

There's so much pressure when you tear down a whole building. You have social workers, family evacuations, you almost never feel good about it. Two hours in the field are like ten hours in the office. They've tried to stab me, run me over with a jeep, one guy even attacked me with a five-kilo hammer. Meanwhile, the cops just want to go for lunch.

Is it only Arab homes that get demolished in Jaffa?

Of course, they build illegally without permits. They could build legally if they gave the plans to the municipal committee for approval.

They say the committee never gives approval because it wants them out of Jaffa.

Maybe there's a policy like that but I'm just a small screw trying to do my job. Maybe the judges and courts are not fair to everyone (laughs). They are not.

When you know a family has nowhere to go to or their possessions will be locked up, it's tough. I saw a young guy and his pregnant wife crying. They'd added another room to his mother's place because it only had two rooms. Your heart sometimes tells you... But all I can do is call the engineers. I didn't issue the warrant. I'm just the acrobat on a rope. It doesn't matter if you fall to the left or the right, you are going to fall and it will hurt you.

Do you see the developers as honourable, civic-minded people?

In Jaffa? No! But the land they're developing now was never settled. Near the harbour, it was all sand, dirt and garbage mountains that the Arabs made. Around Kedem and in Old Jaffa, you see more developers but it looks great. The Israelis developed it, not the Arabs. They throw their piss and sewage on to the street. They just don't care.

Jaffa residents believe that contractors are paid by developers to needlessly damage properties so that they can be knocked down as safety hazards. Have you seen that? It happens everywhere. In Jaffa it's a little bit harder.

They also say that criminals and drug addicts are moved into the houses next door to them to make their lives so unbearable that they'll move out.

This is the private policy of companies, not the municipality. It can happen if they don't find another way. I've heard about it. The managers have to get things done. They want to get a road built so they extort as much money as they can for their shake (laughs). Maybe they know bad elements that can make this happen. People go there and tell them - I imagine - 'You're going to sign the contract, settle for this amount of money and leave.' Then they'll get their commission. If they're not strong, it's done. Even if they don't have the legal rights to the land, they'll come with the police. There is corruption everywhere.

How do you cope with it?

It's draining me and grinding me down mentally. Every day is a grey routine. I started off in the garbage department and I'm hoping to be transferred back there. It's unbelievably hard to hold down two jobs like this and get by with just four hours' sleep a night. My family is my one comfort in life and if you agonise every day about demolitions, you're going to come home pissed off and inflict your misery on your kids. I've had to fight all my life. A future without fighting would be amazing.

DINA PELEG

My little Holocaust

Shoah was the corner stone a must Read

Perhaps no single event had a more profound effect on the psyche of Israeli Jews than the Holocaust. It became the stone on which the post-independence Zionist narrative was carved, namely of an Israeli phoenix rising from the ashes of six million dead. The survivors of the Shoah were a shadow self of this vision, a shameful example of craven submission to many Israelis, and a haunting reminder of the potential consequences of military defeat. For decades, survivors, Diaspora Ashkenazim and 'weak' Israeli Jews were routinely dismissed as 'savonettes' or 'soap', an allusion to the bars the Nazis made from the melted fat of Jews in Auschwitz and Treblinka.¹⁷ It was incumbent on Israeli citizens not to talk to their children, or anyone else, about the Holocaust. Many of the 1.25 million survivors who immigrated to the country thus lived with a black hole in their memories, even as they were rehoused in the homes of ethnically cleansed Palestinians who themselves formed a black hole in the country's collective memory. After America and France instituted Holocaust memorialisation, Yom Ha Shoah (Holocaust Memorial Day) began to be commemorated in Israel. The injunction 'Thou Shalt Not Remember' began to morph into 'Thou Shalt Not Forget'.¹⁸ Today, Israeli children are routinely taken on school trips to concentration camps, the subject is endlessly discussed in the nation's media, and used as both shield and battering ram in international diplomacy. Zionism has belatedly discovered that victimhood can be

17. Warschawski, *On the Border*, pp. 154-5. Warschawski's description of hearing the 'savonette' slur is apropos. "'Blasphemous" was the word that stuck in my mind the first time I heard the expression. I remember my whole body trembling as if my mother had been called a whore or someone had urinated in front of the tabernacle of the synagogue. It was absolutely terrible yet commonplace in the Israel of the 1960s, where weakness was considered a flaw... I was dealing with Jews like myself who seemed to have suddenly donned the cassocks of inquisition priests, Cossack tunics or SS uniforms.'

18. Idith Zertal, 'Memory without Rememberers, Israeli collective memory of the Holocaust', Hebrew University of Jerusalem. From a talk given at 'Crossing Borders:



Dina Peleg. Photo by Arthur Nestlen

a weapon as well as a weakness. For survivors like Dina Peleg, however, it remains an arena of loss, denigration and stigma.

I was born into a rich Parisian family of non-believing Jews in 1933. They were more French than the French. My father was a close friend of Leon Blum¹⁹ and they worked together as lawyers. When the community asked him to give legal help to the German refugees who were arriving during the 1930s, he said 'of course – but send the musicians'. Everything was about music with my father. Of course, the refugees came to him every week.

Nobody knew what was going to happen with the Germans. We got out of Paris before they arrived but my father decided to go back. I learned later that he was arrested on 12 December 1941. The Gestapo made a list of the most important and wealthy Parisian Jews and they disappeared. As a girl, no-one told me. With my brother and my grandparents, we travelled to Perpignan, near the Pyrenees, but Spain wouldn't let us in, even though my grandparents had Spanish passports. We were hungry all the time.

Jews had been ordered to register with the authorities and my mother – who thought the French would never give us up to the Germans – gave them all our names. But many French people admired Pétain because of his history in World War I and we were put on a list for deportation. By the time the big arrests began in July '42, we'd moved to a farm near Chateau Rouge. We pretended we were Protestants and went to the church every Sunday. It was horrible.

One day, my mother received word that we were about to be arrested. I was at school so she left a message with the guard outside saying 'don't come back to the house. Go to the farm.' She took my brother there. A French policeman lied to the Germans that they were his wife and child. When I got out at six o'clock, I cycled eight kilometres to the town's checkpoint. I didn't have papers but I didn't look Jewish so they let me through. I wasn't afraid. For me it was like a game. We were always running away whenever something happened.

Walter Benjaminin conference' in Barcelona, 25–27 September 2000, reported by Esther Leslie.

¹⁹ Leon Blum was the first socialist – and Jewish – premier of France, between May 1936 and June 1937. A brilliant law student, he was politicised by the Dreyfus Affair and became a Socialist MP in 1919. Blum united Socialists, radicals and Communists in an electoral alliance called the Popular Front, which won power in 1936. Blum's government introduced collective bargaining, a 40-hour working week, paid vacations, nationalisation, and other reforms. But he refused to support anti-fascist forces in Spain and French business leaders campaigned against him under the slogan 'Better Hitler than Blum'. He was forced from office in 1937 and deported to a concentration camp by the Vichy government in 1942. He survived and went on to become an international statesman.

My grandfather was blind and he knew he was making it difficult for us to be mobile, so one night in December '42, he got out of his bed and just lay on the floor for three days until he died. It was suicide.

The war was hard on my mother. When it finished, she was in a difficult spiritual situation so she went back to the farm and sent us to boarding school in Versailles. My father's money had been stolen from the apartment. Whenever I asked about my father, she'd say, 'Wait 'til the war is over. You'll find out then.' I was so sure that he'd be waiting for me at the boarding school station that when I arrived, I jumped out of the train and ran along the platform looking for him. The people I was with ran after me, shouting 'don't be foolish, he died a long time ago'. I passed out. When I awoke, I had amnesia. My migraine and insomnia problems started then. I used to run away from the boarding school to the town because it was the only thing I knew how to do. I felt free there. I had nowhere else to go. The next year, they threw me out of school and my mother took me back in.

For me, the Holocaust – my little Holocaust – began after the war. My brother and I weren't as close as before. He seemed Jewish, he was older and as a boy, it was more difficult for him. I felt lonelier than I can say. We became prisoners of the sleeping pills we took and my brother never escaped them. We were still getting anti-Semitism from the French but I didn't even know what Pesach or Yom Kippur was.

I went to the Communist party but I also wanted to feel Jewish. I wanted to begin a new life and forget about what happened before. A classmate in my school introduced me to Hashomer Ha'tzair and I decided to come to Israel when I was 16. Nobody in the group was talking about what happened to us in those days. It was a complete taboo until we were in our 50s and 60s. We all came from orphan homes and most of us had no parents at all. By the time we arrived at a kibbutz in '53, I was the group's leader and most of us were in a bad way. The worst thing was that no-one thought that we'd suffered. We weren't survivors. We hadn't been in the camps. We were the lucky ones, nothing happened to us.

Around this time, Ben Gurion said that Europe's Jews 'went to their deaths like sheep'. It was the way of thinking in Israel. People who were in any way connected with the Holocaust were embarrassed to talk about it. You were like a person with a cold. Ben Gurion would say, 'With half a million Jews we fight 200 million Arabs but these people did nothing!' The only people they liked here were the partisans or the ones who got bashed standing up to the Germans. They didn't understand. When a father has children, he has to take care of them. He can't join the partisans. And the partisans of the Warsaw ghetto were people who knew they were going to die. Israel made survivors feel they had to prove they were not weak or cowardly all the time.

They (B.G. especially) looked down on Holocaust survivors

What happened to us was so terrible that we tried not to think about it. When I thought about my father, I felt like an opium taker who'd had her supply cut off forever. It was very human. Two people in my group committed suicide and a lot of others tried. We'd missed out on our childhoods, and we had horrible stories which followed us all our lives. Most of the kibbutzniks were born in Israel or the USA and didn't understand. We thought that there was something wrong with us and we felt it was shameful to speak out. We already felt guilty for the deaths of our parents and now we were told that only weak people were talking.

Ben Gurion said 'the better part of our people was the first to be exterminated'.²⁰ Was there a sense that only the dead were real, worthy victims?

When Ben Gurion was asked to give money to a French Jewish orphanage for blankets, he replied, 'They will receive blankets when they come to Israel.' That was the atmosphere. If we had at least been aware of our suffering maybe we could have fought it. But our ignorance made us weak. I never spoke to my children about the Holocaust. In 1980, I left the kibbutz and went to the Negev after someone very close to me committed suicide.

The first Israeli generation were afraid to approach the Holocaust. Everyone had lost someone and they needed distance. But time passed and the next generation began to talk and write about it. Then you had the Yom Kippur War and although we won, Israel's psychology changed again. People realised that we could lose a war and it would be the end. Still, I heard a woman on the radio a few years ago saying, 'All the people who were in the Holocaust, I hate them!' The journalist should have told her to shut up. There were people of the Holocaust listening to that show. Why did they have to hear that?

How do you think the Holocaust affects the Israeli psyche today?

I think you have two types of Holocaust survivor: those who say it must not happen again and those who are afraid to lose their human face. During the Holocaust, people lost their human faces. Terrible things were done to them. Afterwards they were not the same.

How did you feel about the Israeli soldiers who made a Palestinian violinist play for them at a checkpoint?

Horrible, horrible, horrible. It's exactly what I'm saying. This war began from the day we came to a country that was not ours. We became soldiers against people weaker than us. They lost their human faces because now we were the strong ones. I feel terrible about it. A journalist recently said that 20 per cent of soldiers

a must Read
20. Zertal, 'Memory without Rememberers?'

have been brought up to hate Arabs. I don't try to defend them when they shoot children in Gaza but don't ever forget that soldiers are going to jail here because they refuse to do it. I don't know if Palestinians can say the same.

In '67, a lot of people went to Gaza but I knew we had to get out. I am afraid to be among people who hate me because I am Jewish. But it's not the same as the Holocaust. Begin always equated the two but I think the Holocaust is the Holocaust and now is now. Some Israelis confuse the situation and try to confuse other people. You can understand why Jewish people feel a little paranoid.

Can you tell me more about the people who committed suicide?

One of the more important boys in our group shot himself in the head. Everyone admired him and he was always helpful and responsible. He would do anything for others but he lost both his parents. Ultimately, he lost himself. Another girl left the kibbutz and committed suicide afterwards. Her story was unimaginable, really. You couldn't understand how someone could go on living with that. Another two of my best friends – who were sisters – also committed suicide. We always felt there was something wrong with us. Why were we weak? Why didn't we have the energy to do things? I have so much admiration for people who are happy. What's is wrong w/ us?

You know my brother also committed suicide? He was a captain on a boat in the French army. He was one of the most intelligent people I ever knew but you couldn't speak to him about our father or the Holocaust. When something like that happens to you, you are left without skin. Everyday problems take on the proportions of what happened to you then. I remember how when my grandfather died, I wanted to die. I felt so alone and I didn't understand why nobody loved me or wanted me. My father left me and my mother left me and I was angry with them all. Even today, many people think that it's weak to talk about this. I don't think it is a weakness.

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The Forgiven and the Forgotten

The Hebrew language is unique in having the same word for both blame and guilt, 'ashmad'. To blame a person is to push guilt upon them. Equally, to question a ~~person~~ of guilt is to deny responsibility. Possibly the only group in Israeli society who are officially exempted from this blame game are the families of the Holocaust, war and Intifada dead. Yet for this they too pay a price. In a society where the highest moral value is imbedded on those who have suffered most for the nation, the families of the dead, like the dead themselves, are idealised representatives of the national narrative. But they still must deal with issues from 'survivor guilt' to understanding the meaning of their loss in an unbearably loaded context.

One legacy of a permanent war society is a discomfort with losses that cannot easily be transformed into a redoubled determination to soldier on. Traumatic disorders do not generally become evident until a crisis has passed. Israel's paradigm was perhaps set in its eventual acceptance of the Holocaust as a dual signifier of both eternal persecution and national resurrection. The dead, either way, were claimed for off-stage parts in a grand epic while survivors often suffered in silence.

Today, the families who lost loved ones during the Intifada can similarly be revered as martyrs and overlooked as morale-sapping casualties of war, depending on the expediencies of the day. The private wounds they nurse, like their losses, belong also to the national story. They can be forever forgiven for the sacrifices they have made, and at the same time utterly forgotten in the dust of an Israel racing to face its next national crisis.