialogue streaming from and between teachers and directors, the teachers themselves, and teachers and students.

In an improved Hadassim model, three aspects previously unemphasized must also prevail. **Intellectuality:** our progenitor, Abraham, gave birth to the principle of abstraction when he discovered that God has real existence, only not physical. This was the greatest discovery in history because it made science possible. An educational system must develop the student's faculty of abstraction to the maximal point, so that he has the intellectual skills to analyze a wide set of phenomena and situations -- and comprehend deeper meanings. The student must be shown that everything has a fifth dimension -- the Abstract -- and only attention to it will improve our state in physical four-dimensional world. **Criticism:** symmetry -- and thus every idea and plan -- collapses in reality. Therefore, everything we encounter in reality is already flawed, but will be even more so if we don't expose those flaws and correct them. The survival principle explains why flaws remain in place by design, by structural tendency, so it follows that in order to survive one has to neutralize the survival dialectics. Without a culture of criticism, that wouldn't be possible. **High technology:** Moshe Schwabe had already observed that not enough use has been made of educational auxiliaries. In the 21st century, educational achievement must include the sophisticated use of high technology. Technology enables us to grasp theory and perform experiments in every field: Chemistry, Physics, Biology, History and Geography, et cetera. Every student can now benefit from the widest array of subjects, as against the narrow concentrations of the past. Gideon Ariel developed high level systems for the advancement of sport, but by improving those same systems it can become possible to study *any* subject matter better.

Human wisdom means converting the miracle into the routine. The Hadassim miracle can be converted to the routine in education everywhere in the world. We hope that writing Oasis of Dreams has been the first step forward in that thousand mile journey.

And so the reunion was my thank you to the friends and teachers and country who taught me the creative dialogue that enables me to invent, risk, keep growing and give. These principles have not only directed my life, but have been the source of my happiness.