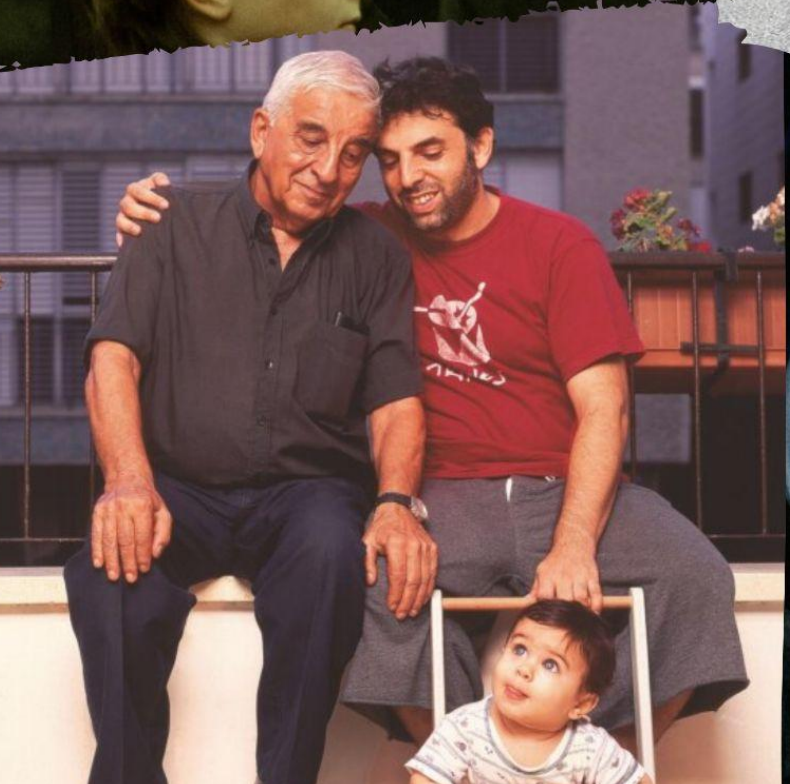
Weekend Reads

5.5.23



Forward

They survived a 'pogrom.' Now Palestinians in Hawara fear life will only get worse

By Arno Rosenfeld

HAWARA, West Bank — The only pool in this Palestinian town is ready for swimmers, but no one is slipping down either of its two water slides or enjoying any of the other attractions at "Howwara Country," a sprawling complex also featuring steam baths, an event hall and two Ferris wheels. The resort sits just below a ring of Israeli settlements whose residents are considered among the most violent in the region by their Palestinian neighbors.

"Step-by-step, the people become afraid," said Abu Assad, who built the complex nearly 15 years ago and wonders, with so few customers, if he can afford to keep it open.

In February, Hawara became shorthand for settler violence after hundreds of Israelis poured into the town from the surrounding hills and burned down four homes, torched hundreds of vehicles and destroyed dozens of olive trees. One Palestinian was killed by gunfire during the riot. Both Palestinians and Jews understood the violence as revenge for the killing of two Israeli brothers who were shot as they drove through Hawara the day before.

Outrage over the assault on the town was intense and swift, and extended even to those reeling from the deaths of the brothers.

Several senior Israeli officials described the rampage as a pogrom, invoking the attacks on Jewish villages in Eastern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. And after Israel's far-right finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, called for Hawara to be "wiped out" days after the riot, a host of leading American Jewish organizations announced they would boycott his March visit to the United States.

The scale of the February violence also stunned many of the 15,000 Palestinians who live in Hawara and the surrounding villages, despite the fact they had grown accustomed to stone throwing and similar provocations from the Israelis who live nearby.

Tensions have subsided some in the two months since the riot. A handful of buildings are still blackened from the arson and some thick store windows show marks from the stones and hatchets that settlers smashed them with. But other damage has been cleaned up and businesses have reopened.

Inhabitants say they hope to return to more peaceful times, although many anticipate a bleaker future — and not only because they expect more violence. They also expect a road, now under construction by the Israeli government, that will bypass their town. Those afraid of visiting today will have even more incentive to drive by its dozens of family-run shops and restaurants, and "Howwara Country" too.

"Next year, Hawara will be a real disaster," said Ziyad Abdullah, the owner of a struggling auto parts store there.

The road ahead

Running a business in Hawara has not been easy for a long time. Assad, who opened his resort in 2009, said from almost the beginning vandals targeted it with tire slashings and racist graffiti. In recent years, drones began dumping bags of sewage into the swimming pool and settlement security guards arrived to detain guests for hours at a time. During the February riot, Assad said settlers lit vehicles on fire outside the hotel and cracked its water tanks with stones before descending on the houses and businesses below.

Almost as bad as the physical destruction from the riot was the damage to Hawara's reputation, residents said. The town was first settled by Muslims centuries ago and an 1882 British survey of the region described it as "a straggling village of stone and mud" with "an appearance of antiquity." The ruins of some stone buildings are still perched on the hillside above town, but these days Hawara is a major commercial district on the West Bank's Route 60, which funnels both Israelis and Palestinians from the area around Jenin in the north to Hebron in the south.

The road, four lanes wide, cuts through the center of town, and is lined for 2 miles with restaurants hawking takeout, butchers with animal carcasses hanging from hooks and candy shops that draw on the reputation of nearby Nablus, which is known as "Palestine's capital of sweet treats." Houses, many of unfinished concrete, spread up the mountainside and down across the valley floor and the West Bank's ubiquitous olive trees grow in the rocky soil behind many of the homes.

At Abdullah's auto parts store, customers can purchase a truck battery for $30 that would cost $100 in Jerusalem. But Abdullah, who opened the shop 30 years ago, said his business tanked after the February riot.

Palestinians are afraid of stopping in Hawara and falling victim to violence from settlers. But they also cut down on travel along Route 60 after the Israeli army began more aggressively enforcing the local checkpoint, stopping some visitors from returning to other parts of the West Bank and forcing them to pile into crowded hotels in Nablus.

And then there's the new bypass road being built by Israelis on land confiscated from Hawara and three other Palestinian villages in the area. Abdullah worries that the bypass road may spell the end for businesses like his, which rely on customers rolling past the commercial strip.

In the meantime, the 60-year-old busies himself with drawings. Pencil portraits, including one of Shireen Abu Akleh, the Palestinian journalist killed by an Israeli

soldier last year, cover the walls of his garage, and among the piles of invoices and phones and cigarette packs piled on his desk is a sketchbook filled with more art.

The bypass road was announced three years ago at an estimated cost of $70 million. It's meant to end the town's notorious traffic jams, which have periodically exposed both Israelis and Palestinians to violence, as it is one of the few stretches where both groups are in close proximity in the northern West Bank. For years, many have considered the journey through the town dangerous, although Israelis and Palestinians disagree over the cause of some past incidents. In May of 2017, for example, two Israeli settlers driving by protests in Hawara opened fire on Palestinians, including shooting one in the back. Palestinians said the settlers tried to plow through protesters, while the settlers claimed they were thwarting an attempted lynching.

"I saw death in their eyes," one of the settlers told The Times of Israel.

There was less disagreement over what preceded the riots this year. During a traffic slowdown on Feb. 26, an unidentified Palestinian shot and killed Hallel Yaniv, 21, and his brother Yagel, 19. The assailant waited by the side of the road before charging into traffic and shooting the brothers, who lived in the settlement of Har Brakha, just north of Hawara.

Abdullah, who speaks Hebrew from his days working as a bartender in Tel Aviv, said he knew the brothers as occasional customers and had been on friendly terms with them. "But this is a war," he said.

(B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights organization, arranged this reporter's trip to Hawara, and translated most interviews from Arabic to English.)

Since February, the citizens of Hawara have suffered more abuse.

Abdullah's adult son Hamed pulled out an old laptop with a video from March which shows settlers jogging by his shop, wearing masks, the fringes of their tallit hanging out. One at the back of the pack stops to light an old car on fire.

Also in March, two Israeli soldiers were wounded during a drive-by shooting in Hawara.

The riot and the protests

February's riot struck a nerve among both Israeli and American Jewish leaders, inspiring levels of outrage seldom reached in response to settler violence in the past.

The events in Hawara took place at a watershed moment in Israel, during the first weeks of massive anti-government protests in which hundreds of thousands of Israelis, almost entirely Jews, took to the streets over a proposal to strip power from the Israeli Supreme Court. The country seemed to be falling apart, but not along the seam that separates Jews from Palestinians, but over a continuing drama that pits right-wing and conservative Jewish voters against those who accuse them of trying to subvert democracy.

American Jewish leaders in March took the unusual step of traveling to Israel in order to share concerns about the legislation. Many American rabbis, from their pulpits and in stateside demonstrations, warned that the

Knesset was poised to trample on the rights of everyone from LGBTQ Jews to diaspora Jews to Palestinians.

The images from Hawara also shocked Jews who saw other Jews terrorizing an entire town, which seemed disturbingly like the pogroms many of their ancestors had fled.

“How could it come to this, that Jewish young men should ransack and burn homes and cars?” said Moshe Hauser, the rabbinic leader of the New York-based Orthodox Union, in a statement.

The Israeli army responded to the riot by closing Hawara’s businesses for five days and soldiers are now posted along the main road with guns trained on motorists.

Days after the riot in Hawara, anti-government protesters in Tel Aviv, who have often avoided focusing on the Palestinians, shouted “Where were you in Hawara?” at Israeli police, suggesting their crowd control methods, which included water canons, would have been better applied to the rampaging settlers.

Inshrah Khmous, who lives at the edge of the road into Hawara, said she appreciated the sentiment but that the protesters’ question missed the point: Law enforcement was present in Hawara that night. Khmous hid inside her house for five hours during the February riot with seven of her female relatives. Settlers, she said, jumped over the fence into her courtyard, set cars on fire and hurled rocks through her windows. Soldiers stood on the street but came to the family’s aide only when the flames threatened to enter the house.

A photo of Israeli soldiers rescuing Khmous from the fire subsequently circulated on social media as an example of the army’s humanity. “They observed everything,” she said of the soldiers.

Khmous, 76, was born in Jaffa, just south of Tel Aviv. Her family relocated to the West Bank following the 1948 war that led to the creation of Israel, and Khmous moved to Hawara, her husband’s hometown, in 1963.

“It’s a very sweet town,” she said. During Ramadan, her family would sit in the courtyard until 2 a.m. But February’s violence left her fearful, so this year during the holiday, which fell in March and April, she hurried her nieces and other family members inside in the early afternoon.

Khmous is adamant she will stay in Hawara. The broken window panes have already been replaced and she has plans to clear the shattered glass and charred furniture from her courtyard. She wants to build a taller fence and a stronger gate.

“The land is ours, the house is ours, the sky is ours,” she said. “They can’t kick us out from here.”

But the younger generation is less certain about the future of Palestinian life in Hawara.

Sadin, a 16-year-old relative who lives in the house with Khmous, has trouble sleeping through the night now and is scared to walk along the streets of Hawara. She wants to join her father in Ohio.

“Before I didn’t accept the idea of leaving,” she said, fidgeting with her hands, which were decorated with blue henna. “But what happened pushed me to make a decision.”

Hamed Abdullah is having similar thoughts. For now he still works at his father's battery shop. But if the bypass road bankrupts the business, he may reapply for a visa to join his sister in the U.S., where he could put his computer science degree to use.

Abu Assad, who runs the hilltop resort, said that if the situation doesn't improve, he may have no choice but to leave with his children, who range in age from 4 to 27. He might move to Venezuela, where his mother is from and much of his family has citizenship. The entrepreneur, who previously ran a car business, never worried that Smotrich was literally going to send bulldozers into Hawara and raze the town. That, he said, wasn't necessary.

"I don't think they will come and throw us out," Assad said as he smoked a cigarette in the resort office. "But they're encouraging the settlers to attack, and do what they want, so that we leave on our own."

Culture

There's yet another Netflix show about Orthodox Jews — but this one is full of thrills

By Mira Fox

You wouldn't think that a show about corrupt, money-laundering Haredi diamond dealers would be good for the Jews. And yet Rough Diamonds, a new Netflix show set in the Antwerp diamond district, delivers one of the most nuanced and positive portrayals of Haredi life yet.

We've grown used to the explosion of shows about Haredi life in recent years, and the subsequent fascination with Orthodoxy has led to a multitude of podcasts and op-eds on the community. Perhaps it even contributed to the splash that The New York Times made with its investigation of Hasidic yeshivas last year.

Much of the media about Haredi life has focused on details viewers are likely to find odd or prurient — married women's wigs; couples sleeping in separate beds; the shidduch process.

Rough Diamonds, created by Rotem Shamir and Yuval Yefet who worked together on the Israeli thriller Fauda, feels far more like Uncut Gems than Unorthodox. It's full of backroom dealings with the Albanian mob and people punching each other in the face.

But it's also full of Haredi life. The show, which is mostly in Flemish and Yiddish, is set in Antwerp's diamond bourse, which is the biggest diamond trading business in the world. Two of the most important diamantaires, as the diamond trading businesses are known, were founded by Hasidic families, and business in the district was historically conducted in Yiddish and closed on Shabbat.

Rough Diamonds follows the multiple generations of the Wolfson family, who run an old and respected diamond business that has fallen on hard times as modernity and globalization have changed the trade. Some of the outlines of the show even come from the real life intrigue: An investigator is trying to crack down on the community for its financial maneuvering, which actually happened in 2012. (The investigator is one of the few characters who seems antisemitic; she is a bit too hungry to crack down on the diamond "cabal.")But the series also delves into the family's internal tensions. One of the brothers, Noah, left the Hasidic world and broke ties with his family. But he returns for a funeral, with his young son, and finds the family business on the verge of collapse, quickly becoming embroiled once again in his family's world.

Shows about Haredi life tend to focus on someone who doesn't quite fit into the community or seeks to break out, painting the Haredi world as unbearably repressive. But Noah doesn't quite follow the template. While he starts out prickly and guarded, snapping at anything that reminds him of his old life, he soon loosens up and joins the family's prayers at a shiva. His son — though not Jewish by Orthodox standards, thanks to his gentile mother — is drawn to the newfound customs, excitedly putting on a kippah and learning the Shabbat blessings. (Whether a Haredi family would embrace a grandson with a non-Jewish mother as a Jew seems perhaps unlikely, but it makes for a nice storyline.)

The main beats of the plot are attached to the diamond business and its drama, but all with the Haredi world as its backdrop. There are discussions of Jewish burial rules, weddings, kosher internet and synagogue drama, all of which are part and parcel of the politics of the diamond trade. There's even a plotline in which the family uses a chevra kadisha van to smuggle illegal goods across the border to London.

Yet as essential as Jewishness is to the plot, it also feels like an afterthought — in a good way. The focus is not the exoticism of Orthodox life, but the intrigue of diamonds and mafia deals. Judaism doesn't feel connected to the characters' rapacity and corruption. The characters' flaws are the same as in any thriller, their concerns and machinations the same as in any big family business. (Succession, anyone?) Jewishness, if anything, is the force that recalls the characters to good, with its emphasis on community and mitzvot.

Rough Diamonds has its flaws; drawing a thriller out across an entire TV season leads to some overly convoluted storylines and gratuitous fighting, plus some of the romance seems a little contrived. But its portrayal of Jewishness is more detailed, nuanced and human than many of the previous shows that set out to focus exclusively on Haredi life. Is it accurate? Probably not — I doubt there are quite that many fistfights in Antwerp's cholent shops.

Coffee and cigarettes: An essay by Etgar Keret

By Etgar Keret

The question I have been asked more than any other in my adult life is, "which authors have influenced your writing?"

As with any frequently asked question, I have a stock answer. It begins with Franz Kafka and Sholem Aleichem, and ends with Janet Frame and Kurt Vonnegut.

But if I am being real, there are two people that — although they have not published so much as a pamphlet in their entire lives — have influenced my writing more than all the other authors combined: My mother and father.

My parents, both children of war, had to use everything they had to survive. And what they had wasn't much. Although they lacked food and warm clothing, whether in hiding or in the ghetto, they drew from a secret mental stash, the last remaining resource that soldiers were unable to steal or confiscate: their imagination.

This year, Ira Glass dedicated a program to my mother, of blessed memory, and the special way in which she told the story of her life — and how, over the years, that informed my own writing style.

My father, of blessed memory, also taught me quite a few things about imagination as a means of survival. I learned from my father, from infancy, that at the heart of the stormy and violent ocean of existence lies within you, always, a buoy. Yes, one that you have to reinvent time and again. But, still, one on which you can float until you reach a safe shore.

On the fraught and discouraging 75th birthday of the State of Israel that we're celebrating this year, we still haven't reached those calmer shores. But with the help of my father's compass of imagination and optimism, I will keep trying. I will remember the important lessons that I learned from my father about stories, imagination and hope.

When I was 6 years old, my dad worked at a pool snack bar, not far from one of Tel Aviv's beaches. Every day, at 5:30 in the morning, he'd leave home for the pool, swim two kilometers, shower in the warm members-only locker room, and get to work. He wouldn't get home till nine at night. Fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, unloading boxes of soft drinks, pressing toasted sandwiches, brewing coffee in gleaming glasses at the pool snack bar, up by Gordon Beach.

Years later, Dad always said those were the best days of his life, fondly remembering how the salty air blowing in from the sea

would mix in his lungs with the smell of the coffee and the imported cigarettes he used to sell at the bar. Coffee, cigarettes and the sea were always my father's three favorite things.

For me, those days were not quite as happy. When Dad came back from work, I was already in bed, and other than Saturdays, when I'd go off to visit him at the pool with Mom, I never saw him at all. Not that I was bitter about this. Six-year-old children can't really imagine a different world for themselves, one where their father has more time for them; they accept reality as it is. And yet, I missed him dearly. Seeing this, my mother suggested I go with him every morning to the pool, have a swim together, and take a cab to school from there.

Besides the slap of cold I suffered every day, jumping into the frigid water, I don't remember anything of those morning swims, but the car rides with Dad are crystal clear: It's still dark out as we sit in our silver Peugeot 504, the windows rolled down, Dad smoking Kent 100s and describing parallel universes that exist at this very moment in other dimensions, universes where everything is precisely identical to ours — same road, same traffic light, same cigarette in the corner of Dad's mouth — all except for one tiny difference. And this difference, Dad would switch out every morning, changing the one detail in the parallel universe that differed from ours: Here we are, in a parallel universe, waiting at the exact same intersection for the light to change, only in this universe, instead of a silver Peugeot, we are riding a dragon. And here's another one, where under my faded sweatpants hide gills, which will soon allow me to breathe underwater, like a fish.

When I was 9, my father got a new job. He no longer had to get up so early in the morning, and in the evenings, we'd all have dinner together and watch the nightly news. I was 22 by the time I moved out of my parents' house, but I still made sure to visit them at least twice a week, and on Saturdays I'd swim with Dad at the pool where he once worked. When I was 43, my father was diagnosed with cancer. It was tongue cancer, the result of 50 years of smoking. By the time the doctors caught on, it was at an advanced stage, and though we never spoke a word about it, it was obvious to us both that he was going to die soon.

On Mondays, I'd take him in for his physical therapy, and as we sat in the waiting room to see the physical therapist with the British accent, my father sometimes still talked about parallel universes where everything was exactly the same as ours, save for one difference. Say, that dogs could speak. Or that people could read minds. Or that the sky was purple, a deep shade of beet, and when the milk white clouds floated across it, they looked tasty enough to eat.

At the end of every session, the physical therapist would show me how to hold my father's arm when we walked together, and what I should do in case he lost his balance. On our way home, as we approached the corner of King Solomon and Arlozorov, Dad would always stop. "Do you smell that?" He'd say, and point to the new café on the corner. "Just by the smell of it, I can tell you, that's the best coffee in town." At this stage of his illness, the tongue cancer was so advanced my father could no longer eat or drink. Instead, he got all his food and liquids through a clear plastic tube, straight to his stomach.

On one of these Mondays, after physical therapy, while walking by the corner café on King Solomon and Arlozorov, my father, instead of just pausing to praise the place as usual, suggested we actually go in for a cup of coffee. “Dad,” I said, after a moment’s hesitation, “You can’t drink anything. The tumor is blocking your esophagus.”

“I know,” he said, and patted me on the back. “But you can.”

We sat at a corner table on the sidewalk. I ordered a latte and a glass of water from the pretty waitress, and when she asked my father what he’d like, he asked for a double espresso. I stared at him — confused — and he smiled and shrugged. The waitress noticed Dad’s guilty smile, and gave me a questioning look. Not knowing what to say, I ordered an oatmeal cookie.

Until the coffee arrived, we sat in silence. I wanted to ask my father why he’d ordered coffee at all, and if it had anything to do with the waitress being pretty, but I said nothing. Dad pulled the cigarette pack out of his shirt pocket and the lighter he had stored in his glasses case and set them both down on the table. We waited.

A few minutes later, the waitress returned with our order. She placed our order on the table: a latte, a glass of water, and a cookie on a plate in front of me, and a double espresso in front of Dad.

Aromatic steam rose from my coffee. I wanted to drink it, but doing that in Dad’s face seemed unfair, so I just kept staring at it, when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw my father quickly snatch the double espresso off the table and gulp it down in one sip.

It was impossible. I knew it was impossible. After all, I was there in the room when the oncologist showed me and my mother the X-ray with the tumor resting above the blocked esophagus, like a scoop of vanilla ice cream on a waffle cone.

My father, she said then, could never drink again. And here we were, sitting together on a pleasant summer day, at this hipster café, me still staring at my steaming cup of coffee and him, by my side, smiling after killing off his double espresso, and for a moment there I thought, maybe we were in a parallel universe, maybe he’d told me enough stories, ever since I was a little boy, to tear open a hole in the aching heart of our universe, through which we were sucked into a parallel one, identical to our own in every way, save for one exception — in this universe, my Dad could drink and eat as much as he liked, and he was not about to die in just a few months.

The piping-hot coffee slid down my father’s windpipe and into his lungs. When it got there, Dad started to choke. He stood up in the middle of the café and grabbed his throat with both hands. The wet wheezing noises he made were horrific, the sound of a man whose lungs are flooded with hot coffee. The waitress looked over in horror. A bespectacled man from the table next to us leapt up and asked my father if he needed any help. I just sat there, paralyzed. The parallel universe I’d shared with my father moments ago had vanished, dropping me back into a far worse universe. A few more seconds of gargling followed, after which Dad leaned over and spat onto the café floor, evacuating all of the fine Italian espresso that had filled his lungs. When he was done, he sat up in his chair as if nothing had happened, centimeters away

from the puddle of coffee and phlegm, and lit himself a cigarette. People at the tables around us kept staring at him, mesmerized.

“What did I tell you?” He smiled at me and exhaled smoke from his nostrils. “The best coffee in town.”

This essay originally appeared on This American Life. It was translated from the Hebrew by Jessica Cohen. The headnote was translated by Laura E. Adkins.

‘A simple shared love’: A Jewish sportswriter pays tribute to his immigrant father’s baseball dreams

By Frederic J. Frommer

For many Jewish immigrants to the United States at the turn of the 20th century, baseball helped make them feel like Americans. Longtime New Jersey Star-Ledger sports columnist Jerry Izenberg writes movingly in his new memoir about one such immigrant — his father.

Harry Izenberg arrived in New Jersey in 1882 as an 8-year-old from Lithuania, speaking no English, and other kids made fun of him and the clothes he wore. Then he hit a baseball into orbit in fourth grade, and for the first time in his life felt like he was where he wanted to be.

Harry dropped out of school that year to help support his widowed mother and his siblings. Later he would be wounded in World War I, but that didn’t make him an American in his mind, Harry told his son, Jerry, in a conversation captured in the book.

“I still think I became an American back on that day in the little park in Paterson the first time I hit a baseball,” Harry said. “That made your old man as much an American as any kid in the school. That’s when I fell in love with this country and with the game. And I will love both of them the rest of my life.”

Harry would go on to become a minor-league player, often the only Jew on his team or even the entire league, sometimes ducking beanballs thrown by antisemitic pitchers.

“I think his approach to Judaism was shaped during his baseball years,” Jerry Izenberg writes in the memoir, Baseball, Nazis & Nedick’s Hot Dogs: Growing Up Jewish in the 1930s in Newark, which is being released May 1. “It was far more cultural than it was ritualistic. During those years in ‘the enemy camp,’ he had to defend his religion more than practice it.”

The memoir is as much about his father, who died in 1958, as about him. It captures the experience of two generations of Jewish Americans — the immigrant and the first native-born — and how each embraced America’s opportunities and faced its prejudices.

Newspaperman

In an interview this week, Jerry Izenberg, 92, said he never heard racial or ethnic slurs uttered in his house as a boy.

“And I asked my father about it one day,” Izenberg recalled. “And he said, ‘Let me tell you something. I ducked so many balls thrown at my head that you’ll never hear those words in this house because we’re all in the same boat.’ That’s pretty good for a fourth-grade dropout.”

In 1952, 70 years after his father emigrated to the U.S., Jerry Izenberg was a student at Rutgers University, discussing his future with a history professor he respected, Henry Blumenthal. Izenberg said he wanted to take the Foreign Service exam, but Blumenthal warned him that as a Jew, he’d be marginalized:

“You will always be a minor functionary. The posts to Europe in our diplomatic corps are reserved for the privileged — graduates of Yale and Harvard and Princeton, not for young men like you who earned their degrees in a building that once housed a brewery. At least if you remain a sportswriter, nobody will keep you from covering the World Series because of your religion.”

It turned out to be good advice. Izenberg would go on to cover not just the World Series, but the first 53 Super Bowls, 54 consecutive Kentucky Derby races, and many Muhammad Ali fights, starting with the 1960 Olympics, when the boxer was still known as Cassius Clay. Izenberg is also the author of books including Once There Were Giants: The Golden Age of Heavyweight Boxing; No Medals For Trying: A Week in the Life of a Pro Football Team; and Rozelle: A Biography.

In 2020, at the age of 90, he had his first novel published, After the Fire: Love and Hate in the Ashes of 1967. It’s the story of a forbidden relationship between a Black young woman and an Italian American high school football star and war hero in 1960s Newark.

Izenberg won the Red Smith Award in 2000, presented every year by the Associated Press Sports Editors to a writer or editor who has made major contributions to sports journalism. Currently columnist emeritus at the Star-Ledger, Izenberg has been inducted into 17 Halls of Fame, including the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame.

Izenberg, who lives in Henderson, Nevada, quipped in the interview that he decided to write the memoir because “I’m getting old.”

“I have tried much of my life to honor my father because I really respect what he overcame and what he did,” Izenberg said. “If the book has a subtext, it’s my relationship with my father.” He writes about his father’s passionate rooting for the New York Giants, and the abuse he’d inflict on his Philco radio when the team let him down — as it often did during the 1940s.

In one of the book’s best scenes, Izenberg describes having a baseball catch with his dad on a snowy December day, neither one wearing a coat, as his mother bangs on the window and yells, “Get in the house! Meshuge. Meshuge. You are both crazy – you will catch pneumonia!” Father and son laughed and pretended they couldn’t hear her. “We continued to play, my mother continued to scream, and the snow continued to fall.”

"He had given me a lifetime gift — a simple game and a simple shared love for it," Izenberg writes. "It remains there, bright and shining in memory eighty-three years later. In the soul of my memory, I see our kind of shared love of baseball again. It never fades."

Ballplayers and boxers

As a kid growing up in the Great Depression, Izenberg said in the interview, the most important classroom he experienced was watching his parents and his older sister survive the economic hardship of that era.

Izenberg describes his mother, Sadye, as loving but overbearing, who years later became upset with Jerry when he dated a non-Jewish woman (whom he would later marry — and divorce).

"Her reluctance was compounded by a dark cloud of ethnic antecedents: the Polish-American Catholic and the Lithuanian-American Jew," Izenberg writes. "'No good can come of this,' she said. 'Her people killed Jews in Poland and Lithuania.' Actually, that would have been difficult, since for two generations they had all lived in Kearny, New Jersey. 'College kids,' she warned, "think they know everything. You better think it over, mister.'"

Izenberg, who was born in 1930, came of age as the Nazis took power — and some American Nazis flexed their muscles in the United States. He writes of going to the Newsreel Theatre in downtown Newark and watching footage of the infamous 1939 German American Bund rally in Madison Square Garden, which attracted 20,000 people, some of whom carried posters that said, "Stop Jewish Domination of Christian America." The spectacle featured a giant portrait of George Washington flanked by two large swastikas.

"Back on the street," Izenberg writes, "my old man said something I never forgot: 'That wasn't Berlin. That was New York. They're not an ocean away. They are here. But this is America, pal. We are Americans and we are Jewish and we will stop this crap.'

"Then he looked down at me and said, 'Nedick's hot dog?"

"Yeah, yeah, with an orange drink. OK?"

"You bet. You bet."

In the interview, Izenberg recalled seeing kids in Hitler Youth suits at German American Bund camps in New Jersey.

But American Jews also had something to celebrate in the late 1930s — the 1938 "Summer of Hank Greenberg," as Izenberg calls it in the book, when the Detroit Tigers' Jewish slugger challenged Babe Ruth's single-season home record.

"In my house, we kept score," he writes. "My father talked about what Greenberg had to do to make history. My mother did all but set a place for him at the supper table. My sister didn't much care, and it was my job to bring the little Philco radio in from the front porch each evening and turn on WOR for the Stan Lomax Sports Report." Greenberg came up two homers short of Ruth's record 60 (since broken).

Another sports memory from that year is the famous match between African American boxer Joe Louis and German fighter Max Schmeling, who had knocked out Louis in 1936. Leading up to the 1938 rematch, the

Nazis touted Schmeling as a member of the superior “Aryan” race. Izenberg’s father insisted that Izenberg and his sister stay up to listen to the fight, over their mother’s protestations that it was a school night.

“This is a more important lesson for them,” Izenberg’s father retorted. “Joe Louis is a colored man. He is fighting for all the colored people in this country. More than that, he is fighting for us Jews, because Schmeling is representing Hitler.”

Izenberg writes that his father was wrong — Schmeling was not a Nazi. Izenberg in fact would befriend him years later.

Louis knocked out Schmeling in the first round. Twenty-five years later, Izenberg reminisced about a talk he had with a Black man about the fight.

“I never met your daddy,” the man told Izenberg, “but on that night we were brothers under the skin.”

Culture

‘When did you learn your grandfather was a Nazi?’ — Burkhard Bilger’s redemptive journey through a complex family history

By Laurie Gwen Shapiro

In his new memoir, Fatherland, Burkhard Bilger poses a provocative question: What do we owe the past? This question is especially poignant when the past brings to light uncomfortable revelations about our family history.

Fatherland delves into the complicated legacy of Bilger’s maternal grandfather, Karl Gönner, an elementary schoolteacher from the Black Forest who held a leadership role in the local branch of the Nazi Party during the occupation of France where he organized events and promoted Nazi ideology. In the memoir, Bilger reflects on this family history and grapples with personal legacy, guilt and forgiveness.

Bilger and I have been friendly since just after the millennium when I read his essay collection Noodling for Flatheads, a fun, breezy book in which the Oklahoma-born author took readers on a tour through lesser-known Southern subcultures, relating stories about coon hunting, catching catfish with your hands, frog farming and moonshining, all told with a sharp wit and an eye for the absurd.

In late 2000, I was raving about the book at the offices of Discover Magazine where my friend, who worked as an editor there, stopped me mid-sentence to tell me that Bilger was just down the hall, working on a koala story. “Hey, Burk!” he called out. “My friend was just saying she digs your book.”

Not long afterwards, I bumped into Bilger on the F train; he told me he had been hired as a staff writer at The New Yorker, where he still works. Bilger’s widely acclaimed writing style, which he has perfected there, involves delving into the stories of unusual individuals such as the short-order cooks of Las Vegas and a cheesemaking nun, and is characterized by his ability to connect with his subjects.

He worried: How would readers react?

Bilger and I met at the Condé Nast cafeteria on the 35th floor of One World Trade Center to discuss Fatherland. Looking out the window at the Hudson River, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, I couldn’t help but think about my Jewish grandparents, who fled antisemitism and arrived in America before the clerks at Ellis Island started processing paperwork. It felt a little surreal to be sitting across from the enlightened grandson of a Nazi leader.

Bilger is 59 years old. This was the first time I’d seen him since the pandemic and his

thick brown hair had become a shock of white. I asked him to describe himself the way he might write in a New Yorker profile.

He grinned. “His downturned eyes and gap in his teeth are two of his most distinctive features. His flexible face can make animated expressions, but his resting face is stern,” he said.

We both laughed hard.

Fatherland, I told him, was unlike anything I had read of his before (and I read everything he writes). He agreed that the book was a significant departure. In his previous work, he said, he had always played the role of Sancho Panza in the Don Quixotes he covered. “If I pop up at all, it’s for occasional comic relief,” he said. Turning his attention to his family history for the first time forced him to write in a different and more introspective style, which was a hard slog.

I asked him why the book took so long to write, then apologized. “Is that too insensitive?” I asked.

“Not at all!” he said. “As a magazine writer, I’m used to working with tight deadlines, so initially, I thought it would take me three or four years to complete. Oh, this embarrasses me now, even saying that! But I quickly realized I wanted to approach it with a level of detail that took me nine years to fully achieve.”

I asked if he worried about how people would react learning about his family’s history or if he put that out of his mind while he was writing.

“Man, I worried terribly!” he said. “When I started working on Fatherland, I was concerned about how readers might perceive me and my intentions. I was concerned about being seen as an apologist for my grandfather’s actions. I knew that for readers to trust me as a narrator, they needed to believe that my heart was in the right place and that it was imperative to show that I was not trying to whitewash my family history or downplay the horrors of the Nazi regime.

“Finding that balance was a challenge. I wanted to acknowledge the complexities of my grandfather’s character and actions and condemn his involvement in the Nazi party. It was a delicate line to walk. I worried about offending readers. In the end, I believe I conveyed my honest feelings about the situation while also acknowledging and respecting the suffering of the victims of Nazi rule.”

Before he learned about his grandfather’s history, Bilger said he knew Karl Gönner mostly as an old man with a glass eye in a German nursing home and whom he visited on childhood visits abroad.

“When did you learn that your grandfather was a Nazi?” I asked.

He sighed.

“Yeah, a biggie, right?” he said. “I found out about his war crimes trial when I was 28, that back in 1946 he was being tried for the murder of a farmer named Georges Baumann. But I first learned about his membership in the Nazi party back in high school.”

High school was in Oklahoma, where Bilger’s father, Hans Bilger, was a physics professor at Oklahoma State. I asked if his

fellow students in the American heartland ever made fun of him for his name.

He smiled. “What do you think? Brickhead Belcher!” he said. “We went to Germany for a year when I was 4 and 5, so I came back, and I started first grade in Oklahoma, and my first week, my mother dressed me in lederhosen.” He effortlessly shifted to an Oklahoma accent, “What the hell is that boy wearing?”

“In the beginning, we absolutely stood out,” he said. “I remember my mother would come to PTA fundraisers and make some strange German dessert; she had this extreme German accent. But when my mom went back to grad school in 1974, we started eating like Americans. She got that Pillsbury Bake-Off crescent roll kick.”

From a young age, Bilger was immersed in multiple languages, learning English and German simultaneously, and French during a family sabbatical in Montpellier, France, during sixth grade when he was enrolled at a local school, which helped with the reporting and writing of Fatherland. Speaking local dialects allowed him to put his subjects at ease when he was conducting interviews with elderly men and women in German and French villages.

Although Bilger’s mother earned her Ph.D. in history with expertise in Germany, she rarely talked about her father’s connections to the Nazi party or his role in World War II. Bilger first learned of a more tangled history when, in 2005, his mother received a yellowed packet of letters from a relative in Germany, written in a strange cursive, from villagers in Alsace who had testified on behalf of Bilger’s grandfather just after the war. They had been found in his grandfather’s desk.

The letters offered conflicting testimonies about Karl Gönner, painting him as both a savior and a tyrant. One letter accused him of ordering police to beat a local farmer to death. Was he a war criminal, Bilger wondered, or a man doing his best in the face of an unfathomable regime? The more he learned about his grandfather’s story, the more he found himself uncovering complex truths about his family’s past.

In early drafts of Fatherland, Bilger took a novelistic approach, at times delving into his grandfather’s thought process and writing his internal monologues. Two colleagues at The New Yorker — David Grann, who had Jewish relatives killed in the Holocaust, and Raffi Khatchadourian, who lost relatives in the Armenian Holocaust — advised him to pull back on that approach, for fear that he might appear to be defending his grandfather. They advised him to focus on presenting the facts and letting the record show what he learned.

But even with this refinement, he struggled to find the right balance between acknowledging the complexities of his grandfather’s character and actions and condemning his involvement in the Nazi party. As he says of his mother, at the end of Fatherland: “She came to think of [her father] as a soul undone by history and then spared by it — a man whose reckless, blinkered idealism led him to the Nazis, then gave him the nerve to resist them. “‘Angst het er nit g’ha,‘ she told me. Fear wasn’t in him. But she could never truly forgive him.”

‘History can be redemptive’

For Bilger, Fatherland isn't about blaming a particular community, but rather taking responsibility for addressing broader issues. He rejects black-and-white thinking and instead presents a nuanced exploration of the humanity of everyone involved. This challenges readers to recognize the potential for violence and prejudice in all societies, not just in well-known examples like Germany, Russia, China and Rwanda, but in the United States as well.

Although he considers himself agnostic, Bilger says he has found solace and community within the Old First Reformed Church, which he joined on his wife's suggestion. The Park Slope church's sermons and parables provide Bilger with opportunities to reflect on moral issues, mysticism and life's biggest questions.

Through his introspective approach, Bilger encourages readers to confront uncomfortable truths about their family histories and the importance of historical memory. His words remind us that vigilance and self-reflection are key to building a more compassionate and just world. The legacy of the past can continue to shape the present if left unexamined, and Bilger's work encourages us to engage in the vital work of self-examination.

"History can be redemptive," he notes. "It doesn't have to be a burden; it can be a gift."

A Bintel Brief

I'm Jewish — and my friend just asked me to help him dispose of Nazi memorabilia

By Talya Zax

Dear Bintel,

Recently, a high school friend wrote to me to ask for advice. He had found his grandfather's military mementos, including German military insignia — a couple of Iron Crosses and a few items bearing swastikas. He asked me if I know what is appropriate to do with this paraphernalia — burn it, melt it? — and whom he might ask about what to do with it.

My question isn't what he should do with the stuff, but rather, how do I tell this non-Jew (whom I am actually quite fond of) not to ask Jews what to do with their family's antisemitic heirlooms? For context, when we were growing up, it's likely that my family were the only Jews he knew. My family were the only Jews I knew!

Sincerely,

Feeling Burdened

Dear Burdened,

Oh, I feel for you. It's a tricky situation, being frustrated with a friend who you know has good intentions.

And I'm angry on your behalf. It's very easy to Google "how to dispose of Nazi memorabilia." The New York Times has a thoughtful guide, one of several to show up on the first page of results. It's more than disappointing that your friend, rather than do the most basic due diligence, tried to offload his burden onto you.

I'm wondering why your friend, consciously or subconsciously, feels less embarrassed about posing this question to you than to the internet.

Perhaps it just means he trusts you. Or perhaps — and this is what I suspect — it means he doesn't want that question in his search history, because he's not quite ready to reckon with what this collection means within his family.

In Exodus, the Torah suggests that God punishes children for the sins of their parents — a passage rabbis have often interpreted as applying only to children who are not independently righteous. It's possible your friend fears that if he's honest about his grandfather's sins, he'll be punished for them. Tough luck: He's going to have to be honest about them to avoid that very outcome.

(Is the grandfather's collection a sin? An indication of some moral flaws? There are those who say there are good reasons to hold onto Nazi memorabilia. I say they're frequently wrong.)

It's not your job to make your friend confront this family legacy. But if you're honest about how his question made you feel, you can help him begin that process.

Your first step is to be honest with yourself about how this interaction really made you feel. I suggest journaling. Ask yourself: Does this kind of request fit into any sort of pattern of behavior on this friend's part? Does it connect to other challenging experiences you've had as a Jew, particularly coming from a place where you and your family were something of a rarity? If you weren't worried about hurting his feelings, what would you want to say to him about this incident?

When you're ready to talk to your friend, here are some guidelines for healthy emotional conversations: Use "I" statements ("I feel this way," not "you made me feel this way"); don't raise your voice; and be direct. Try to fight the instinct to apologize on your friend's behalf, and instead see if he listens, understands where you're coming from and takes accountability.

If he does, that's his first step to the righteousness the rabbis talk about. "Righteous" can be an uncomfortable word — very fire-and-brimstone. But there's a reason non-Jews who risked everything to save Jews from the Holocaust are known as the Righteous Among the Nations. There is little more ethically noble than having the courage to know when those you are close to — your family, your neighbors — are wrong, and to do what you can to counter their wrongdoing.

Your friend has the opportunity to show this courage. By speaking to him about the way he mishandled this, you'll give him the opening to take it. And no matter how uncomfortable the conversation might be, that is assuredly a mitzvah.

Sincerely,

Bintel