

WEEKEND

READS

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**Forward**

# **At the UN, a ‘Book of Names’ invites visitors to touch the names of more than 4.8 million Jewish Holocaust victims**

By Stewart Ain

The Book of Names, an installation that includes the names of more than 4.8 million Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust, will go on display at the United Nations Jan. 26 in observance of International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The book, an archive that stands 6 ½ feet high, more than 3 feet wide and nearly 26 ½ feet long, was created by Israel’s Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center. The names are organized alphabetically in 50 different segments of 3,000 pages each. Blank pages at the end of the book represent the more than 1 million Jewish Holocaust victims whose identities are yet to be recovered.

Given its length, several people can view the book at the same time. A ray of light that runs the length of the inside of the book illuminates each opened page.

“The big element of the Book of Names is allowing people not only to touch the names of the murdered victims but to connect physically with their memories like we do at a gravesite,” said Simmy Allen, head of the international media section of Yad Vashem.

All the names in the book are also online on Yad Vashem’s website. Whenever the information is known, beside each name is the person’s date of birth, hometown and

place of death. The online Book of Names is in English, French, Spanish, Hebrew, German and Russian.

Accompanying the U.N. installation, which is supported by the Permanent Mission of Israel to the United Nations, will be a video about the importance of remembering the names of Holocaust victims, why the search continues for additional names, and information about the Holocaust. The narrator of the video intones: “The monumental size of the book attests to the immeasurable and inconceivable loss to the Jewish people and to all of humanity.”

The Book of Names will be on display in the U.N.’s Sputnik Hall for three weeks, after which it will be dismantled and shipped back to Israel for permanent display as a part of Yad Vashem’s Museum’s Complex on Jerusalem’s Mount of Remembrance. It will be open for public viewing there in time for Israel’s Holocaust Remembrance Day, observed this year on April 17-18.

Another Book of Names created by Yad Vashem has been on permanent exhibition in Block 27 in the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial since 2013. At the time that book was created it contained 4.2 million names.

The exhibition is free and open to the public from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday from Jan. 26 through to Feb. 17.

# **The ADL is wrong to attack the NYT's brave investigative reporting on Hasidic yeshivas**

By Ruth Messinger

It was 207 years ago that Thomas Jefferson wrote, in a letter to a friend, “Where the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe.”

His pithy wisdom seems lost on the Anti-Defamation League, which this month attacked The New York Times for its investigative reporting on Hasidic yeshivas in what amounts to an assault on the First Amendment.

The Times has devoted extensive resources to produce well-researched articles documenting the failure of many yeshivas to provide their students adequate secular education; the exploitation of state funding for special education by those and other yeshivas; and the existence of other inequities in parts of the yeshiva community. The ADL's New York/New Jersey branch said on Twitter that the reporting seems to “paint the community with a broad brush,” prompting concerns “about stereotyping that could lead to antisemitism.”

The ADL is one of the American Jewish community's oldest, largest and most respected nonprofits, whose stated mission is to “stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all.” But in this instance the ADL seems to be channeling Agudath

Israel, which represents Hasidic and other Haredi Jews, and has been attacking The Times' reporting on billboards and the internet through a campaign called Knowus.org.

Both groups have advanced the scurrilous claim that attacks against Jews can be linked to an impressive work of investigative journalism. Talk about blaming the messenger.

## **Investigative journalism is a ‘venerable institution’**

The ADL ought to understand the importance of a free press in preserving a democracy and realize the perils to which Jews are prey when the truth is suppressed. Its leaders ought to recognize the importance of journalists who are not afraid to report on specific findings backed with data about any group, and to hold powerful institutions to account. Especially when those institutions have access to public funds — and are stewards of children's futures.

The ADL's misguided attack ignores the fact that The Times was doing exactly what we need news organizations to do: comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.

Investigative journalism is a venerable institution in our nation and an important safeguard of our democracy. It brought down Nixon. It exposed the sex abuse scandal within the Catholic Church. It put an end to Harvey Weinstein's systemic abuse of women in Hollywood.

And now The Times is hard at work helping the public, and public officials who represent us, understand how Hasidic yeshivas serve their students — and how they may exploit loopholes in state laws and education funding.

### **The Times' reporting has spurred change**

Following The Times' reporting, the state's education commissioner told New York City officials Jan. 10 that they had until the end of June to complete "detailed determinations/recommendations" about the status of secular education in the schools. After more than seven years of stalling, this marks a significant victory for tens of thousands Hasidic children currently being deprived of adequate teaching in English, math and science.

Did the ADL similarly admonish The Times for its reporting on Weinstein or other Jewish criminals like Bernie Madoff and Jeffrey Epstein lest they be accused of depicting negative stereotypes of Jews and inciting antisemitism? No, they did not.

Truth-telling can be dangerous. Just ask the current and former Hasidic Jews who have been telling the truth about the problems with yeshivas for years through the nonprofit group Yaffed. They have received death threats on their voicemails, and been attacked as antisemites on social media, as have the Times reporters — who, incidentally or perhaps not incidentally, are both Jewish — who did this important work.

### **Attacks against the Jewish reporters who broke the story**

"NYT's Jewish Kanye West is at it again," an account called @Am\_Yisroel\_Chai Tweeted at Eliza Shapiro, who covers education for The Times, after she posted her December article about how the difficulties some Hasidic parents have pulling their children out of failing schools.

Yaffed's leaders have told me that the ADL, whose mission is "to stop the defamation of the Jewish people," has refused to meet with them about either these attacks on their character or the broader issue.

The ADL is in the business of telling uncomfortable truths about antisemitism that is promulgated by non-Jews. What about also protecting Jews from accusations of antisemitism that come from other Jews?

### **An 'educated populace' should include yeshiva students**

In his letter more than two centuries ago, Jefferson noted that we need both a free press and an educated populace able to read it in order to preserve our democracy. That educated populace should include the students in Hasidic yeshivas, who need to be able to read English and navigate their way in society.

Illiteracy is not a Jewish value. Every Jewish group should want to make sure that these yeshivas follow state laws and provide their students with secular education that is substantially equivalent to what they'd get in public schools.

The ADL is not fulfilling its own mission of protecting Jews if it remains on the wrong side of this fight.

# Scrub Daddy's viral sponges come in kosher options now

By Mira Fox

If you're familiar with Scrub Daddy, the thirstiest sponge in the world, and the most popular on TikTok, perhaps you'll be excited to hear that it comes in a kosher pack now. Color-coded for the somehow-universal rules of kosher colors, it includes a red sponge for your meat dishes, blue for dairy and a green sponge for whatever your parve needs may be.

Other than color, though, there's nothing kosher about Scrub Daddy — or any sponge. You don't eat them, so they're not subject to the rules of kashrut. And, of course, you could just buy your sponges in the necessary colors.

Sure, it's a nice convenience for them to come prepackaged, plus it's a fun little bit of Jewish representation that actually speaks to real, lived Jewish practice — a rarity in a world of "Oy to the world" merch. But it seems, well, pretty random. What makes this sponge different from all other sponges?

If you know about Scrub Daddy, and the world of TikTok influencers, it all makes perfect sense.

## **The wild world of brand TikTok**

The world of brand social media is a strange place. On brand Twitter, due to the general culture of cynicism on the platform, corporate accounts relate to customers

through existential musings or defend the footwear of their "spokescandies," as M&M recently did.

But Brand TikTok is ruled by personified mascots, engaging in whatever memes are trending on the platform at the time, whether that's a certain dance, a song or a joke. For instance, there's the Duolingo owl, best known for harassing users to do their language homework.

And then there's Scrub Daddy sponges. They were originally pitched on Shark Tank by CEO Aaron Krause, so they've always had a certain amount of publicity and hype. They're made of a patented plastic compound that is both absorbent and abrasive and changes texture in hot and cold water. Plus, each sponge has a smiling face — you can clean utensils by shoving them through the open mouth — which means they work well as a character.

Their marketing team knows how to leverage a meme, riffing on the "Chad" — an online archetype of a square-jawed ideal male — and creating a large-chinned sponge. They feud with other brands, creating publicity wars that bring in amused viewers. But most of all, they use sex.

That anthropomorphized Scrub Daddy face with its open mouth also means the sponges lend themselves to an inordinate

amount of sexual innuendo. Mr. Clean may have pioneered sex appeal in the cleaning arena, but Scrub Daddy rules it. A few months ago, for example, it got 2 million likes, and 12 million views, on a porny TikTok that involved sensually drizzling a new cleaning product over a Scrub Daddy's face.

The account alternates between being aggressively thirsty and simply aggressive, including a long-running bit in which a Scrub Daddy sets normal sponges on fire. But it also seems to be a good sponge; it has a monopoly on “cleantok,” the corner of TikTok that consists of cleaning videos. Influencers recommend it for its scrubbing power, but also love the fact that it is superior at generating bubbles. (There's a whole genre of cleantok videos that focus on simply generating giant piles of bubbles instead of actually cleaning; viewers seem drawn to the satisfying visual.)

### **The surprising popularity of Jewish TikTok**

OK, fine — so there's a sexy sponge on TikTok that's super popular, sure. But it sure doesn't sound very Jewish, or kosher.

But in the past few years, Jewish TikTok has taken off well outside the Jewish world. Influencers such as Miriam Ezagui, a Hasidic woman in Brooklyn, have well over a million followers, who are fascinated by customs such as keeping kosher or attending the mikvah. Ezagui recently had a viral New York Post article about her sex life, focusing on her separated beds. She also had a video about buying a new wig go enormously viral, with viewers astonished at both its price tag — \$7,000 — and its realism.

Within Jewish TikTok, Melinda Strauss is one of the longest-standing influencers, educating Jews and non-Jews alike on

Jewish text and ritual. She's an energetic Modern Orthodox woman and mother known for her funky glasses and her videos about kashrut and keeping Shabbat. She focuses on making Judaism accessible and relatable, and though she herself is Orthodox, her observance is more approachable than some of what viewers see elsewhere — she doesn't, for instance, cover her hair — making her the go-to for a lot of confused TikTok users.

Strauss's videos invariably get hundreds of comments with questions about Jewish practice, often about keeping kosher or housekeeping, like how to have light on Shabbat. She might not be part of cleantok, but Strauss's account ends up talking a lot about issues to do with kitchen and home, including how she separates her meat and milk dishes.

So, Scrub Daddy and Strauss partnered to create the pack of kosher sponges, which Strauss has marketed on her TikTok. (It might also help that Scrub Daddy's CEO is Jewish.) In her marketing videos, she leverages the thing that draws viewers to her brand: kashrut, explaining how to use the sponges, showing viewers around her kitchen and reminding people that no, sponges do not need to be kosher.

At the end of the day, the kosher sponges aren't so weird after all, and it's all just a basic marketing partnership trying to find a new devoted consumer market. Scrub Daddy saw an opportunity to infiltrate a new niche with a strong viewer base via a trusted figure like Strauss, and she presumably got a similar boost by association with the viral brand.

And, apparently, Scrub Daddy realized that sex sells — but so does kashrut.

# Why the poet Anna Margolin wrote a 1915 column about actress Sarah Bernhardt's leg

By Jennifer A. Stern

In 1905, the French-Jewish actress Sarah Bernhardt was performing in Rio de Janeiro, when she badly injured her right knee. Ten years later, in February 1915, her leg was partially amputated. Yet Bernhardt — the first truly international stage star — continued to perform on stage and in films until weeks before her death in 1923.

Three months after the amputation, the celebrated Yiddish poet and columnist Anna Margolin (1887-1952) wrote about Bernhardt's leg for the Yiddish daily *Der Tog* (The Day). The reason why is nothing less than fascinating.

Margolin defies easy categorization. She published only one volume of poems (*Lider*, 1929, translated into English in 2005), but scholars of Yiddish verse see her as one of the most original talents of the earlier 20th century.

She was born Rosa Lebensboym in Brisk, Lithuania. After emigrating to New York City in 1906, she returned to Europe. She then lived for a time in Tel Aviv until settling permanently in New York in 1913. In 1914,

she began writing a weekly column called "In der Froyen-Velt" (In the Women's World), for *Der Tog*. She used the pseudonym Anna Margolin for her poems; the column was published under her original name, Rosa Lebensboym.

Like her fellow *Tog* writer Miriam Karpilove, Margolin/Lebensboym was expected to write primarily for female readers. Tellingly, "Froyen-Velt" always appeared on the last page of the paper. But it gave her a platform for observations about women's lives.

## **How journalist Anna Margolin engaged her women readers**

The article from May 23, 1915 — mostly about Bernhardt's leg — is a vivid example of how Margolin engaged female readers. Choosing to write about Sarah Bernhardt was not inherently remarkable. The superstar actress was Jewish, though the article never specifically mentioned this fact. But Margolin's take on Bernhardt's amputation was remarkable. Letters and documents make clear that the 70-year-old Bernhardt decided to remove most of her

leg after the accident on stage left her with excruciating pain and mobility issues. But the *Tog* column embraced a very different explanation.

Margolin based her interpretation of the amputation on a sonnet about Bernhardt which she attributed to the French playwright, Edmond Rostand (although some sources believe it was written by his son, Maurice, who knew the actress well and wrote several starring roles especially for her). Entitled “Sarah,” the poem contended that Bernhardt had her leg removed in solidarity with the many young soldiers who lost limbs fighting in World War I. She deliberately chose to disfigure her own body for France, he wrote. In this way she became the literal sister in bloodshed of the countless Frenchmen sacrificing their bodies on the battlefields. The sonnet praised the actress for her incomparable patriotism and heroic — even saintly — self-mutilation. He even attributed to her these words: “I wish to be wounded like they [the soldiers] are. And the wound should be grave.”

Margolin enthusiastically endorsed Rostand’s interpretation of Bernhardt’s valor. “Can we believe the poem on this point? Certainly we can,” she wrote. Rostand, Bernhardt’s “intimate friend who knows all the passions of her great heart, is a cold and unexcitable man.”

### **An era when Americans praised French martyrs**

Some readers today might be skeptical or distressed by the notion that anyone would

disfigure themselves in solidarity with a cause. It’s even tempting to wonder if Margolin, whose poetry sometimes reveals a dark wit, was subtly mocking Rostand. But the modern instinct to scoff at self-sacrifice and heroism was not as automatic as it is today.

More importantly, mocking Rostand’s interpretation of Bernhardt’s “sacrifice” would have been disrespectful toward France’s wounded soldiers. This would have been an untenable attitude as the horrors of 1915 unfolded, and deeply offensive to *Tog* readers.

Assuming that Margolin believed Rostand’s claims (which seems consistent with her tone and language), why might she have found this explanation attractive? And why would she have shared it with her female audience? Speaking for a mind as complex as Margolin’s is inherently risky, but in a real sense “In der Froyen-Velt” was written by Lebensboym and not by Margolin. This is not the voice of the poet, but of the journalist speaking to her public. Seen in this light, the story of Bernhardt’s leg served a purpose.

The United States had not yet joined the war in 1915, but all eyes were looking toward Europe. Americans could feel that they were supporting the war effort by extolling French martyrs. More specifically, Margolin seemed to be encouraging American women to explore their potential for heroism within their own lives.

### **An example of female courage and even self-sacrifice for a higher cause**

Of course there was only one Sarah Bernhardt, whose “extraordinary, almost superhuman love” for the soldiers, as Margolin put it, allowed “her body to be literally cut.” But mere mortals among women could nonetheless derive strength from the actress’ example. They could dare to think more openly about issues of female courage, self-fulfillment and even self-sacrifice for a higher cause — whatever that might mean to each individual. Most daringly, women could contemplate full ownership of their bodies and the intoxicating freedom to choose what to do with them.

This interpretation is supported by the next section of the column. (“Froyen-Velt” typically addressed multiple topics). Margolin moved on to praise and quote the American artist, poet and activist, Rose O’Neill. O’Neill, like Margolin, strongly supported women’s suffrage. She wrote eloquently about the creative potential of women once they were liberated from the shackles in which men had put them. O’Neill is quoted (in Yiddish translation) as saying: “Can it be expected that an enslaved woman should create freely? We should become free, then you will see.” Once women are free to express themselves creatively, who knows how many Bernhardt-like acts of greatness — in art and in life — would be possible.

### **Freeing women also meant urging less constricting women’s garments**

The final section of the column moved into a lighter and more humorous vein, but was consistent with the first two. Margolin

described O’Neill’s quest for the “polymuriel hat” as a complement to the “polymuriel dress”. These were both part of the early 20th-century American movement for sensible, less constricting women’s garments that could be worn over and over in all kinds of social situations. This led Margolin into a biting satirical history of women’s headgear beginning in 1850. She emphasized the discomfort, ugliness and impracticality of every type of hat within living memory. Her hope that something better would soon come along was part of her overall message. Women have the right to break free of societal constraints and live unencumbered, creative and passionate lives.

In other words, the saga of Sarah Bernhardt’s leg, enhanced by the words of Rose O’Neill and reflections on fashion, allowed Margolin to agitate for women’s right to self-determination. At the same time she could maintain the decorous distance of a professional newswoman in the world of 1915. She exhorted through example and quotation — lightened with a dose of humor — rather than directly in her own voice. But the message seems clear. Women would not be waiting in the wings much longer, but would be taking center stage. Perhaps sporting polymuriel dresses and hats, brilliant female artists in the spirit of Bernhardt — and of course of Margolin herself — were poised to make their indelible mark on the world.

# How the horrors of WWII turned the righteous into heroes

By Julia M. Klein

It is a truism of Holocaust rescue stories that the rescuers didn't conceive of themselves as heroic. "What have I done that is so special?" Adolf Althoff, a German circus owner who sheltered Jewish performers, asked after World War II. Althoff and others insisted that they acted as any normal, decent person would under the circumstances.

The circumstances themselves were extraordinary, the perils extreme. The diverse rescuers in Richard Hurowitz's history, *In the Garden of the Righteous*, braved arrest, torture, even death. They ranged from diplomats who offered life-saving visas in defiance of their own countries' policies to resisters under Nazi occupation who knew that each day of subterfuge could be their last.

After the war, appreciation of their deeds was curtailed by guilt and lingering antisemitism. Many rescuers struggled with poverty and professional disgrace. But those they helped didn't forget them. The subjects of Hurowitz's book were honored by Israel's Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, as "Righteous Among the Nations," a designation reserved for

non-Jews that now encompasses more than 27,000 people.

Hurowitz isn't a Holocaust scholar. His website describes him as a writer, investor and publisher of a magazine of ideas called *The Octavian Report*. But he has done an impressive job of researching and telling these invigorating stories. His greatest contribution has been tracking down children and grandchildren of the rescuers, as well as Holocaust survivors, who offer intimate accounts of what these rescue missions meant, and the costs they exacted.

Selecting which rescuers to highlight was one of Hurowitz's challenges. He skipped over Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved thousands of Hungarian Jews, and Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist and Nazi Party member turned rescuer, he writes, because their stories are so well known.

His introduction mentions the White Rose, the Munich-based student group whose morally based opposition to the Third Reich is perhaps the most stirring of German resistance stories. The White Rose distributed rhetorically powerful flyers

bemoaning the persecution of the Jews and urging the German populace to rise up against the Nazi regime.

But the White Rose — “beautiful souls in a time of nightmare,” in Hurowitz’s words — couldn’t save even themselves. Betrayed by a janitor and others, key members were arrested and executed. Their main contribution was to provide a heroic counternarrative to set against the German majority’s capitulation to Nazi ideology and terror. Their story “ultimately inspired the writing of this book,” Hurowitz says.

The rescuers Hurowitz covers in ten subsequent chapters (plus a conclusion) are not, for the most part, obscure. Several — including the American Varian Fry, the French Protestant pastor André Trocmé, and the Polish social worker Irena Sendler — have been the subject of biographies and histories.

Hurowitz contextualizes their deeds, often describing clusters of rescuers working together. Trocmé, for example, was backed by his wife Magda and parishioners in the town of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, as well as by residents of neighboring villages. Tasked by the Emergency Rescue Committee with evacuating imperiled artists and intellectuals from France, the Harvard-educated Fry had a ready accomplice in Hiram Bingham IV, the scion of an elite family and a vice consul in Marseille; their chapter is titled “The Ivy Leaguers.”

Sendler, too, did not work alone; she had contacts in the Jewish and Polish undergrounds, as well as a Polish

organization dedicated to saving Polish Jews. Hurowitz usefully widens his lens, at times also diluting his narrative focus.

His first case study, of the Portuguese consul Aristides de Sousa Mendes, is among his most powerful. To escape Nazi-occupied Europe, Jewish refugees needed a complex assortment of paperwork that was challenging, at best, to assemble. Sousa Mendes’ government explicitly barred him from issuing Portuguese visas to Jews. But after what he later described as “a severe nervous breakdown,” Sousa Mendes determined to defy those instructions.

According to Hurowitz, he may have saved as many as 30,000 Jews in a frantic few weeks of visa writing in southern France during the summer of 1940. Sousa Mendes described himself as the descendant of Jews forced to convert to Catholicism during the Inquisition, surely one motivation. But he also reportedly told a crowd of desperate refugees: “I would rather stand with God against man than with man against God.” His government did not appreciate his initiative: He was ousted from the diplomatic service and stripped of his pension, with only Portugal’s small Jewish community offering its support.

The physical dangers of rescue were greater for Irena Sendler, a Polish Catholic who grew up with Jewish friends and even spoke some Yiddish. During the Nazi occupation, Sendler seems to have been fearless, spicing hundreds of starving Jewish children out of the Warsaw Ghetto and finding them hiding places. After being

captured, she was beaten ceaselessly but refused to imperil her network. Her colleagues came through for her in the end, bribing an SS officer to help her escape.

The story of the rescue of Danish Jews, ferried to neutral Sweden in advance of Nazi raids, is a familiar one. The details Hurowitz provides are fascinating. He highlights the role of an Olympic rower, Knud Marstrand Christiansen, in aiding the escapes — and of a German diplomat, Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, who tried to prevent the deportations. When those efforts failed, Duckwitz warned Danish officials of the impending threat. He confided in his diary that he was “assisted by my rock-solid belief that good deeds can never be wrong.”

Elsewhere in Europe, other men and women worked desperately to stave off genocide. The head of the Greek Orthodox Church, Damaskinos, protected Athenian Jews; the Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara issued visas from the consulate in Kovno, Lithuania, and the Italian cycling champion Gino Bartali hid Jews and served as a courier and scout for the Italian underground. Hurowitz also relates how ten British prisoners of war jointly saved a starving, traumatized Jewish teenager, Sara Matuson, from a Nazi death march in the war’s closing weeks.

Rescue, Hurowitz writes, was “a celebration of what is best in us and, in its extreme scarcity, an indictment of the worst.” For those who did nothing to counter evil, he writes, “the existence of the righteous was an inconvenient fact.” While rescuers had

diverse motives, one unifying characteristic was a strong moral compass, a characteristic that he believes can be cultivated. “We may never have an inoculation against prejudice,” Hurowitz concludes, with measured optimism, “but we can do our best to create a community that will resist the pathogen.”

# For Holocaust day, reflections on 2 years of documenting monuments to Nazi collaborators around the world

By Lev Golinkin

It's been two years since the Forward published my initial investigation of streets and statues honoring Nazi collaborators around the world. On that International Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2021, we documented 320 such monuments in 16 countries on three continents.

They honored dictators like Hungary's Miklós Horthy and Slovakia's Josef Tiso, who deported hundreds of thousands of Jews to their deaths. In Melbourne, the investigation unearthed a bust of Croatian fascist Ante Pavelić, whose regime exterminated Jews, Serbs, and Roma. Most shockingly, the project exposed a monument to Latvian SS soldiers in the heart of Belgium.

We thought we were publishing a comprehensive accounting, complete with country by country lists. But we soon discovered we'd only scratched the surface — thanks to tips from researchers and readers, the project now has more than 1,652 instances of honoring collaborators in 30 countries across five continents.

This includes some three dozen in 16 U.S. states — Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia and Wisconsin — and, added just this week, new lists of monuments in Bulgaria and Argentina.

Bulgaria is a prime example of Holocaust whitewashing.

Its Czar Boris III, who ruled the country from 1918 until his death in 1943, has been honored — including with a memorial erected in Israel in the 1990s — because the country did not deport Jews in Bulgaria proper during the Holocaust. But Boris' rule included the passage of laws that restricted the rights of Jews in the country, denied them citizenship and established quotas in some professions. His government also deported more than 11,300 Jews from territories under Bulgaria's control; nearly all were murdered in Treblinka.

Israel decided in 2003 to take down the monument.

### **Incremental changes**

Since we began this project, it's been gratifying to see a handful of streets have been renamed and monuments removed.

Bucking intense pressure, a Belgian town removed a monument to Latvian soldiers in the military wing of the Nazi Party last summer. Around the same time, a Smithsonian-affiliated museum in Huntsville, Alabama, quietly took down a giant quotation from Werner von Braun, who was part of a group of Nazi scientists brought to the U.S. in a secret program after the war, and became a NASA leader known as the "father of space travel."

I was inspired by people like Michael Samaras, who unearthed the dark past of a Nazi collaborator who had fled to Australia, Bob Srederas, and pressured an art gallery he had financed in their shared hometown of Wollongong to remove his name. Similarly, 83-year-old David Salz fought to rename a school in Friedberg, Germany, that honored von Braun; Salz was a survivor of Auschwitz as well as Dora-Mittelbau, where von Braun used prisoners to build the deadly V-2 missile he had created.

### **Lessons learned**

One thing I've learned in more than two-and-a-half years of doing this reporting is that, for millions of people, especially in Europe, it seems World War II never ended. I'm not talking about old veterans reminiscing of old trenches. I mean unfinished business that needs finishing.

The most obvious example is President Vladimir Putin of Russia, who falsely painted his invasion of Ukraine last Feb. 24 as aiming to stem the tide of fascism. The notion that all Ukrainians are Nazis is a slur, of course, but Putin's use of it to justify his war is worth scrutiny.

Because he isn't alone. Across swaths of Europe, old maps are unfurled as irredentist movements in places like Serbia and Hungary speak longingly of their countries' formerly broader borders. And Holocaust revisionism and the honoring of Nazis and their collaborators is never far from the surface.

Earlier this month, an international row broke out after a brutal assault in the North Macedonian city of Ohrid. The victim was a secretary for a new cultural club honoring Boris III, the Bulgarian leader who collaborated with Hitler and had seized Macedonian territory in 1941.

Indeed, this project's roots are not so much in history but current events. In the process of covering European far-right movements, I kept coming across campaigns to whitewash Nazi collaborators. Wherever I found angry men and torchlight marches, I also found statues of leaders and soldiers who helped Hitler fight the war and exterminate Jews.

I came to think that neo-Nazis in Europe are more obsessed with WWII history than far-right extremists here in the United States are with the Confederacy and the Civil War. This was during a period in which many

American cities took down monuments to Confederate commanders.

When I saw that the Southern Poverty Law Center had a database and map tracking some 2,000 Confederate monuments across the country, I thought it was important to have something similar for Nazi collaborators, and brought the idea to the Forward.

Today's neo-Nazis use these statues to obfuscate and distort history; I wanted to shine a light on them, in hopes of reminding people what really happened in the Holocaust.

What particularly stunned me is how even in many Western nations seeking to address legacies of slavery and colonialism, Nazis get a pass. In fact, as I wrote last year, even Germany, long seen as an international model for its reckoning with the Holocaust, has more than 150 places named for people with blood on their hands.

Some argue that taking down a statue honoring a Nazi collaborator or renaming a street is akin to "erasing history." But that's not really the case. Most of the monuments in our project were erected only in the past several decades.

As I sorted through thousands of statues, buildings, and streets, the only examples of actual historical objects I found were monuments to Benito Mussolini and Italy's king Victor Emmanuel III that were created around the 1930s when Italy was a fascist state. Otherwise, the streets and statues glorifying Nazis and collaborators are

reflective honors, not parts of history — these two things are too often conflated.

Others say that instead of toppling Nazi monuments, we should contextualize them. In other words, rather than remove a statue, put up a sign next to it saying the person was bad.

But instead of "neutralizing" the Nazi monument or street, such contextualization has the opposite effect. It sends the message that we know exactly who we're honoring and we're going to keep honoring them anyhow.

Because in the end, claiming to care about antisemitism and the Holocaust while putting up a statue to killers of Jews makes about as much sense as claiming to oppose Islamic terrorism while erecting a statue of Osama bin Laden — even if that statue comes with a board saying terrorism is bad.

# **This film, not ‘The Fabelmans,’ was the greatest Jewish film story of 2022**

By PJ Grisar

Last year saw the release of a stirring saga of a Jewish family’s journey through difficult times that doubles as a paean to the power of cinema — it’s not called *The Fabelmans*.

Only in Theaters follows Greg Laemmle, a third-generation owner of a storied LA arthouse chain, as the business contends with the rise of streaming and a pandemic that shuttered their doors for a year.

Well before the landscape of cinema faced its mightiest challenge, director Raphael Sbarge was drawn to the Laemmle family, and it’s no wonder why. As Greg says, seated in a row of one of the Laemmle theaters, the premier LA venue for independent and foreign films (and also, he adds, Tommy Wiseau’s *The Room*, which falls somewhere in between while resisting categorization), “there really has been a Laemmle in the film business ever since there has been a film business.”

The early parts of the film, shot in 2019, tell the immigrant story of Max and Kurt Laemmle, from Stuttgart, Germany. Their Uncle Carl came over with nothing and managed to found a little family firm called Universal Pictures. In the 1930s, Max was in Paris working for the studio when Kurt,

fearing the rise of fascism, recalled him to the U.S. to open theaters. The rest is history and, lucky for the film, Kurt’s widow, Alyse, who worked the box office while pregnant with her first child, was around to share stories from the early days.

The current Laemmle family, introduced during a Shabbat dinner at their home (they have a painting of the famous “I don’t roll on shabbos” quote from *The Big Lebowski*), are remarkably charming and forthcoming about their business. Since they are committed to programming films with artistic merit or those that otherwise can’t secure a venue, the advent of streaming hurt their bottom line, forcing them to consider the sale of some or even all of their theaters.

Greg announces the future of the business during the annual Christmas Eve singalong to *Fiddler on the Roof*, an apt programming choice for the film’s concerns of legacy, tradition and changing times. The screening was in late December 2019. We all know what happened next, and Sbarge conducted a large portion of interviews over Zoom throughout the pandemic. (He also tracks the pandemic-era marquees, a favorite being “Now Playing: *Life Stinks*” and “Coming Soon: *Hope Floats*.”)

## **Forward**

Sbargo, an actor and the Emmy-nominated director of *LA Foodways*, was nimble with his evolving story, though, as an occasional narrator, he holds the audience's hand more than he has to.

Talking head asides from directors Cameron Crowe, James Ivory, Ava Duvernay and lesser-known filmmakers occasionally go off-piste in their appreciation of the cinema experience writ large. I wondered if it needed these interviews, or if a more vérité approach could have served the same purpose.

When the film focuses on the Laemmles, the film delivers a funny, touching, multi-layered portrait that gets at an elemental part of the human experience.

"We're designed to be around other people," Greg Laemmle, says. It's a lovely sentiment, best enjoyed in a dark room with other moviegoers.

*Only In Theaters opens in New York on Jan. 20 at the IFC Center and New Plaza Cinemas.*

# Founded by New York social workers, this non-profit rescues Israeli youth from suicide, prostitution and despair

By Stewart Ain

Yael Kahn hadn't told her parents that a man from their town, northwest of Jerusalem, had sexually abused her. Home was a place to eat and sleep for the lonely, traumatized teen, but not where she found the emotional support she needed.

At 14, Kahn discovered ELEM, a nonprofit founded by Americans to help troubled Israeli youth. It matched her with an online counselor. When she finished military service at 20, she went straight to one of ELEM's homes, in Tel Aviv, where young women can talk freely, take part in art and music therapy and cook meals together.

"ELEM saved my life," said Kahn, now 33 and an emergency medical technician.

ELEM, Hebrew for "young man," and an acronym that translates to "The Association for Youth At Risk," this year marks its 40th anniversary, which it is using to draw more attention to a problem that American Jews often don't see on their trips to Israel: a large swath of Israeli young people — religious and secular, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian — who are coping with trauma on their own. It also has initiatives to reach out to LGBTQ teens, as well as those from Ethiopian and Russian immigrant families.

Many young people who find ELEM — or who ELEM finds through its presence on the streets — are suicidal, battling drug addictions, and engaged in prostitution. More than 25,000 Israeli youth live in the street, according to a 2022 Knesset report. Hundreds of thousands more suffer at home, according to ELEM's leadership.

The nonprofit served 12,500 young people in 2021, according to its annual report — about a quarter of them Arab. About 900 of its clients are in its high-risk program, and 500 have turned to prostitution.

## Upper West Side roots

ELEM was started by Ann Bialkin, its co-founder and chair, and other Jewish social workers living on New York's Upper West Side. A graduate of Columbia University's School of Social Work, Bialkin worked as a family therapist with at-risk young adults with Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services. Visiting Israel, she and her New York friends and colleagues realized at-risk Israeli teens were woefully underserved.

Many now consider ELEM Israel's leading nonprofit dedicated to troubled youth. On a budget of \$20 million — which comes from the Israeli government, foundations and

donations — it oversees 90 programs in 42 cities in Israel proper. Its more than 2,000 volunteers, together with paid staff, run shelters, drive outreach vans, and teach skills to help young people support themselves. ELEM sets up safe areas at rave parties for young people who have overdosed. It created a program to prepare teens to work in restaurants.

Some teens refuse help, and ELEM doesn't succeed with every teen that agrees to accept it. But Bialkin said ELEM is a lifeline for many.

"I have seen young people overcome addictions and life challenges and rehabilitate — discovering new talents, following their life journeys and growing their own families," she said.

In the last two years, ELEM has bolstered its offering to Arab young people. The nonprofit reported that it served nearly 3,000 Israeli Arab teens in 2021, mostly in cities in northern Israel as well as in 11 Arab towns. ELEM also has a center that serves Arab clients in East Jerusalem. For the last 12 years it has worked with the Bedouin community in the Negev.

Its philosophy is to listen to young people, and never to shame. "We try not to be judgmental and understand that this is their way to survive," said Maya Baron, a social worker who oversees ELEM's programs for youth at extreme risk. "If I tell them, 'You can't do drugs or prostitution,' my shelters would be empty."

ELEM recognizes that Israeli teens, menaced by the threat of war, face particular stress. But it also recognizes that Arab Israeli teens, suffering from much higher rates of poverty than their Jewish

peers, grapple with the added pressure of being a minority. They are grateful, said Khalil Homeidi, the national director of ELEM's programs for Arab youth, for counselors who understand the particular challenges they face.

"When you talk the language of the community, they hug you," Homeidi said.

### **A star is born**

Those served by ELEM often become its most effective spokespeople.

Kahn, who connected with ELEM through one of its online therapists, participated in ELEM programs until she aged out, at 26. But before she did, and with ELEM's support, Kahn revealed to her parents and the police that she had been sexually abused.

The abuser was arrested, tried and convicted. After he served his time, he went back to his community, though outraged neighbors forced him to leave. Kahn spoke before the Knesset about the trauma victims experience when a sex offender returns to a neighborhood. The Knesset then passed a law prohibiting sex offenders from returning home.

Israeli singer and actress Diana Golbi, now 29, was a struggling teen who lost a friend to a drug overdose when she began talking to ELEM counselors on the streets of Holon, a city south of Tel Aviv. They pushed Golbi — who went on to win in 2010 on *A Star is Born*, an Israeli version of *American Idol* — to take her dreams seriously and study theater. She has returned to Holon to visit with ELEM staff and volunteers, and made a video testifying to the difference they made in her life.



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