

# The JEWISH FRONTIER

SUMMER 2003



A LABOR ZIONIST JOURNAL — SINCE 1934

**"Do you think that people strike  
'cause they is lazy and wanna  
chill for a day or so?"**

*Ali G., pictured above*

**Who is Ali G.?**  
Ari M. Chester

**Scent of Jasmine**  
Nitzza Agam

**Who Murdered Mary Phagan?**  
Joseph Adler

**Camp Kinderwelt: A Memoir**  
Sol Eldman

# JEWISH FRONTIER

— Summer 2003 —

Since 1934

## Founders

Hayim Greenberg  
Marie Syrkin

## Editorial Board

Henry L. Feingold, *Chairman*

Saul B. Cohen

Jay Eidelman

Jonathan J. Goldberg

Emanuel S. Goldsmith

Jerry Goodman

Rabbi Mark W. Kiel

Chava Lapin

Judy Loebel

Jeffrey V. Mallow

Daniel Mann

Mordecai Newman

Samuel Norich

Michael S. Perry

Mark Raider

Ezra Spicehandler

Shari Troy

David Twersky

Bea Chankin Weisberg

---

Nahum Guttman, *Publisher*

---

Ari M. Chester, *Managing Editor*

---

GB Tran, *Design*

## Note to Subscribers

If you plan to move, please notify our Editorial Office six weeks in advance.

Changes of address may be forwarded to

Circulation Jewish Frontier  
275 Seventh Avenue 17th Floor  
New York, NY 10001

*The Jewish Frontier seeks to explore diverse perspectives. Signed articles do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Jewish Frontier. Publication information on page two.*

## CONTENTS

LXX, No. 3 (646)

### Feature

- 01 SCENT OF JASMINE** The living room was full of people. I noticed that Michael's mother was kneeling on the floor, her head bent as if in prayer. This confused me. I knew his mother was not religious. All eyes turned towards me, and there was silence. *Nitza Agam*

### In Retrospect

- 05 CAMP KINDERWELT: A MEMOIR** The campers grabbed a counselor whose claim to fame was his luxuriant red mustache. "What are you doing?" cried he. "We're going to cut off half your mustache." *Sol Eldman*
- 09 WHO MURDERED MARY PHAGAN?** Men with rifles stood at the open windows, some aimed at the jury, some aimed at the judge. *Joseph Adler*
- 13 THE POSSIBILITY OF COMPASSION** I discovered, first in myself and then in others, the profound connection between the ability to mourn one's losses and feel compassion. *Mary Rothschild*

### Contemporary

- 17 THE DECEMBER DILEMMA** The Yuletide spirit is so enticing to Jews—and dangerous—because, in its American customization, it kindles to light motifs more closely associated with classical Judaism than apostolic Christianity. *Stanley Cohen*
- 21 HAS THE ROADMAP REACHED A DEAD END?** Without the Roadmap or something like it, both sides face a stagnant and hopeless future. *M.J. Rosenberg*

### Media

- 25 GANGS OF NEW YORK** Throats are slit, skulls are cracked open and torsos disemboweled. Limbs are severed, arms are broken but strangely enough most of the characters have perfect teeth and the prostitutes all look in vibrant health. *Norman Berdichevsky*
- 27 WHO IS ALI G.?** Whatever you do behind the walls of your house is your business... just as long as you don't try to recruit my kids. You try to recruit my kids, you have a problem with me. *Ari M. Chester*
- 29 PEACE FIRE: FRAGMENTS FROM THE ISRAEL —PALESTINE STORY** How do you justify a tank gunning down three kids on bikes whose father is a Palestinian bus driver in Israel? *Deepa Kandaswamy*

## Scent of Jasmine

The tanks rolled down the highway perched on trucks, or drove on their own. I had never seen a tank before, and now there were so many. We went one way; they went in the opposite direction heading south to the desert. Traffic was slow. Our bus inched along as we passed these massive tanks. They seemed like headless horsemen without their champions, their warriors. I thought about how Michael hated tanks, and wondered if he was in one of them.

Michael and I had just gone camping a few weeks before the war in a forest near his home. Michael loved sleeping beneath the stars with just a sleeping bag. I was terrified of being out in "nature": the sounds of the forest, the feeling of being exposed; it was more ominous than relaxing, but I did it for him, to be close to him. I hated it when it got dark, and I thought the night would never end, yet Michael was in his element. That was when he told me how much he hated his job as a tanker in the army. Tanks were claustrophobic and confining. He was happiest on his motorcycle, the wind on his face, traveling everywhere from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, to his hometown of Rehovot....

Tel Aviv.... now, it was like a ghost town. I walked the empty streets, thinking, wondering, and imagining those tanks moving endlessly on the highway. Tanks were supposed to make their way in sand, and not on concrete highways. Yet, they had to be transported there somehow. When I was five years old, I had my tonsils out, and I dreamed about a pack of cards showing themselves to me, card after card: jacks, queens, kings, each card appearing larger and larger and then disappearing. That was my only memory of

the ether-produced dreams. I remembered hearing voices telling me to breathe deeply, one breath after another. I would breathe and see a card as it appeared before me before making way for the next card. Just like the tanks.

My grandparent's house was a refuge. I wanted to sit in their living room and drink my grandmother's sweet coffee, and eat her apple strudel. I wanted to wake up from an afternoon sleep to find her knitting and to feel her soft skin against my cheek, and believe that everything would be all right. But I couldn't eat, I couldn't drink, and I couldn't sleep. All I could do was walk the deserted streets and imagine those tanks, empty and headless.

I couldn't stay in Tel Aviv. I hitched a ride to the desert town where Michael and I lived. It didn't take me long to get there. His motorcycle was parked outside the door of our two-room cabin. He had left it there the day the war broke out on Oct. 6th. I remembered how disappointed we both had been in not being able to make love for a few days because a friend of mine was visiting with us, and we didn't want to make noise. We finally broke down that night before he left. I was glad. I found a postcard from him mailed a few days before from somewhere in the south. It was brief. "I'm fine. Miss you. Take this to my mother and let her know I'm O.K."

A soldier picked me up on my way to his mother's house. Hitching was easy. It was the best way to get around during a war. Everyone picked anyone up whether they were soldiers or not. The soldier who offered me a ride was Yemenite: dark, with a mustache, and not that young, probably in his late twenties or early thirties. He told me that he was a photographer and needed to stop by his house, which was on the way to where I was going to get to, to pick up some equipment. He asked if that was all right with me. Sure. I just wanted to get there.

---

NITZA AGAM, a teacher in San Francisco, writes occasionally for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and her poems have been published in various anthologies, including *Without a single answer: poems of Contemporary Israel*.

---

His house was situated in the middle of a garden courtyard full of fruit trees and thick with the scent of jasmine. I wished I could hide in this idyllic garden with this dark, sexy soldier who began to fall in love with me. He described how many weddings he had photographed in that very garden. Did I want him to photograph Michael and me? He would be happy to, he said. As soon as Michael got home, he would arrange it. "Did I want to marry?" he asked. It seemed he wanted to seduce me and marry me off at the same time. Suddenly, I was not so sure I wanted to rush to Michael's mother's house.

He leaned towards me telling me how beautiful I was, and did I really need to get there so soon? His voice seemed safe and warm, his hands felt good, and the scent of jasmine and lemon and orange trees made me think of lying down and feeling him on top of me. You will have your wedding in my garden, and I will photograph the two of you, he whispered in my ear, soon, very soon. I wanted to believe him, to make love to him, and to know that Michael was coming back, and that maybe we would get married in this garden.

I looked around his home. I was astonished to find photos of famous Israeli celebrities and politicians: Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin, and Shimon Peres. This photographer was obviously well known and reputable. I was surrounded by faces one only saw on television or read about in the newspaper. These faces crowded his living room, their presence overwhelming. Books were strewn all over the place. His shelves were packed with books, and more lay on the floor, on his desk, next to his bed. A thick, bright sofa was in the middle of his living room, not far from his desk. His bedroom was messy, cluttered with newspapers on the floor and coffee cups next to an unmade bed. Perhaps it was wartime, and he didn't have time to straighten up. Was this who he was or a reflection of the war?

We sat on the sofa, and his arm rested on my knee. He caressed my arm as we spoke. His touch felt light, sensual, slow, and I thought, why not sink into this sofa with these light, caressing hands and warm voice surrounded by photos of famous people, and personal items of a stranger's life, and the strong, ever-present scent of jasmine....

"Somehow," he said, "I feel close to you and to Michael. I can picture you in my house, my garden. There is something special about you, about the both of you. I promise you, you will get married here, and I will photograph you." As he spoke, his hand ran up and down my arm.

I tried to imagine it. I loved Michael but I was afraid to get married, afraid of commitment. I might be too young, or I might never be able to commit to one man. Right now I wanted Michael back and then I could think about marriage. On the other hand, this photographer felt so comforting, so sexy, so promising, so safe, and the here-and-now was all that mattered. This garden, this time, this living room, this hand, his mouth, and I could forget my anxiety; my sleepless nights, just feel his touch.

He began to kiss me and licked my ear and slowly unbuttoned my blouse. We began to kiss and I felt his tongue in my mouth exploring slowly, ever so slowly. How had I gotten here? I wanted to tell him I had to go. I had to bring Michael's postcard to his mother. She needed to know he was safe. My blouse was off as he played with my breasts and continued to kiss me.

"You're very beautiful, very special. Are you sure you're not Yemenite? With your dark eyes, dark hair, and dark skin. You could be," he said.

I thought of Michael's room, and the bed we had made love in just a few nights before. How we always wanted each other, always had to touch each other whenever we met, and how we usually always went to

JEWISH FRONTIER (ISSN 0021-6453) is published quarterly by the Labor Zionist Alliance, Inc. The business office is located at 275 7th Avenue, 17th Floor, New York, NY 10001. The editorial office is located at Jewish Frontier, 275 7th Avenue, 17th Floor, New York, NY 10001. Editorial office may be contacted by e-mail only at [jewish\\_frontier@hotmail.com](mailto:jewish_frontier@hotmail.com). POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Circulation, Jewish Frontier, 275 7th Avenue, 17th Floor, New York, NY 10001. Subscription rates for U.S. and possessions, \$20.00 per year for 4 issues; Canadian subscribers add \$2.50 for postage and handling. All foreign subscribers must remit in U.S. dollars drawn on a U.S. bank: \$30.00. Back issues are available for \$10.00 each. Multiyear discounted subscriptions available as well. Advertising, editorial, and subscription information may be found at [www.jewishfrontier.org/frontier](http://www.jewishfrontier.org/frontier) (information includes ad and notice rates, subscription rates, advertising calendar, editorial calendar, submission guidelines, subscriber list). All contributions, unless otherwise noted, ©2003 Jewish Frontier.



bed before anything else. I loved his blue eyes, his soft beard, the slight protrusion of his stomach, and I could never tire of looking at him, watching him when he slept, waking up to reach out and touch him, and to make love again, over and over again. What had he taken with him when he left? A rifle and an apple and a toothbrush in his small army duffel bag. The weapons of war, an apple and a toothbrush. We kissed quickly and then he was gone. I began to tape the windows with black cloth as the neighbors had instructed me for possible black outs or bombing attacks. One minute we had laughed about something, and within half an hour, he was in his army uniform, walking out the door, and I was taping black cloth over the windows.

**N**ow this stranger was kissing me just a few days later, undressing me, telling me I was beautiful, telling me he would photograph Michael and me in his garden, and his voice, his hands, his mouth, and the scent of jasmine filled me. I wanted to allow the soft, lingering kisses, the hands and my desire to take over. But how could I? How did I get here? I had stood on the road determined to get to Michael's mother's house and show her the postcard as soon as possible. I had taken a detour with this unknown Yemenite photographer who lived alone in a charming home in the middle of a garden courtyard near the ocean.

The image of the tanks, one after another paraded before me, the image of Michael's motorcycle parked in front of our home, the old dreamlike pictures of the cards appeared before me, and I kept seeing our room, our bed, the photos of us plastered all over the small room. Michael had a few photos he had taken of me taped above his desk. I looked exotic and melancholy but happy. I couldn't always recognize myself. Who was this young woman so in love, and now in the arms of someone else in the middle of a war?

A few days ago, everything had seemed so normal, so right. Other than not being able to make love when we wanted because of my friend's visit, we had no problems, no sorting out. I had pushed the question of marriage away and felt I had time to work it out, to work out my fears, my doubts. Now time was something else. It was not being able to sleep or eat, or remember one minute to the next, to just knowing how to get from one place to another, from Tel Aviv to Beer sheva, from Beer sheva to Rehovot, and then I wasn't sure.

I had not had other lovers, though I had thought of it a few times. It worried me that even though I was so in love with Michael, I had thought of other men, been tempted to kiss them, to experiment. I was ashamed of my feelings; I could not share them with Michael. Michael asked me a few times about my feelings or attractions to other men when I was studying in Jerusalem and spent the week away from him. I vehemently denied any such attractions, but I knew it was not so.... Pictures of wildflowers that Michael loved to photograph came to me; red, white, pink, blooming in the desert, even in the snowfall that had taken our desert city by surprise. They bloomed, they flourished. He loved taking pictures of flowers.

I saw these flowers in my mind as our hips moved in unison. I wanted to scream, to feel intensely, as we moved, to break out of this courtyard, this house, this

---

war, out of my own skin, my head, and at the same time, I wanted to savor the sensation of the kissing, his tongue in my mouth as he moved slowly, and groaned. I wanted to groan as well, to sigh in pleasure, but all I could see were headless tanks and flowers, and blue eyes, and tanks, and an apple and a toothbrush. Yes, Yes, he murmured, Oh, that is so good, you are so wonderful, yes, yes, oh, yes, yes, and why, how come, I think, as he moved faster and faster, and I buried my hands into his back, not wanting his release, feeling his mounting excitement as he shouted my name, and I closed my eyes and tried not to see Michael's face.. But all I could see was Michael's face as the photographer moaned one final time and came.

I lay still and began to cry. How had I gotten here? Who was he? I needed to leave, to get to Michael's mother's house. The photographer buried his head in my shoulders, and felt my tears, "I am sorry for your tears, I am sorry for you, for Michael, but it will be fine, you will see, it will all turn out. And I truly loved you for this moment. Please believe me."

I didn't know what to believe. I knew I had to get away. "Please, let's just go, and take me to Michael's mother's home. I should have been there hours ago. We need to go."

He murmured, "Yes, of course, right away. We'll get dressed and go".

I dressed quickly feeling like I had to leave immediately. I wasn't sure what I was feeling about this unexpected encounter, but the urgency of my mission to reach Michael's mother resurfaced. We got back into his car, and left the courtyard, his room, the house, and the scent of jasmine. It was difficult for me to look at him, to hear his voice as he tried to reassure me, to soothe me, to calm the anxiety that was once more mounting. Now, I could feel no tenderness, no remnants of desire or even satisfaction; I was just impatient with him, and with myself.

The roads were empty. No tanks, no warriors, merely empty highways that spoke of a country in limbo, just like I was. I was not in Tel Aviv with my grandparents, not in Beer sheva, which was Michael's

and my home, and not in Rehovot, which was Michael's mother's home. I was on the road with a stranger whom I had made love with and now seemed to look at me with love in his eyes and spoke in a velvet voice. I had taken a ride, stopped at his home, made love on a sofa, cried in the living room as I pictured Michael's face and heard the photographer's groans of pleasure. Where was I? Who was I? A few days ago I was on the back of a motorcycle looking out at the desert and feeling the wind in my face and life seemed fairly simple.

The fairly industrial city of Rehovot welcomed us as we entered the main streets. Michael's mother lived in a residential neighborhood near the famous scientific institute, which was enclosed and wooded, green and lush. He wanted to take me right to the house. I asked him to drop me off nearby. I wanted to walk there by myself, and I wanted us to part. "Please let me know how everything is," he said. "Can I take your number, and call you to make sure you're all-right?" "Sure," I answered anything to just go, and put this behind me. I wrote my grandparent's number and gave it to him. "Thanks," I murmured, and left the car, slamming the door, not looking behind me.

I walked the few blocks to Michael's mother's house. It was familiar, as he and I had often walked these streets before. I had come here first, to meet him, before he had moved to Beer Sheva. This was his childhood home, and the home of his first girlfriend. Sometimes, I had been jealous of her presence since they were still friends. I had seen her once or twice, and she was beautiful, part Russian, part Yemenite, an airline stewardess who worked for El-Al, and she seemed more confident than me, sultrier, sexier. Jealousy could still overtake me and I would need to make Michael reassure me that I was his only one, his only love; even if I secretly yearned after others, I wanted to know that he desired only me.

It was early evening. The streets were still and usually I loved this time of day, for a walk, or to sit at a café. Now, the streets were empty. People sat in their homes, watching television, with their families, and wondering about their brothers, sons, husbands,

*Continued on page 30*

# Camp Kinderwelt: A Memoir

Sol Eldman, September 1, 2003

I was a camper at Camp Kinderwelt in 1926, its first year, again in 1930, and the last time in 1931. The Director was Mr. Shapiro, father of Judah Shapiro, whom we called Yehude. Later, Yehude became a leader of American Labor Zionism, and ultimately Executive Director of the *Yiddisher Natzionaler Arbeter Farband*.

Before he left for the night, Yehude, our counselor, used to tell us kids a story he made up. Seventeen years old, his mind dwelled on flesh-and-blood girls, not made-up stories. He, therefore, offered us a gambit: I'll tell you two stories tomorrow night. That worked, so he offered three, then four, then five, and six the last night.

Life's permutations almost brought us together in the 1970's—almost but not quite. I was in the bronze and aluminum sign business, and received a phone call from a man who asked me to meet him at the corner of 16th St. and 6th Ave. He wanted me to quote a price for furnishing and installing bronze raised letters reading Jewish National Workers Alliance on the 3rd floor facade. Shortly, they abandoned the project, fearing the possibility of an Arab reprisal. I mentioned being a camper at Camp Kinderwelt in 1926, and my counsellor was Yehude Shapiro. "Yehude Shapiro?" his assistant said, "he's our Executive Director," which was news to me. His assistant didn't invite me up to his office. Had I been invited, I would have said, "Yehude, *mein* counsellor, you owe me six stories from 1926, and I demand payment forthwith."

Camp Kinderwelt, situated at Highland Mills, N.Y., 13 miles northeast of Newburgh, N.Y., was associated with Unser Camp (for adults) on adjoining grounds.

Unser Camp came earlier in the 1920's. In 1926, at Kinderwelt, I was 6-1/2 years old. My greatest fear, since I was mechanically disinclined, then and now, was that I wouldn't be able to tie my shoelaces. My mother claimed to be patient during my sweat and tears, but her eyes told me she was lying. Seventy-eight years later, I can proudly state, I have no trouble tying my shoelaces, but when it comes to tying a Windsor knot on my tie, after not having done so for a while, I become tongue-tied.

In 1928-1929, I met Meyerowitz, the compulsive teacher of the Farband coops, in the North Bronx, who would become co-director of Kinderwelt in 1930 and director in 1931. Meyerowitz kept a four foot brass curtain rod in his desk. Shortly after class began, whether he was reading to us or explaining some fine point of grammar, he would remove the curtain rod from his desk and start to twirl it like a cheerleader's baton. In my life, I never saw any baton-twirler exceed his skills. We students were fascinated, and he knew it. At home, I got hold of a curtain rod, but I was a dismal failure. I seemed to specialize in failures. Only once, in class, did he not twirl his baton. It was early June, 1929, a sweltering hot day. He was giving us students a yearly oral test, and the windows were open. As a result of the test, many Farband tenants were peering in, listening intently. Apropos of something he said, he asked, "*Vus is der untershade tsvishn a cemel un a ferd?*" (What is the difference between a camel and a horse?) Meyerowitz looked around, but no one was answering. Finally, I raised my hand. "*Ye, Shloime?*" "*A ferd is gratzyez*" (A horse is graceful.) "*Richtig*," (Correct) he thundered. At that, all the spectators at the windows broke into applause. It is little victories like that which makes

---

life worth living. But for Meyerowitz, the hot weather and the audience negated his compulsion. After all, it would make him look like a *schmelke melamed* (a ninny of a teacher.)

To put Camp Kinderwelt in 1930 into perspective, many of the parents of the campers were Zionists; many of the idealistic campers would soon go to what was then Palestine to join Kibbutzim. Zionists were still starry-eyed over the Balfour Declaration of 1917, pledging British support to the Zionist hope for a Jewish national home in Palestine.

In charge of all singing activities was the estimable Lazar Weiner, still not at the apex of his fame, but accomplished composer, pianist, and choral director. My mother had sung in a couple of his choruses, and he knew her well. He was listening to camper's voices, picking them for his glee club. My voice was serviceable, so I was one of those picked. He asked me if I enjoyed singing, I replied, "Not particularly," and that was the end of my singing career.

Baruch Lumet, father of the future world-famous movie-director, Sidney Lumet, was theatre-director of Kinderwelt in 1930. I had a very small Yiddish singing part in one of the musical plays he produced. His son, Sidney, is 5-1/2 years younger than me. In the old days, his name was pronounced LUM-et. In later years, I heard some of his female sycophants pronounce it lyum-AY. I don't know which version Sidney favors. Near the end of the season, Baruch ran around peddling a book to parents, telling them there would be photographs. Lies, Lies! If I were to run into Sidney today, alighting from his chauffeur-driven limousine, I would say, "Sidney, *mein* movie-director, you owe me photographs."

In 1930, in bunk 14, there was a camper named Ben-Ami. He was said to have been on the New York stage. After hearing one sentence on-stage, you knew he was a trained actor. After that year, I never heard of him again. Let's time-travel to the 1960's. I'm visiting an optician named Ziesk, on 6th Ave., in New York. I know Ziesk very well. I'm in the waiting room. Ziesk comes out and says, "You know whom I have inside? Jacob Ben-Ami, the famous

actor." I tell Ziesk I want to talk to him. I tell Jacob Ben-Ami about my mystery, and ask him whether the other Ben-Ami is a relative. He says "No, and I never heard of him." Could the young Ben-Ami have gone to Palestine? But, if he was on the New York stage, how is it that Jacob never heard of him? Jacob was an old man at the time. Did he have a faulty memory? Maybe an old Kinderweltnik has the answer.<sup>1</sup>

Kinderwelt had a chess instructor named Charles Jaffe. Judging by his dark complexion, he was probably an Ethiopian Jew. He spoke no Yiddish. He would trumpet his chess prowess to the skies. The kids in our bunk said that he had beaten the Cuban, former world champion, Capablanca, and so Jaffe was the second-best player in the world—next to the champion, Alekhine. I found out later that he had never beaten Capablanca, but he bragged that he had shown Alekhine some secret variations, which Alekhine used in 1927, when he dethroned Capablanca. Jaffe actually was an expert coffeehouse hustler who made his living that way. I wonder what his remuneration was in Kinderwelt.

When Jaffe taught us to play chess in Kinderwelt, he arranged a knockout (one loss and you were out) tournament. The winner was a Ralph Nagnowitz. Jack Soudakoff and I from bunk 12, continued to play chess, but we never heard of Nagnowitz again. Soudakoff and I both played for the James Monroe High School team, which won the Bronx-Manhattan Championship in 1935. Later, Soudakoff placed third among eight entrants in the professional New York State Tournament Championship and reached a Master's rating in the United States Chess Federation. I opted for Postal Chess—different from over-the-board chess. I very quickly began to excel at this game. Shortly, I played a draw with the postal champion of New Hampshire, and I defeated the former postal champion of Michigan. Our successes can be traced to Jaffee's chess program at Kinderwelt.

In 1930, in Kinderwelt, I remember seeing a headline on an inside sport page in the New York Daily News: 600 IMMORTAL. That was Babe Ruth on the way to 714 home runs. Baseball was big in Kinderwelt. Some bunks played against each other. Ben-Ami, mentioned

<sup>1</sup>If so, please get in touch with me via the editor of this journal, Mr. Chester.





*Junior counselor Aaron Nissenson, rear row, right; senior counselor Ko-Ko, rear row, left; Jack Soudakoff, middle row, center, wearing white tam; Sol Eldman (author), first row, second from right; Trotsky, the kitten, first row, center.*

earlier, pitched for bunk 14. Kinderwelt played against Camp Gregory (Catholic,) and we beat them.

In 1930, even-numbered bunks (2-16) were for boys, odd-numbered (1-15) for girls. The season comprised 10 weeks; children were also accepted for 5 weeks (depression time.) I was in bunk 12, and was eleven years old. My Junior Counselor was Aaron Nissenson, then living in the Farband Houses. We called our Senior Ko-Ko, but I understand his real name was similar sounding. Aaron Nissenson was one of the nicest people I have ever known. He and I used to test each other on who knew the Yiddish equivalent of more English words. I believe I had a slight edge. He had a literary bent and could declaim very well. One evening at a campfire, as a good-natured spoof of the many campers who were

running for camp Vice-President, he held up a kitten that we had adopted, introduced it as Trotsky, and said it was joining the race for Vice-President. A few years ago, someone told me Aaron had become a dentist. If so, what a shame! But I'll bet he was the nicest dentist in captivity.

Ko-Ko was a horse of a different color. He and I slept next to each other in the same alcove. Each morning, he would get up before anyone else, and bray (horses bray?) "*Chevreh Leytsim, Shtate Oif!*" (Comrade Clowns, Wake Up!) No one stirred. Who would trade the last stages of a sweet dream for Ko-Ko's ugly face? Trouble was, Ko-Ko had a canteen of cold water in readiness every morning. And who was the only one who slept in his alcove? Some day, maybe not tomorrow, I'll regain my

---

equilibrium. (Do you think it's too late for an old man to see a shrink?)

One day in 1930, our bunk 12 was going to lunch. Boys will be boys, and as we were entering, we were making a racket. Stiff-necked Meyerowitz blocked our path, told us to return to our bunk; we would have no lunch that day. I spoke to "His Stiffness," telling him our parents were paying for that lunch and he had no right to deny it to us. Alas, logic was not Meyerowitz's strong suit. My mother was a waitress in Unser Camp in 1930 and 1931, and when I told her of his latest foible, she brought a whole lunch over for everyone in our bunk. She must have given him what is known in Yiddish as a good "*stock*." Meyerowitz didn't say word one to us about my mother.

Morning *ibungen* (exercises were conducted by Meyerowitz,) as we mimicked his bending and flexing. I can report that his deportment, for once, was exemplary. There were Yiddish and Hebrew classes, but I don't remember who was in charge, which suggests that they were run by different people at different times.

**E**phraim sold hand painted paintings, pitchers and jugs. He also taught painting, and in 1926, he taught the youngest campers gardening. His badge of honor was a crippled finger, which he would expound on to all who would listen. It seems, he was bitten on the finger by a snake. After surgery, with his thick bandages hiding the wound, he was given a statement to sign absolving the surgeon from any negative results. He signed it, a forerunner of the shape of things to come.

In the middle of the season, "Red Letter Day" was declared. All campers were to take on the responsibilities and authority ordinarily vested in the counselors and administrators. They, in turn, were to cowtow to the campers. When Red Letter Day dawned, the camp awoke to loud laughter. Some of the oldest campers had entered the office halfway up the hill, and cleverly rigged all the furniture up to overhead wires, out of the reach of the administrators.

On "Red Letter Day," 1931, the campers grabbed a counsellor whose claim to fame was his luxuriant red

mustache. "What are you doing?" cried he. "We're going to cut off half your mustache." "I beg you, don't do it, don't do it!" Oh, how weak some mortals be. I would have walked the rest of my life with my red badge of courage.

Toward the end of the season, the camp staged a sixty yard dash, a 3-legged race, and a wheelbarrow race. The winners would receive a round leather Camp Kinderwelt emblem, which could be sewn onto a piece of clothing. My mother sewed it onto a sweater of mine. I came in second in the 60-yard dash, and third in the 3-legged and wheelbarrow races.

In 1931, I arrived at Kinderwelt a few days late, because I came with my mother who would be waitressing at Unser Camp for the second straight year. A few of my 1930 bunkmates were now advanced to the next higher bunk number. Mike told my mother (I wasn't present) that because I was a little younger than my previous bunkmates, he was putting me in a younger bunk. I told my mother I wanted to be with my old friends, not with a bunch of new guys. She relayed this to Mike, and his response was that my old bunkmates were now at the age when they were undergoing certain hormonal changes. Since I was younger, I wouldn't be able to cope with the problem, and a whole revolution might take place in my head. He would not budge; I had to accept his decision. I told my mother Mike could shove his camp up his \*#!. I was going home—and I meant it.... Mike budged.

My last contretemps with Mike occurred the very last day of the season. I'm sure I was guilty of some infraction, but I don't remember what it was. Anyway, Mike started chasing me all the way from the bunks at the bottom of the hill to where the theatre was at that time, then toward the spacious fields separating Kinderwelt from Unser Camp. I was thin and fleet and, though I outdistanced him initially, he wouldn't give up. I started to become winded, the distance between us shortening. I realized he would soon catch me, but I reached the fields that had been grass during the summer, but were now, in September, thickly overgrown with weeds well over my head. Just before he reached the weeds, I plopped down, out

*Continued on page 32*

## Justice Denied: The Leo M. Frank Case

The Civil War undermined the political, economic and social foundations on which the antebellum South had rested. After the war the South was reduced to the status of a conquered province, and remained basically rural. The victorious North, on the other hand, was transformed by an industrial revolution that subordinated the farm to the factory and supplanted the standards of an agrarian society with the mores of an urban civilization. Accompanying the rapid growth of the cities (particularly those in the North) was an influx into these urban centers of millions of Catholic and Jewish immigrants. The misgivings and insecurities engendered by these changes intensified in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the dawn of the twentieth century. This uncertainty was most acute in the South, where many felt they were losing the region their fathers had built, a region they expected to inherit as their birthright. Indeed, well until America's entry into World War I and even beyond, these doubts and ambiguous feelings were expressed in the South by lynching, race riots, and attacks on foreigners.

Southern prejudice, however, mainly concentrated on the African-Americans in their midst and rarely focused on Jews. Local Jews, on the whole, maintained equitable relations with their Gentile neighbors. Nevertheless, in the abstract, Jews were thought of as a foreign element, anti-Christian and replete with all the canards attributed to them over the course of centuries. Among the hobgoblins of Southern rural imagination was the widely held belief that Jews were frequently associated with insidious schemes that supposedly prevailed in the far-away corrupt and immoral cities of the North.

Atlanta, Georgia had a small prosperous Jewish community shortly before World War I. However,

---

JOSEPH ADLER *is the author of The Herzl Paradox and numerous articles on Jewish personalities and historic eras.*

unlike its counterparts in the North who felt the full impact of the immigrant tide from Europe, a large percentage of Atlanta's population consisted of African-Americans, and recent white rustic arrivals who had been lured from the countryside by the promise of a better life. It was the core of these former agrarian workers who would eventually rise to attack the Jews as a symbol of the new urban culture, and all that was evil. The catalytic agent which precipitated this development was the infamous Leo Max Frank murder trial. Here was America's Dreyfus case with a tragic ending.

In April, 1913 on Confederate Memorial Day, a night watchman named Newt Lee (an African-American) found the body of Mary Phagan, a thirteen year old employee in the Atlanta factory basement of her employer, the National Pencil Company. The girl had been brutally beaten and strangled evidently during the holiday when the factory was closed. Some scraps of yellow paper were found near the body. Scribbled on them was a semi-literate sentence that seemed to implicate "a long tall negro black that hoo it was." The police immediately took into custody the night-watchman who had found Mary Phagan's body and Arthur Mullinax, an ex-street car driver who frequently drove Mary to and from work. Other arrests followed, including one John Gantt, a former bookkeeper at the pencil factory who had openly admired Mary Phagan. The superintendent of the pencil factory, Leo Max Frank, was also questioned by the police.

The twenty-nine year old Frank was the son of German-Jewish immigrants. He was born in Cuero, Texas and raised in Brooklyn. Leo attended Cornell University, and after receiving a degree in mechanical engineering he accepted the invitation of his uncle Moses Frank to manage his pencil factory in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1907, Leo Frank moved to Atlanta to assume his new position. He quickly won for himself a reputation in the Jewish community as a man of

---

integrity and unblemished character. He was elected president of the local B'nai B'rith branch and he married Lucille Selig, the daughter of a prominent Jewish family of Atlanta.

After questioning by the police, the newspaper the *Atlanta Constitution*, reporting on the various suspects, described Frank as "a small wiry man, wearing eyeglasses of high lens power. He is nervous, and apparently high strung. He smokes incessantly... His dress is neat, and he is a fluent talker, polite and suave." This emphasis on Frank's nervousness surfaced again in the questioning of the night watchman Newt Lee. He informed the police that Frank had telephoned him the night of the Confederate Memorial holiday to inquire if everything was all right at the factory—and that the superintendent had sounded extremely nervous. Suspicions heightened when blood stains and hair identified as that of the dead girl were found in a workroom opposite Frank's office. The stains formed a path from the workroom to the elevator that went down to the basement of the factory. Despite the absence of conclusive evidence linking Frank to the crime, the police now regarded him as a major suspect.

**A**t the coroner's inquest into Mary Phagan's murder, several witnesses stepped forward to challenge Frank's moral character. Particularly damaging to Frank was the testimony of George Epps, a fifteen year old friend of the dead girl. He claimed that Mary had told him that she feared Frank because he acted "in too familiar a fashion and made advances to her." A few of the girls from the pencil factory related similar tales. All of these assertions, basically hearsay, would much later prove to lack substance. However, a Pandora's box had been opened and rumors quickly circulated about Frank's supposed lechery and lust for Gentile women. The rumors, in particular, resonated strongly among the transplanted rural population working in Atlanta. For these impoverished souls, an attack on a white Gentile girl was an assault on their last remnants of dignity. The slain girl symbolized all that was evil and most feared about the city. Ten thousand mourners attended Mary Phagan's funeral, and cries arose to

avenge her death. Local newspapers were quick to exploit the situation. The *Atlanta Constitution* offered a reward for the solving of the murder, and its rival the *Atlanta Georgian* sensationalized the crime for all it was worth. Soon other newspapers across the country followed suit.

Upon the recommendation of the Fulton County Solicitor General, Hugh Dorsey, the coroner's jury indicted Frank, who was accordingly jailed without bond. Politically ambitious, Dorsey needed a conviction. He had recently prosecuted two accused

◆

**The jury was threatened with death unless they brought in a verdict of guilty. The judge was threatened likewise if he didn't pass a sentence of death by hanging.**

◆

murderers and had failed to win his case against either of them. A conviction against a Northern Jew for the slaying of a white girl would do much to salvage Dorsey's reputation. The very day of the indictment of Frank (May 1, 1913) newspapers in Atlanta headlined the confession of one Jim Conley, an African-American sweeper and handyman, with a record of assaults and burglaries, who had been recently dismissed from the National Pencil Factory. He had been found by a foreman in the basement of the factory on the night of the murder trying to wash blood from a shirt. Under police questioning he confessed that he had written the murder note discovered near Mary Phagan's body. The police never bothered to send the blood stains to a laboratory to test if they matched Mary's blood. Instead, they secured a statement from Conley that Frank had dictated the note so that it would appear that a black man had murdered Mary Phagan. In exchange for his cooperation, Conley claimed, Frank had given him two hundred dollars to keep silent. The confession was bizarre, and at best highly questionable, but Solicitor General Dorsey chose to believe it. Evidently there was more political mileage to be gained from the conviction of a Northern Jew than that of a Southern black man with an unsavory reputation.

---

The trial of Leo Max Frank began on July 28, 1913. Tension in the courtroom was palpable, and heightened by temperatures in the nineties. Frank's lawyers, misjudging the depth of the animus toward their client created by the local press, had failed to demand a change of venue. As the trial proceeded, a large number of witnesses testified to Frank's impeccable character. However, despite the flimsy nature of the evidence and Frank's own eloquent testimony, Dorsey hammered away at Frank's allegedly depraved character; nor could the defense shake the testimony of Dorsey's key witness, Jim Conley, even though he had changed elements of his story several times since his arrest. Adding to the defense's dilemma was the fact that many of their witnesses were Northerners, which tended to evoke more resentment than credence on the part of the jury. Describing the scene and mood of the crowd inside and outside of the courtroom, an eyewitness to the trial stated: "Mobs choked the area around the courthouse. Men with rifles stood at the open windows, some aimed at the jury, some aimed at the judge. Over and over, louder and louder, the men repeated the chant, ' Hang the Jew.' The mob kept up their chant. I can still hear them screaming... through the open windows. And inside the courtroom, spectators were allowed to give full vent to their anti-Semitism. The jury was threatened with death unless they brought in a verdict of guilty. The judge was threatened with death if he didn't pass a sentence of death by hanging. No deputies tried to clear the windows, or the courthouse."

The jury, taking its cue from the prosecutor and the howling mob, found Frank guilty as charged. The verdict was greeted with jubilation throughout Atlanta and Georgia, and the very next day the judge sentenced Leo Frank to death. Frank's lawyers appealed the case to the Georgia Supreme Court. The latter body, however, upheld the conviction. Undaunted, Frank's legal team took the case all the way to the United States Supreme Court on the grounds that their client had not received a fair trial.

By now the case had become a *cause celebre* which had enlisted the support of various groups and prominent individuals, Jews and non-Jews. Most

active on Frank's behalf were members of the American Jewish Committee led by the organization's president, Louis Marshall. An advertising tycoon named Albert Davis Lasker contributed one hundred thousand dollars towards the appeal process, and hired the services of the famous detective William Burns to seek out new evidence which would exonerate Frank. Burns failed to live up to his reputation, but he did manage to ferret out one interesting bit of information. He was able to determine that some hair found on the machine which Mary Phagan had operated (her job had consisted of running a lathe that placed metal lips on the pencils) was not that of the dead girl. The prosecutor was aware of this fact but had managed to suppress it from being presented before the jury.

A press campaign launched by Marshall and such prominent Jews as Jacob Schiff, Felix Warburg, Julius Rosenwald, Nathan Straus, and Samuel Lewisohn, attracted nationwide attention to the Frank case. Gradually, newspapers in growing numbers began to editorialize on what was perceived to have been a miscarriage of justice in Atlanta. In Georgia itself the *Atlanta Constitution* and the *Atlanta Journal* reversed their former editorial stand and came out in support of granting Frank a new trial.

In New York City, Abraham Cahan, the influential editor of the Yiddish newspaper the *Jewish Daily Forward*, decided to go to Atlanta in order to determine for himself if Frank was guilty of the murder of Mary Phagan. After interviewing the condemned man, Cahan came away firmly convinced that Frank was innocent. It seemed remarkable to Cahan that Frank had been found guilty of a capital offense solely on the evidence submitted by a black man with a disreputable background—truly, he thought, a first time in the history of the South. Would the Atlanta jury, the editor asked himself, had been willing to believe Conley if Frank had not been a Jew?

On May 18, 1915 the U.S. Supreme Court turned down Frank's final appeal. As a last resort Frank's lawyers and other prominent personages appealed directly to the Governor of Georgia, John M. Slayton, to commute Frank's death sentence to life

---

imprisonment. Slayton was among the handful of Georgians who believed that Frank had not received a fair trial, but feared to act in the heated atmosphere created by the trial. However, on his last day in office, a few days before Frank was scheduled to be executed, Slayton commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. As a safety measure, Frank was transferred to the Georgia State Prison Farm at Milledgeville, seventy miles from Atlanta.

News of the commutation loosed an explosion of rage, especially among Georgia's rural population. Mobs in Atlanta burned Slayton in effigy. In some Georgia communities citizens threatened summary vengeance on all Jews if they were not out of town within twenty-four hours. Many Jewish families faced with such threats abandoned their homes. The outraged rural and small town population of Georgia soon found a spokesman in the strident voice of Tom Watson, the publisher of the weekly newspaper *The Jeffersonian* and a monthly called *Tom Watson's Magazine*.

As a young lawyer and congressman, Watson had championed agrarian causes. In 1896 he was William Jennings Bryan's running mate in the presidential campaign. Eight years later he emerged as the presidential nominee of the vestigial Populist Party (running on a platform representing agrarian interests, the free coinage of silver, and government control of monopolies). Watson's newspaper and magazine reflected the prejudices and fears of rural Georgia. Their main product was sensationalized black and anti-Catholic bigotry. Anti-Semitism did not at first play a large part in Watson's editorials and articles until the *Atlanta Journal's* volte-face in calling for a new trial for Leo M. Frank.

**I**t seems that Hoke Smith, a former Georgia governor, was part owner of the *Atlanta Journal*. During his term in office Smith had refused to pardon a Watson supporter who had been convicted of murder. Watson sought revenge. The Frank case provided him with the opportunity to get back at the former governor who was once again seeking public office. Accordingly, Watson launched a vicious anti-Semitic campaign against Frank, and in the process singled out Smith's newspaper for favoring a retrial.

A formidable demagogue, Watson stirred the passions of his readers with stinging anti-Semitic rhetoric. "Frank," he wrote, "belongs to the Jewish aristocracy, and it was determined by rich Jews that no aristocrat of their race should die for the death of a working girl .... While the Sodomite who took her sweet life basks in the warmth of today, the poor child's dainty flesh has fed the worms." In a similar vein Watson exclaimed "Our Little Girl—ours by the Eternal God—has been pursued to a hideous death and bloody grave by this filthy perverted Jew of New York." Watson did not hesitate in his propaganda campaign to employ rumors, half truths, special pleading, merciless slander and every other device known to the skillful agitator, to blacken Frank's character and hasten his execution. Resorting to the most despicable form of journalistic chicanery, Watson had a photograph of Frank retouched to depict Frank with thickened lips and popping eyes. He then printed the picture in his newspaper with the following comment: "...you can tell Frank is a lascivious pervert, guilty of the crime that caused the Almighty to blast the Cities of the Plain, by a study of the accompanying picture; look at those bulging satyr eyes, the protruding sensual lips, and also the animal jaws."

As the circulation of his newspaper increased from 25,000 to 300,000, Watson intensified his anti-Frank attacks. He helped found an anti-Semitic society, the so-called Knights of Mary Phagan, which sought to organize a boycott of Jewish stores and businesses throughout Georgia. Responding to Watson's continuous calls to avenge the death of Mary Phagan, crowds of armed men began pouring into Atlanta from the countryside forcing units of militia with fixed bayonets to be positioned around the state capital and Slayton's home.

For a time Frank seemed safe in Milledgeville. Then a month after his transfer from Atlanta, a fellow prisoner slashed his throat. Quick action by the guards and emergency surgery saved his life. However, the respite was a brief one. A month later, stimulated by Watson's rabble rousing, a caravan of eight vehicles bearing twenty-five armed men stormed the prison farm at Milledgeville. Thrusting the guards aside they

*Continued on page 33*

# The Possibility of Compassion

*"We have not understood yet that the discovery of the unconscious means an enormous spiritual task, which must be accomplished if we wish to preserve our civilization."*

*C. G. Jung*

About one year ago, September 2002, one year after the crash of the World Trade Center, I was invited to join a group of activists, conflict transformation practitioners, and peace studies researchers, for an inquiry into the question "How does compassion arise in the process of social healing?" Long time peace and human rights activist Judith Thompson convened the conference, which was hosted by the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century.

The gathering proposed to utilize the participants' lived-experiences as the basis for their exploration into the various aspects of compassion and social healing. During the five hour flight to Boston I reflected on the trajectory of my life that brought me to this conference. The Holocaust left a gaping, unhealed wound in its survivors which they, in turn, have passed onto their children. In many Holocaust families, one of the children is designated as the 'memorial candle' for all the relatives who perished. I was given the burden and the mission of serving as the link that joins the past to the present and the future. I spent my adult years trying to deal with the effects of this inter-generational trauma. In an effort to seek healing, I traveled in 1998 to Berlin, Germany, to participate in a dialogue with descendants of the Nazi regime. Two years later, four participants of the

dialogue, two on each side of the Holocaust, Jewish and German, traveled to Bosnia to inspire the survivors of the most recent European genocide to start their healing.

This conference inspired me to reflect on the meaning of compassion, and I realized that compassion can only be born out of suffering, the kind of suffering which has the power to humanize. Perhaps the soul inflicts suffering to give itself compassion. Often the only bridge across the abyss that separates us, compassion is a communion and a deep resonance with another. I experienced the highest level of compassion from descendants of the Third Reich during our dialogue when many said to me "I am so sorry for what my people did to your people." I discovered, first in myself and then in others, the profound connection between the ability to mourn one's losses and feel compassion.

Compassion is one of the noblest expressions of our humanity and a sacred space in which, according to Carl Jung, "a person can suffer the suffering he always needed to suffer and lacked the courage." I learned the most heart wrenching lessons about compassion from Holocaust survivors: That a human being crushed by suffering loses compassion, yet conversely, a soul can expand from pain and feel a great depth of compassion. It seems the edge of extreme suffering cuts both ways.

The Boston Research Institute for the 21st Century was housed in a cheerful building and we took our seats positioned in a circle. During the opening speeches someone mentioned that evil has succeeded because it was organized, and the time has come for the rest of us to do the same. Imre Kertesz, the most

---

MARY ROTHSCHILD, a psychologist, frequently lectures and writes about the horrors of war and its impact on subsequent generations.

---

recent Nobel Prize winner, reflects on the notion of evil in his book, "*Kaddish for a Child Not Born*."

And please stop saying that Auschwitz cannot be explained, that Auschwitz is the product of irrational, incomprehensible forces, because there is always a rational explanation for wrongdoing: It's quite possible that Satan himself, like Iago, is irrational: his creations, however, are rational creatures indeed; their every action is as soluble as a mathematical formula... On the other hand what is really irrational and what truly cannot be explained is not evil, but contrarily, the good...

In his essay "*Mysterium Coniunctionis*," Carl Jung elucidates these "irrational, comprehensible forces," discussing the dangers of falling prey to the dark side:

When man no longer knows by what his soul is sustained, the potential of the unconscious is increased and takes the lead. Desirousness overpowers him and illusory goals... excite his greed. The beast of prey takes a hold of him and soon he forgets that he is a human being...

One of the speakers remarked that we have failed to live in the image of God and instead we made God over in our image. Another speaker quoted Solzhenitsyn, the Russian writer, who said that if the world was divided in evil and good, the solution would be simple: Get rid of the evil. Unfortunately, we all have the capacity for good and evil.

We then started telling our personal stories. Before starting, we each placed an object representing compassion on the cloth that was our sacred altar. In the middle of the cloth, there was a bouquet of flowers in vivid colors and a tall, slow burning candle. Reverend Michael was the first to speak. Targeted because of his anti-apartheid work, Reverend Michael was the victim of a letter bomb. He lost both hands and is now partially blind and deaf. Yet he has continued to work tirelessly on behalf of human rights and reconciliation in South Africa and worldwide. Dumisa, also from South Africa, is an eloquent spokesman for reconciliation and forgiveness. During the apartheid years, he was repeatedly imprisoned for his political activities. He talked about the time he spent in solitary

confinement where he was looking forward to the interrogations; such was the need for human contact and stimulation. Dumisa radiates strength and nobility of spirit.

Yitzak, a clinical psychologist from Israel, was severely wounded in a terrorist attack in 1994 which prompted him to develop a theory on reconciliation in the therapeutic setting. He mentioned an organization called "Orphans with Parents," and I was reminded how those of us with parents who survived concentration camps grew up feeling orphaned even though our parents were still alive. He commented that the victim holds the key to the liberation of the perpetrator by granting or withholding forgiveness, and that the Greek root of the word "forgiveness" means untying a knot. Zoughbi, a Palestinian living in the West Bank, is the director of a Palestinian conflict resolution center. He talked about the pain of bringing up children whose safety is threatened every day. Together with Yitzak, they brought us into the presence of the horrors of the divide of Israeli and Palestinian conflict.

**S**vetlana, a cardiologist from former Yugoslavia, told us the story of her inspiration to write "*Good People in Times of Evil*" during the genocide in Bosnia because, as she said, "you cannot build a future based on evil." Her book documents the stories of those who crossed lines of ethnicity to save neighbors, friends, and strangers during the wars in the Balkans. Miki, a human rights activist from Sarajevo, Bosnia, was involved during the war in projects to ease the suffering of youth and the elderly. Today, he works extensively on issues that involve peace making and conflict resolution. He is married to Eva and they have a six months old daughter whom they brought to the conference. The presence of the baby offered relief to the survivors of genocide and the others who were witnessing our stories.

Joseph, a member of the Tutsi tribe from Rwanda, lost his immediate and extended family to the war with the Hutus. He showed us pictures of his family. I cried when he told us that his brother's death had been his greatest loss. I remembered how Holocaust survivors talked about a loved one, that one person whose loss left an eternal emptiness, a bleeding wound when torn



---

from their lives. When I asked him why he has not become embittered by his experiences, he replied that he didn't know, but that bitterness would condemn future generations. Joseph is a sociologist working in the field of conflict transformation.

Arn, formerly a child soldier in Cambodia, is today a celebrated human rights activist. The unspeakable horrors and the pain that radiated from him made his story almost impossible to hear. I had to steel myself against running from the room. Once more we heard of the extremes of horror and cruelty that humanity is capable of, and I was jolted into the realization that I owed it to him to listen. I felt as though in some small measure I agreed to carry the burden with him by hearing his story. Arn told us that he was forced to play a flute while witnessing atrocities. He brought his flute with him and played it again, for us. He continues to play the flute as a way to purge and heal the memories. My soul was singed by his suffering, and by the notes of his flute...

From the United States, Pat shared her experiences as a member of "Murder Victim Families against the Death Penalty." She related the pain of racial discrimination suffered by African-Americans. She works as the director for "Fellowship of Reconciliation." Pat radiated a gentle wisdom and kindness. She brought with her two paintings from death row inmates. Next, Ruth told us of her heritage and suffering as a Native American. She works with restorative justice and civic groups from over 40 countries. She cried many tears and told us that her tears were cleansing. Her regal countenance and her tears reminded me of the stones called "Apache tears." At first they seem opaque and dark, but in the light, they become transparent and turn into the color of a fine wine, not unlike pain that is alchemically transformed into compassion.

Maureen and Richard, who had been blinded at the age of ten by the British army, were the first couple from "opposing sides" to speak to our group. They modeled reconciliation between the Loyalist and Republican communities in Northern Ireland. They both work to turn their experiences with the conflict in Ireland into learning for future generations. I was touched to witness their friendship and tenderness for each another.

When my turn came, I spoke of my mother's "liberation" from several concentration camps which did not bring her freedom from the horrors she had endured. When she birthed me to replace her mother, we both needed a mother and got a child instead. I talked about the image permanently seared in my mind of my grandmother marching to the gas chamber. Still, I realized that I cannot change my history but rather my relationship to that history, and that the same poison that kills can also heal. I then related how I found emotional restitution when one and then several descendants of the Third Reich said "I am so sorry."

With few exceptions, most genocides of the 20th Century were represented in the room and as the week-end unfolded we learned that many of our lives had been personally touched by genocide, political imprisonment, or torture. It seemed that we all had in common a desire to make those experiences count, to transform them into something that can be of service to others.

The conference presented me with the paradox and the possibility to maintain one's compassion in spite of having survived unspeakable horrors. These people chose to transform their pain rather than wallow in it and to uphold the luminosity of the human soul against the depth of darkness, evil, hatred and bestiality that our species can sink to.

I was humbled to be in the presence of human beings whose compassion was engendered not only by the depth of their suffering but by their willingness to descend into that suffering and make meaning out of it. In the words of Reverend Michael: "Together for three days we told and embodied the stories of the depth of human degradation and the heights of beauty which characterize the human family."

Someone mentioned that anything which was life-threatening is life-changing. The question was where, how and why does a person turn his or her private wounds into public purpose rather than become a perpetrator? How did these people transcend their suffering and turn it into service for mankind? Why did their spirit grow instead of become crushed by their suffering? Why are they

involved with restorative justice rather than restitution?

In his book, "Avalanche," Brugh Joy, a transformational teacher who has worked with thousands of individuals in awakening human awareness, expressed this:

I have been impressed with certain individuals who have survived the ravages of chaos, whether the black pit of alcoholism and drug abuse or the extreme trauma of war. They seem to have gained a depth of maturity, a compassion, and a rich spirituality that is completely absent in people who are naive and untraumatized. It is as though such chaos is a contemporary rite of passage, an initiation, one that was previously handled through sacred rites and vision quests and that selects out those individuals who have the interior resources to become the great teachers, Priests, Healers, and Sages for a clan or a collective. (p.229)

Hearing the stories of several survivors of genocide, I must conclude that the alchemical process that transforms psychic pain into compassion is not for the faint of heart. At the end of the conference I wanted to stay immersed in the feeling of compassion I experienced. Yet we had barely scratched the surface of a subject so immense.

On my flight home, I read the following comments by Jason Pontin in an article on cloning: "As to whether a technology should be illegal because it alters human

nature, I have no objection to a new nature." The late Robert Nozick, in his essay "The Holocaust" asked whether the human nature that administered Auschwitz was worth preserving: "It now would not be a special tragedy if humankind ended," he writes, "Perhaps what we need do, is produce another, better species." In a speech he gave on October 10 2002, Deepak Chopra comments on the urgency of changing what needs changing:

We need a critical mass of people that will no longer participate or tolerate a culture of violence that is based on profound indifference to the pain of our fellow human beings and lack of respect for life.

History is the story of victims and victimizers. The critical first step in healing conflict is the acknowledgement by the aggressor group or its successors. This is the act of accepting responsibility for the violent acts or events which caused the traumatic losses to the victims. Without genuine acts of acknowledgement and contrition the healing process cannot begin. Because I was branded by genocide, I can attest to the transforming power of the words "I am so sorry" that I have heard in my dialogue with descendants of the Third Reich. Not only that but the perpetrator's remorse over their crimes must be followed by the willingness to do repair work. Perhaps then, and only then, we can prevent our legacies from being passed on like a defective gene to the next generation and we can live in a world where everyone tolerates everyone else. ■■

**Subscribe to the Jewish Frontier—**

Name:		
Address:		
Address-2:		
City:	State:	Zip:
Phone:	E-mail:	



4 issues/one year --- only \$20  
8 issues/two years -- only \$35

check enclosed     bill me

Return to: Circulation, Jewish Frontier, 275 Seventh Avenue, 17th Fl, New York, NY 10001-6708

## The December Dilemma: American Jews and Christmas

The December Dilemma will soon be upon us. Once again, in muted trepidation, Jewish parents will gear up to confront the blandishments posed to their children by Christmas trees, Santa Claus and lilting carols. As ever, the challenge is a daunting one, with Hanukkah as a counterweight being of some, but far too little, avail. For Christmas is a magic time, a tinsel season of high merriment and beguiling appeal. Is it any wonder, then, that all but the most scrooge of heart are tempted to succumb?

For Jews, however, this is a first. Given the tragic history of Christian anti-Semitism, it is absolutely astounding that Jews—even the most secularized—should wish to participate in any way, shape or form in the celebration of a Christmas holiday. After all, there is no March/April dilemma: Easter and Passover, although linked historically (and numinously) in a fashion that Hanukkah and Christmas are not, are observances whose identities are discrete and distinct. No Jewish parent worries—the Easter bunny notwithstanding—that his/her offspring will come home one day and express a desire to celebrate Easter in lieu of, or in addition to, Passover. What, then, is so special—and threatening—about Christmas? Whence its seductive fascination and allure?

One important and previously overlooked reason, I suggest, is because the celebration of Christmas in America today has, *mutatis mutandis*, taken on the trappings of a markedly Judaized observance. Like

attracts like: We find most desirable in others those traits and characteristics we cherish most highly in ourselves. The Yuletide spirit is so enticing—and dangerous—to Jews because, in its American customization, it kindles to light emphases and motifs more closely associated with classical Judaism than apostolic Christianity. In doing so, the holiday succeeds in blurring those fundamental parameters of identity whose conspicuous and continuous reinforcement is critical to the survival of Jewry as a minority.

Consider the following: It is commonplace to speak of the Jewish people as both an ethnic (“secular”) and religious polity, in Daniel Elazar’s felicitous phrase, as a community of ‘kinship and consent.’ Similarly, in America today, Christmas is both a national/cultural and religiously privileged celebration. (Hence, the legal imbroglio over the use of public land to display crèches.) Just as there are secular, ethnic Jews, so there is a national/cultural non-Trinitarian Christmas: That of Jingle Bells, Winter Wonderland and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Indeed, there is a veritable treasure trove of Yuletide lore and custom which exists independent of any ecclesiastical cachet. This ranges from fables such as that of O. Henry’s “*Gift of the Magi*” and Charles Dickens’ “*A Christmas Carol*” to songs like “*White Christmas*” and “*Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire*” (tunes both of which, incidentally, were penned by Orthodox-raised New York Jews).

Curiously enough, although Christianity is an offshoot of Judaism, the origins of many of the rites of Christmas seem decidedly pagan: While the gospels appear to indicate that Jesus was born in the spring, the Church selected December 25 as the

---

STANLEY COHEN *grew up as a traditional Jew in a Catholic neighborhood in a Quaker city in a Protestant country.*

---

official birth date of its savior-messiah. This was done in order to co-opt an ancient winter solstice festival widely observed at that time. Likewise, the Christmas tree is a Scandinavian custom appropriated from local heathen practice. Other examples abound.

Clearly those who unremittingly call for “putting Christ back in Christmas” (many of whom traditionally score high in anti-Semitism polls) are woefully ignorant of the history and development of this festival, which bears little fidelity to the milieu and parlance of Jesus, the first century C.E. Galilean Jew. In addition, usually originating among the same “put Christ back into Christmas” circles, is the perennial issue of the so-called commercialization of Christmas. If by this one is referring to crass financial exploitation, then such condemnation is laudable and well-taken: rude, vulgar excess is always to be deplored. But closer reflection leads us to wondering if what is being denounced as the ‘commercialization’ of the holiday is actually nothing more than the Semiticization of Christmas. Starting with its origins in the apocalyptic, Christendom has long suffered from an other-worldly, ascetic bent, illustrated most vividly by its anchorite heritage and well-honed contrast of spirit with flesh. By concretizing and passionately highlighting the spirit of gift-giving—albeit with a vengeance, courtesy of Madison Avenue—Christmas, in its full-bodied Americanized expression, actually represents a vibrant return to, and re-appropriation by Western Christianity of, its authentic Middle Eastern roots. (In Islam, e.g., the Hajj, or the mandatory sacred pilgrimage festival, serves simultaneously as an international trade fair.) Echoing Judaism’s non-eschewment of prosperity and the enjoyment of life through unabashed material blessing, Christmas calls Christians back to their religion’s Judaist matrix. Unfortunately, by the same token, it is the assimilation and incorporation of such Jew-ish (sic) behavior by Christianity which corrodes Jewish identity and thereby threatens Jewish survival in America.

The quintessential embodiment of the Christmas spirit of giving is, of course, Santa Claus. Although there may be antecedents for the character in such religious worthies as St. Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra, and

Father Ice of Siberia, and in more neutral figures like Father Christmas and Kris Kringle, Santa Claus is no mere stateside ectype of any of them: the roly-poly luminary has evolved into a robust persona with a singular identity of his own. There is, however, one facet of the North Pole toymaker that is as curious and problematic as it is unique, and this is his gender. Although often depicted with a Mrs. Claus by his side, Santa is neither rugged, macho, athletic nor even tall. Indeed, his girth—strangely unknown and uncharacteristic of the antecedent figures—is more typical of a personage nine months pregnant. Certainly, it has never been the male role in America to be the parent (or grandparent) responsible for closely monitoring children’s behavior, to be the caregiver who “knows when you’ve been sleeping, and knows when you’re awake; knows who’s been bad or good,” and therefore exhorts the young’ins to be “good for goodness’ sake.” Hmmm: sound familiar? Generally, in the American family, the male parent disciplines, the female parent nurtures (and, especially in Jewish families, rewards), and the grandparents shamelessly indulge. Might dear ol’ Santa, in reality, be more of a Jewish mother than a gentile hombre?

In large measure, neither the lush mysticism of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the exuberant sacramentalism of Roman Catholicism, nor the intra-worldly austerity of the Protestant denominations find ready expression or consonance in the sedimented pastiche which constitutes the observance of Christmas in America today. No, its tonality is located elsewhere, in a bumptious, quasi-Judaized sensibility. And therein lay the ominous message of the ‘C’ word for American Jews, in their pursuit of religious distinctiveness and careful cultivation of a disparate and sovereign cultural identity.

For the December Dilemma of mistletoe, manger and menorah will soon again be upon us, *cum brio*. A national celebration intoning ‘peace on earth to people of good will’ will have the unintended effect of making Jews precipitously self-conscious about their marginal and often recusant place in American society. Stakhovite efforts by the Lubavitcher Hasidim to erect skyscraper hanukiyot on public

*Continued on page 33*

## What Do We Do Now?

Ten years ago tomorrow, I was one of those on the White House lawn watching the signing of the Oslo agreement. It was an amazing day, full of unforgettable images. I remember seeing Members of the Israeli delegation talking and laughing with members of the Palestinian delegation as if they were old friends. I remember watching the lobbyists for pro-Israel and pro-Arab organizations exchanging handshakes and, it's hard to believe, embraces. Most of all, of course, I remember the Rabin-Arafat handshake. The whole experience was, in that much overused term, unbelievable. And so it has turned out to be, as the past month's acts of violence have demonstrated.

But that does not mean that Oslo was a mistake. It is one thing to say that Oslo did not produce peace; it is another to contend that Oslo itself was intrinsically disastrous, or that Israel would not be in the perilous situation it is in now, if there had been no Oslo. In fact, the bottom line about Oslo is that there are hundreds of Israelis and even more Palestinians who are alive today because there was an Oslo. We know that because of what has happened in its absence.

Oslo utterly and completely changed the fundamentals of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Today, despite everything, the vast majority of Israelis support the creation of a Palestinian state and believe that one will be established. The vast majority of Palestinians accept the existence of Israel and that their future state will be limited to the West Bank and Gaza.

But there is more: When Oslo was working—that is, when both sides were largely acting in compliance

with its requirements—the agreement transformed Israel's situation from beleaguered and isolated to a nation that is accepted in every corner of the globe. Once Israel and the Palestinians recognized each other, foreign investment in Israel skyrocketed, and the economy boomed. African, Asian, and even Muslim states—most importantly, Jordan—began coming around to recognition of Israel.

The most visible demonstration of Israel's transformed standing after Oslo came following Yitzhak Rabin's murder in November 1995. Not since President Kennedy's assassination 32 years earlier had the death of any international figure produced such universal mourning. Polls at the time showed that Yitzhak Rabin was the most admired figure in the world. Imagine that, the Prime Minister of Israel was the most admired world leader. In those days, few worried about a surge in anti-Semitism in Europe or anywhere else. Israel had appeared to achieve not only security but also worldwide approval.

The goal of the man who killed Rabin, and of those who cheered him on, was to destroy the possibility of Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation and, to an extent, they succeeded. Anti-Oslo prime ministers who followed Rabin did not want Oslo to succeed and allowed it to be nicked and dined almost to oblivion. As for Prime Minister Barak, he decided to take a different approach, abandoning Oslo's incrementalism in favor of a comprehensive final agreement, a gambit which ultimately failed. Nevertheless, while it was in effect, Oslo made Israel infinitely safer. That did not happen all at once. It took years for Israeli and Palestinian security cooperation to take effect.

Oslo's first years were full of acts of terror, committed as they are now by Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Fatah offshoots. It was so bad that President Clinton ordered the CIA to work directly with Israelis and Palestinians to hammer out an anti-terror strategy. The Americans demanded that the Palestinians produce an

---

M.J. ROSENBERG is the Director of Policy Analysis for Israel Policy Forum ([www.israelpolicyforum.org](http://www.israelpolicyforum.org)). He is a long time Capitol Hill staffer and former editor of AIPAC's Near East Report. This is a reprint from IPF's weekly newsletter, Issue #149; contact the IPF for more information.

---

action plan to stop terror and then pushed the two sides to force them to cooperate with each other (even to share intelligence, which was something neither side wanted to do). Within months, Israeli and Palestinian security officials were working so closely together that the American role became almost superfluous.

**I**t is at this juncture that Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation succeeded in thwarting the terror operations which Islamic Jihad and Hamas were launching regularly. And, according to Israeli government figures, between September 1997 and the outbreak of the Al Aksa intifada in November 2000, less than a dozen Israeli civilians died in terror attacks. Not a single Israeli was killed by terrorists in 1999 or in the first nine months of 2000. (The number of Palestinians killed by Israelis was only slightly larger).

In other words, there was a three year period when Oslo succeeded in securing Israel from terror. That period ended with a car bombing perpetrated by Islamic Jihad four months after the failed Camp David summit and following Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount and the ensuing riots. By then, Oslo-mandated Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation was over. The Israeli-Palestinian partnership was dead.

Today it is hard to imagine three years without terror in Israel—especially in contrast to the 869 killed by terror in the three years since Oslo's collapse—but back then, it was almost taken for granted, along with the booming economy, expanded trade and diplomatic ties with formerly hostile nations, and hotels bursting with tourists. Ask anyone who lived in, or visited, Israel, during Oslo's three years of quiet. They will tell you that there had never been a better time, and there certainly hasn't been one since.

That is Oslo's legacy—hardly the dark picture its critics offer. Nevertheless, Oslo collapsed. It collapsed because Arafat did not accept Prime Minister Barak's offer at Camp David. It collapsed because Israel never stopped enlarging settlements and building new ones, leaving the Palestinians to believe that the land they were negotiating over was being gobbled up acre by

acre. But, above all, it collapsed because Palestinian terrorists resorted to violence.

IPF National Scholar Steve Cohen said it best. Cohen, who has been integrally involved in Middle East peacemaking for almost 40 years, writes of Oslo that, "Palestinian incitement worked hand in glove with Israeli siege and control tactics to erode the political will to peace." He writes that the combination of "hateful words and odious actions fed the cycle of violence and repression..."

Does this mean that Israel should abandon the negotiations route? No, simply because opponents of Oslo (and now the roadmap) can offer no alternative other than continued bloodletting on both sides. As for the status quo, it is an abysmal failure. Can anyone seriously believe that the current set of tactics

—◆—

**Can anyone seriously believe  
that the current set of tactics will lead  
to security for either side?**

—◆—

will lead to security for either side? The only alternative offering a way out is a peace process that works, and one that works because it is fully implemented. President Bush's roadmap was built on lessons learned from Oslo's failures and, for one month this summer, it too succeeded in thwarting terror, reigniting negotiations and allowing Israelis and Palestinians to imagine a peaceful future. But now the roadmap is on life-support because of a new wave of violence.

It is not dead, or, we had better hope it's not. Without the roadmap or something like it, both sides face a stagnant and hopeless future. And America will not only be badly damaged throughout the Middle East but will also be imperiled at home. As Thomas Friedman wrote yesterday, "A credible peace deal here is no longer a U.S. luxury—it is essential to our own homeland security. Otherwise, this suicide madness will spread, and it will be Americans who will have to learn how to live with it." That is why President Bush needs to redouble his efforts to ensure

*Continued on page 34*

# Gangs of New York: What Happens When Hollywood Teaches History

The recent film “*Gangs of New York*,” Martin Scorsese's graphic hymn of perverted hatred, is truly an epic anti-achievement. It matches the worst anti-American propaganda of both the Nazi and Soviet regimes in portraying the United States as a violent society, culturally debased, ruled by corrupt politicians, dominated by the rich who control the police, and accepting of new immigrants only to use them as cannon fodder for imperialist or expansionist adventures. Whatever its cinematic qualities in terms of photography, costume, set design, or dramatic depth, the film presents raw and ugly propaganda in which the absurd plot plays second fiddle to the political message. Rarely, if ever, has a film involving a historical subject distorted the truth in such a consistent and flagrant manner.

I saw this film in a cinema in Spain. The Spanish audience emerged visibly shaken by the violent scenes. In their discussions about the movie, many reflected that the film “confirmed” their anti-American sentiments, even regarding the old canard of America being “anti-Catholic” as well as anti-immigrant, anti-poor and anti-Negro. Many claimed that such was the strong tendency of Americans towards violence that it explained the American intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. Few had the time or inclination to listen to a catalogue of the film’s rewriting of history. “*Gangs of New York*” is homage to how low an art-form can sink, and what can sometimes happen when Hollywood teaches history. Various historical distortions of this film are detailed below.

---

NORMAN BERDICHEVSKY *most recently has authored* The Danish-German Border Dispute (2002) and Nations in Search of a National Language (2003).

## The Five Points Slum

Five Points was indeed a slum, renowned as an area of crime and poor living conditions, but not notably worse than similar areas in London or Paris at that time. It was populated by a largely immigrant population of Irish and a few Germans who shared it with the city’s Afro-American population, predominantly freemen of Color who were artisans. The older inhabitants were people of old-time colonial American-British stock and of Dutch descent (referred to in the film as “The Natives”) and a handful of Chinese Americans.

It was sometimes the scene of violent crime, scams, and drunkenness. Aside from the many saloons and brothels, it was also the source of much creative energy, including dancing halls and boxing rings. Five Points was run by machine politicians who, since the 1830s, were in the service of the Democratic machine of “Tammany Hall” that ran the city until well after the Civil War. Observers such as Abraham Lincoln, Davy Crockett and Charles Dickens, regarded the Five Points as the epicenter of the ills of unassimilated immigrants, unscrupulous politicians, and urban decay, yet they were also impressed with the area’s vitality.

## The Irish

The viewer of the movie has little to no sense at all of how the lives of many immigrants changed for the better after arriving in New York. The Irish pictured were mostly the impoverished tenants of Lord Lansdowne's huge County Kerry estate. In Ireland, many of the Irish were victims of the Potato Famine. Recent Irish arrivals often took the lowest-paying

---

and least desirable jobs in the city, living in Five Points' most squalid tenements, yet eventually they were able to save enough money to move out and build secure lives. Even the most impoverished Irish famine victims living in North America's slums were able to improve their lives dramatically not long after their arrival in the United States; yet the entire ethos of the film from start to finish suggests that the Irish were primarily victims and politically powerless until they were able to rise up against their oppressors—in particular, against the rich as symbolized in the film by editor of the New York Tribune, Horace Greeley, who exemplifies what the film portrays as Native-American bigotry and racism.

The politicians (Tammany Hall) are portrayed as being subservient to the Native Americans and wealthy old families until the “masses” of Irish immigrants rise up against them in the anti-Draft riots of 1863. This ignores the fact that as early as 1832, Irish immigrants voted overwhelmingly to throw out the old Whig administration and install the Tammany Hall Machine of the Democratic Party for which they were rewarded by considerable patronage and access to jobs and influence. A dominant political figure in the area was Fernando Wood, a “native American” who nevertheless secured considerable Irish support as his “enforcers” (illegal voters and ballot-box stuffers). He was a popular figure among the saloon and brothel keepers of The Five Points who rewarded him with kickbacks. In fact, this political manipulation in New York and other East Coast cities alarmed many Native Americans who felt that their only recourse to offset Irish immigrant block voting and the growing influence of the Catholic Church was to organize in the form of a political party (eventually to be called the American Party but known contemptuously and quite unfairly as the “Know-Nothings”).

In the film, Irish Catholics in America are portrayed as experiencing humiliating job discrimination. This was symbolized by signs proclaiming "Help Wanted—No Irish Need Apply!" Yet in actual fact such signs were infrequent and rarely applied to healthy young male labor (which was needed on the great building projects of the Erie Canal). The market for women occasionally specified religion or

nationality. Yet Irish women nevertheless dominated the market for domestics because they provided a reliable supply of an essential service. Many had done such work at home and, unlike other immigrants, understood English.

The slogan “No Irish Need Apply” was more common in England, especially London, where it was turned into a song. This song eventually reached America and was modified to portray an Irishman who confronts the discrimination by giving its sponsor a sound beating. The song was an immediate hit, and is the source of the myth. More Americans were suspicious of the Irish not because of the threat of competition on the job market but due to their religion, their relative aggression, and their subservience to the corrupt Democratic Party machine. By the Civil War these fears had dissipated. Nevertheless, many Irish tended to live together in order to be near their church and maximize their political strength. This tendency towards exclusion was viewed by many “natives” as the reluctance of the Irish to assimilate. The suspicions of many native-born Americans only increased as it also became obvious that the Irish were anxious for the North not to press the abolitionist cause and allow free Negroes to enter the job market, as this would constitute additional competitors in the job market.

### **Bill the Butcher**

Scorsese's film ignores this background entirely. He assumes the “Nativist” indiscriminately persecuted all new immigrants. The film even transfers the racism of the Irish onto those “nativists” in the North who were the mainspring of the American Party, later the Republican Party, which dominated the abolitionist movement. The evil character in the film, “Butcher Bill,” is presented as the Nativist leader who constantly spouts hatred and American patriotism in the same breath—reciting Protestant hymns at one moment, practicing sadistic mutilation at another. In the film, Butcher Bill is often seen cavorting with Chinese-Americans and African-Americans so as to emphasize his contempt for women and “inferior races”; of course, there were only a handful of Chinese men and virtually no Chinese women in the New York of 1863.



---

As Butcher Bill, William Poole (the basis for the character “William Cutting” in the movie) is the chief villain of the film, the very incarnation of evil. He is the head of his own West Side gang of Native Americans and he is regarded as their chief “enforcer.” His main features in the film include his glass eye and an astounding, absurdly-exaggerated ability to throw knives. (In real life, he was killed in 1855 in a brawl with Tammany politicians.) He was hardly representative of the American Party. In fact, he is representative, if anything, of those tactics sometimes employed by Tammany Hall. Nevertheless, Scorsese personifies Butcher Bill as the “American native born Protestant elite.” His glass eye is engraved with the American eagle and shield, the very symbol of the United States of America on many coins and banknotes. “*Gangs of New York*” mocks American symbols by embedding the American eagle in his “evil eye” as the representation of everything immoral, ugly, and corrupt.

### **The “Natives” and the American Party**

American politicians have often used immigrants as scapegoats for the nation's problems, but the phenomenon of the American Party, known as the Know-Nothings, is quite complex and bears little resemblance to the criminal element of “Natives.” Remarkably, Scorsese has Butcher Bill operate out of a headquarters in the very heart of the Irish immigrant neighborhood, The Five Points. This is analogous to the Ku Klux Klan establishing their National Headquarters in Harlem.

The Nativist anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant movement started out as several secret organizations. It was a reaction to the perceived manipulation of Catholic-American immigrants by the Vatican and the Catholic Church. It was also a response to the vast increase in immigration beginning in 1845 with the Irish Potato Famine, exacerbated by the many unsuccessful liberal revolutions in Europe in 1848. A considerable proportion of the new immigrants were destitute, political radicals, non-English speaking, and/or Catholic. This fundamental change in the character of immigrants worried many “native” Americans, not helped any by the growing sectional dispute between the North and South.

Many decent native-born Americans, especially in the Northern states, were opposed to slavery but believed that this issue might eventually be resolved with a maximum of goodwill, a fundamental dedication to the republican principles enshrined in the Constitution, and strict measures to ensure that new immigrants, especially Catholics, were integrated effectively into American society. It was hoped that this platform would draw support from both North and South. There was little support for this platform in the South, however, where, apart from the city of New Orleans, there were almost no European Catholic immigrants.

The use of The King James (“Protestant”) Bible in public schools, the greater education enjoyed by many native-born American women compared to those in immigrant families, the Protestant ethos emphasizing temperance and the work-ethic, the many electoral scandals involving block voting by new immigrants—all of these issues underscored the gulf between the WASP majority and the Catholic immigrants. Furthermore, the Whigs and the Democrats, the two major parties of the time, had not dealt effectively with these issues.

In 1852 and 1853 the “Know-Nothing” movement and its supporters won many local elections under a variety of names. The “American Party” was officially founded in 1854. Previously, the various “nativist” organizations, with names such as “The Order of the Star Spangled Banner” and “United Sons of America,” would reply “I know nothing” if asked about membership in a secret society. Within a year of its emergence in 1854, the party had elected eight governors, over one hundred members of Congress, and thousands of local officials. Prominent politicians of every persuasion joined the Party. After that, the expression “I Know Nothing” was explained to mean “I know nothing except patriotism for my country.” The Party’s platform, above all else, emphasized preservation of the Union.

Many observers predicted that the party would elect the next President. The Know Nothings’ phenomenal success was closely linked to their stance against the extension of slavery. Additionally, the party gained support because of its anti-Irish rhetoric and its

---

platform on other social issues. In the 1856 national election (including the Democrat James Buchanan, the Republican John C. Fremont, and the American Party Candidate, former President Millard Fillmore), Buchanan triumphed by a small margin. Fillmore carried the eight electoral votes of Maryland, a border slave state. The popular vote was 1,838,169 for Buchanan, 1,341,264 for Fremont, and 874,534 for Fillmore.

Fillmore's background, very similar to that of Abraham Lincoln, typified the "ideal" of the American Party candidate: Born in a log cabin in upstate New York and self-educated, hardly representative of the "establishment" or the wealthy elite as symbolized by Editor Horace Greeley in the film. The new Republican Party eventually assumed a large part of the American Party Platform. In fact, the Republican Party assumed a more aggressive position opposing the spread of slavery, but the platform did not reflect the same hostility towards immigration and recent immigrants. In any case, this movement, representing the original "core WASP" population of Americans of British descent, is flagrantly misrepresented in "*Gangs of New York*" by the mob violence and the sadistic persona of Butcher Bill.

### **Catholic Reaction and Attitudes about Abolition**

A number of unfortunate statements and aggressive attitudes by several Catholic political figures, churchmen and editors, exacerbated those tensions which were already epidemic.

Ostes Brownson, the editor of the widely circulated "*Catholic Quarterly Review*," played into the hands of the new political movement by openly proclaiming: "The time has come when Catholics must begin to make their principles tell upon the public sentiment of the country," and worse, "If the Pope directed the Roman Catholics of this country to overthrow the Constitution and to sell their nationality of their country, they would be bound to obey."

Additionally, many Irish in New York, working as stevedores, were hostile to free blacks, particularly as

freed blacks had been used as strike-breakers on the docks. Archbishop John Hughes, who argued the Union cause in Europe, nevertheless warned the War Department that most Irish Catholics in America supported the Constitution, the laws, and the government, but would not fight for the abolition of slavery. Many abolitionists were hostile towards the Irish, as there were recent Irish immigrants who would catch fugitive slaves and return them to the South for a bounty.

### **The Evil Union**

In the film, the union troops, in firing on the Irish rioters, are made to look like callous murderers, protecting the native establishment and the affluent. The reality was that the troops were called from the Front at Gettysburg. They were all soldiers of the "Fighting 69th," a famous regiment composed wholly of Irish-Americans!

### **Editor Horace Greeley of the New York Tribune**

In its ideological zeal to portray the anti-Draft riots as a class uprising, "*Gangs of New York*" targets "The Rich" as embodied by Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune. The film's characterizations exceed poetic license. Greeley started *The New York Tribune* on April 10th, 1841. He edited this paper for over 30 years, during which it was single greatest journalistic influence in the country and it was recognized as progressive in every area of civic and political endeavor.

With his paper, Greeley intended to provide a publication as cheap as those of his rivals but less sensational and more probing. In fact, sensational police news and objectionable materials were not permitted. *The Tribune* actively supported the Union and President Lincoln in the fight against slavery. Greeley advocated labor organization, encouraging the unionization of all *Tribune* printers. He believed in sharing the *Tribune's* profits and ownership with its employees. Greeley was an advocate of political reform, temperance, and women's rights. He

*Continued on page 34*

## Who Is Ali G.?

"Ain't it coincidence that [Jesus Christ] was born on Christmas day," Ali G. asks a priest from the panel on Religion, after which he asks the Rabbi: "Why dos yo' people chop one of your nuts off?" On another show, Ali G. asks Tony Benn, "So what is the point of a strike?" Tony Benn, former Labor Parliamentarian in Britain, explains, "A strike is like: Unless you give us decent conditions, we won't work for you." Ali G., eager as always to understand the subtext, asks, "So do you not think that people strike just 'cause they is lazy and wanna chill for a day or so?" In these interviews, Ali G. typically wears a bright yellow jumpsuit, wrap-around goggles that obscure his face, a Tommy Hilfiger skullcap, and thick, flashy gold jewelry. Thanks to his ghetto-style slang and an outfit which eclipses his racial identity, one would never know that Ali G., like Al Jolson, is really a white guy dressed up as a black guy; nor would one know that Ali G. is not only Jewish but also an alumnus of Habonim Dror, a progressive, nostalgically-socialist youth movement.

Posing as the host of a British, MTV-like educational series to teach "youth" about current affairs, Ali G. conducts seemingly serious interviews with civic figures including Buzz Aldrin, Ralph Nader, Naomi Wolf, Newt Gringrich, Alexander Haig, Ed Meese, and Donald Trump. Of course, he does not really work for a television station, nor are the interviews intended to be serious. When the interviewees on the show realize this, often after the fact, they are not always amused.

---

ARI M. CHESTER *is the executive director of the Labor Zionist Alliance and managing editor of the Jewish Frontier.*

In a discussion with Ralph Nader, for instance, Ali G. cannot understand why indigenous peoples would want to live in the rainforests: "You'd have to absolutely mental to live in the rainforest... w' all these monkeys ploppin' on your head." Nader corrects this misconception: "Monkeys are not eager to search out these natives and plop on them." Although he would never live in the rainforest—aside from the monkey problem, "there ain't no McDonald's or KFC"—Ali G. is a concerned citizen: "If I use a hangar to stop da needle on da meta at my house," he asks Nader, "is dat a type of energy conservation?" After the interview, Nader is reported to have consulted his lawyers to consider a lawsuit. Naomi Wolf is said to have called her lawyers as well. She didn't see the humor when Ali G. asked her if females would ever fly airplanes. "They already do," she said. But apparently she didn't understand Ali G.'s question, who clarified: "No, not the people who hand out da peanuts, but sittin' in the pilot's seat."

Ali G. was a hit in England, where his show first premiered. In the United States, HBO featured "*Da Ali G. Show*" last spring. There were six episodes: Art, Law, Media, War, Science, and Politics. Despite rave reviews from critics, this provocative show did not do well in the States. Of those aware of the show, some became Ali G.'s cult following; others found him offensive, sophomoric, and worse. Meanwhile, his recent movie, "*Ali G. in Da House*," cannot be released in the US with its NC-17 rating (thanks to explicit sexual references)—what is comedy in England is pornography in the United States.

Remarkably, in most of the interviews on "*Da Ali G. Show*," the subjects do not realize the farce of the

---

show. Aside from his hyperbolically hip-hop veneer, Ali G. also pretends to be intellectually moronic. He seems sure of himself at the same time, lending an air of truth to his intellectual paucity. Unfamiliar with and perhaps afraid of youth culture, not to mention black culture, these civic figures invariably are thrown off, believing in the legitimacy of Ali G. and his “youth” audience. Of course, in the back of their minds, they must realize that Ali G.’s absurdly exaggerated ignorance cannot be real, but, intimidated by their own uncertainty, they are initially... well, not quite sure. And so, the movers and shakers of human civilization collapse with confusion as they muddle through the interview.

### **Wot iz barely legal?**

In the HBO episode on Law, Ali G. starts an interview with former Attorney General Richard Thornburgh asking, “Wot iz legal?” After Thornburgh’s reply, he asks “Wot iz illegal,” which is really just a set-up for his third question: “Wot iz barely legal?” When Thornburgh is uncertain exactly what he means, Ali G. describes a movie he saw, “*Barely Legal 3*,” about just-turned-18 college girls who are reprimanded sexually for not doing their homework. “Now that you’ve recommended it,” says Thornburgh, naive, uncomfortable, yet nevertheless polite, “I’ll have to see it. *Barely Legal*.” “*Barely Legal 3*,” Ali G. reminds him. Yet not everyone is as amicable. On the panel on Religion, the priest expresses his indignation when asked, “Ain’t it hypocritical that so many nuns work part time as strippers?” “I find that very, very offensive,” the priest retorts. “But it’s true,” insists Ali G., offering as evidence a film where a nun, Sista’ Fista’, walks into a club and strips. In fact, there are witnesses: Ali G. has other friends who saw the film as well.

Ali G. transmogrifies into quite another persona when he becomes Borat, a reporter from Kazakhstan whose mission is to document grassroots American culture for Kazakhstani television. Borat embodies every negative stereotypical characteristic of a Central Asian man. With his bushy mustache and cheap suit, Borat is socially oblivious and uncouth, yet he is also eager to learn, good-natured, and endearing. Touring Middle America, the subjects of his interviews

experience discomfort or confusion as they attempt to accommodate Borat’s strange, foreign, Central Asian culture. On a historical re-creation of a southern plantation, Borat observes as an actor, dressed in colonial regalia, demonstrates carpentry methods from the 1800s. Borat is confused, however: “I thought in America, it ‘vas very much technology. But it is shame to use these primitive tools.” Borat elucidates, “We now have machine in Kazakhstan, can chop a wood without man.” As the curator/actor attempts to convey the fictitious nature of the plantation, Borat keeps asking if he can buy a slave.

In another episode, Borat tries his luck with a dating agency. In an interview, the dating consultant, Jenny Nowl, asks Borat what he has to offer. “I can provide Television. Remote control. Red dress,” Borat assures her, but there is one caveat: “Must have plow experience.” “Honey, in America, no women have plow experience, none,” Jenny tries to honestly explain. “At least just one year plough experience,” Borat insists. His only racial preference is “no Jew,” and he warns that if his wife is unfaithful, he will “crush” her. Jenny does not flinch at either comment—a polite American, after all, dare not pass judgment on the strange, foreign customs of another culture.

Again, there is a radical twist on this show as Borat transforms into the third character, Bruno, an effeminate, flamboyantly gay reporter for an Austrian fashion show who has spiked blonde hair, skintight pants, and a sleeveless shirt. There are two typical subjects of Bruno’s interviews: flaky designers from the fashion industry, and macho, homophobic men. In the fashion interviews, Bruno establishes a rapport with his subjects, manipulating them into revealing the self-contradicting emptiness or the abrasive character underlying their glitzy veneer. In an obvious reference to the Holocaust, Bruno gets one designer to admit her feeling that “Anyone who dresses bad... should be sent away on trains to the camps.” (It’s all the more disconcerting considering Bruno’s “Austrian” background.)

Bruno’s interviews with macho men, however, are not as festive. In a locker room interview with a football player, Bruno innocently asks, “Do you have to wait

---

until the end of the season to date other players?" "What!" Bruno then starts to explain, "You know"—but as soon as the football player realizes what Bruno is about to say, he interjects: "No, no, no, we don't do that. Nobody on the team is like that." Bruno pushes it further, explaining how lots of guys in the Austrian gay community think the football player is cute, who keeps interjecting "Look, I'm not gay!" Bruno ends the interview asking, "Do you have anything to say to the Austrian gay community?" "Yeah," he says angrily, raising his voice and turning dramatically to look into the camera: "I am NOT gay."

Bruno, on another occasion, attends a gun show organized by a neo-Nazi who explains how Jews have their hands in the government's pocket—a fact with which Bruno, giggling, seems to agree. This neo-Nazi 'libertarian' strongly believes that the government should keep to itself, especially concerning the right of Americans to own firearms. Bruno then asks the obvious question: "So, like, if you believe in freedom, does that mean you believe that my boyfriend and I have the right to walk down the street holding hands?" "It's not *my* type of freedom," the neo-Nazi is sure to qualify, "But whatever you do behind the walls of your house is your business." He further qualifies his statement: "Just as long as you don't try to recruit my kids. You try to recruit my kids, you have a problem with me." Bruno then expresses how he thinks the neo-Nazi is handsome. "I am not that type of guy." Bruno refuses to drop the issue, praising his masculine qualities. The neo-Nazi's face suddenly turns red with rage as he stands up and shouts: "This interview's over! You wanna' be a professional, be a professional, don't be such a g\*# -damned fa\*#ot!"

### Is it 'cuz i iz black?

**M**asquerading as the hipster Ali G., the Khazakistani Borat, and the effeminate Bruno, what is Ali G. trying to accomplish? Is there a theme or message to this show, or is it merely self-promoting, offensive, and juvenile?

Ali G., born as Sacha Baron Cohen to an Orthodox father and Israeli mother, grew up in a privileged London neighborhood. Among the prominent activities of his youth was his participation in Habonim Dror. In fact, he is rumored to have been an ardent socialist, and one of the last stalwarts from Dror before its merger with Habonim. It was in Habonim Dror that Sacha Baron Cohen was first introduced to drama, starring in a Habonim production of "*Biloxi Blues*." He was also famous for his "Rockin' Rabbi routine." Tracing Ali G.'s roots in Habonim, there are those who posit that "Boyakasha," a senseless word that is Ali G.'s trademark, is etymologically derived from the Hebrew "*Be-vakashah*."

Following the traditional Habonim Dror path, Ali G. went to Israel in 1989 to live on the Rosh Hanikra Kibbutz. He then returned to England to attend Cambridge, where his academic focus was the American Civil Rights movement. Soon after college, he started a comedy club. One of his first acts was "*The Shvitz*," a skit where two Hasidic men strip down to their underwear since wearing all black can sometimes be too hot. Sacha Cohen started working for a television station, where he developed the idea for "*Da Ali G. Show*." And so Ali G. became a cult figure, eventually to cruise in celebrity circles with the likes of Madonna.

Ali G.'s reception has not been particularly rosy, however. First, he misrepresents himself to obtain interviews with civic officials, whom he mocks, and in a sense, humiliates. Worse, there are concerns about the racial connotation of a white guy dressing up as a black guy to portray black culture as ignorant and misogynist. It does not help that there is some truth to the Ali G. character: Not that black culture is ignorant or misogynist, but that elements of black culture—the so-called "gangsta' rap" scene—do indeed have such malignant aspects.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps for this reason, while some think the show is racially provocative and others think it is funny, there are those black comedians who are impressed with the dramatic-integrity of the Ali G. persona.

<sup>1</sup>Personally, I hesitate from making this judgment; it is arguably an oversimplification, as well as the imposition of a subjectively external cultural standard. Nevertheless, it seems that the consensus, even in the leadership of the African American community, is to criticize as "malignant" those blatantly chauvinist, violence-celebrating "f#ck the police" aspects of the "gangsta rap" phenomena.

---

Still, if Sacha Baron Cohen, a privileged, Cambridge-educated white Jew, plays a hyped-up version of the gangsta' rap type, is he overstepping his boundaries? In Britain, the Orthodox Rabbinate has condemned Ali G. as being "offensive" and "immoral," which is not particularly helpful, the Rabbinate points out, when European Jewry is facing rising anti-Semitic hostilities. From the left, Raj Patel, co-editor of the *Turtle* (an online socialist forum), writes of Ali G. that his "misogyny comes unvarnished, and its articulation with black culture is pernicious." There are even those from Habonim Dror who dislike the Ali G.

◆

**To Alexander Haig, "Do you think it's worth nuking [Russia] now, when it is weak?"**

◆

phenomena, including alumnus Jerry Goodman, now executive director of NCLI and member of our own *Jewish Frontier* editorial board, who describes the Ali G. show as odious, sophomoric, and self-promoting. Commenting on Ali G.'s legendary status in Habonim Dror England, Mr. Goodman reminds us of the adage: "You can fool most of the people most of the time, but not all the people all the time."

Nevertheless, there are those who see the show not as mockery but as satire. Echoing most media critics in the States, Neil Strauss of the *New York Times* describes the show's purpose as demonstrating the "disconnect between black and white culture, young and old, street smart and book smart, hip and square" ("*Ali G., Britain's Pseudo Homeboy, Takes His Talk Show to HBO*," February 3, 2003). Further, it's hard to claim that Ali G. is racist when his mocking invectives are all-encompassing. The show is a satire of gangsta' rap culture, but more, a mockery of those white suburban and Asian youth who immerse themselves in this culture to a comical degree. Bruno is a satire of the overly flamboyant gay man, but more, of the discomfort and homophobia of "macho" men. Borat pokes fun at foreigners whose transition into American culture is not perfectly smooth. Yet Borat's character is a mockery of the cultural obliviousness, the condescending politeness, and the patronizing patience that Americans often exhibit in a uniquely stupid American way.

The satire extends further, as Strauss writes, exploring the "disconnect between black and white culture," "between young and old." This is why the subjects of his interviews are caught off guard. Take Naomi Wolf, for instance. When Ali G. offends one of the leading feminist activists in the world, what she should have said was: *I don't care if you are black, or a white guy pretending to be black, or stupid. You are a disgusting chauvinist pig and it's inexcusable!* But she didn't, because she must have thought: *Perhaps there is something I don't quite get... he is black, after all... and young... probably really stupid.*

To her credit, Naomi Wolf offered an insightful critique of her encounter with Ali G.: "How does Ali G. do it? You might ask yourself how his production team gets people who have never heard of him to sit down and tolerate his uniquely comical questions. I'll tell you how they do it: Not by appealing to your ego but rather by appealing to your own twisted, inflated sense of idealism." In other words, Ali G. is a satire of the high-minded idealism that alienates our leaders from those who they represent; namely, the show satirizes the divide between the younger and older generations, between non-ideological, television-reared youth culture ("Iz a book media? Haz you ever read a book?"), and the more-coherent, better-educated, older generation which is apparently unable to see through the façade! It's as if today's youth, dumber thanks to television, have nevertheless become wittier and more sophisticated, in other respects, than their parents—perhaps also thanks to television.

### **Israel in the age of *eminem***

To understand this, there was a recently published report, "*israel in the age of *eminem**," authored by Republican pollster Frank Luntz and commissioned by the Bronfman Foundation. Widely circulated among today's Jewish leadership, Luntz analyzes effective ways of reaching out to today's Jewish youth to "inspire us" to support Israel. What he really analyzes, however, is the generational divide in the Jewish community. The conclusion of the Luntz report, though couched in more palpable terms, is an admonition to today's Jewish leadership: "You cannot

*Continued on page 36*

## Peace Fire: Fragments from the Israel-Palestine Story

Peace Fire: Fragments from the Israel—Palestine Story  
*Edited by Ethan Casey and Paul Hilder*  
 357 Pages, Free Association Books, \$19.95  
 Reviewed by Deepa Kandaswamy

While Clinton, Arafat and Barak were holding peace talks at Camp David with the world press waiting with baited breath outside, a different scenario was unfolding in Israel and the occupied territories. Did the "peace process" really stand a chance? How did the second Intifada (Palestinian uprising) start? How did it change from stone throwing to suicide bombing? Was Sharon's visit to Temple Mount politically motivated; if so, how? What is life like for normal people who live in this abnormal land which is in a perpetual state of war? All these questions and more are explored in the remarkable book, "*Peace Fire: Fragments from the Israel- Palestine story.*"

From the bulldozing of houses in Jenin by Israeli soldiers to suicide bombings during Passover in Netanya, from the siege of the Church of Nativity in Bethlehem to the memorial vigil held by Palestinians for the victims of September 11, "*Peace Fire*" is a chronicle of over 100 essays by ordinary people that tell the story of how the vicious circle of grief-anger-violence has wreaked havoc on this cursed Holy land for the past two years. The book is a testament to how the hatred of a few holds captive the hopes and lives of many. The essays will take you through the daily "normal" lives of the people where siege, bombs, snipers and the stench of death have become routine since the failure of the summit at Camp David and the beginning of second Intifada.

---

DEEPA KANDASWAMY is a writer and political analyst in India; her credits include ABC News, the Christian Science Monitor, the Hindu, Khaleei Times, and Middle East Policy.

How do you justify a tank gunning down three kids on bikes whose father is a Palestinian bus driver in Israel? Why has the Israeli public of late become indifferent to the killing of Palestinian civilians? The answer is simple as far as many Israelis are concerned: How can you explain away the death of your best friend who wanted to be a teacher for peace in a suicide bombing by a Palestinian? Religion and politics aside, what makes a dedicated nurse turn into a suicide bomber?

This book has been painstakingly edited by two amazing individuals, an American and a Briton, neither of whom is Jewish nor Arab. Ethan Casey is the editor of several books and co-founder of Blue Ear.com, the online global journalism community. Paul Hilder is an editor, writer and co-founder of opendemocracy.net, the independent global network for debate and invention which focuses mainly on globalization, Europe, network society issues and the Middle East.

"*Peace Fire*" is impossible to read without being moved to tears and getting angry as the headlines fade and you are forced to live in the reality of the conflict with the people. There's no easy escape here into legal debates and moral high grounds. It is an extraordinary effort for it provides a platform for people whose voices have never been heard before—compelling voices of people like Yitzhak Rosenthal, an orthodox Jewish businessman who turned peace activist after his son Arik, an Israeli soldier was murdered by terrorists in 1994; Monica Tarzai, who almost got killed while she went to donate blood for Palestinians, shot at during a demonstration; "lucky" people in refugee camps who have only lost parts of their body; angry teenagers who have lost their best friends in suicide bombings. This book is also a meeting point for non-violent organizations like Grassroots

---

International for Protection of Palestinians and Netivot Shalom, women on both sides who meet secretly to see if they can find a way out.

Every killing, house demolition and suicide bombing opens up old scars. It is untenable for Israelis to live in terror. It is unsustainable for Palestinians to live in occupation, squalor and fear. Maybe an Israeli Gandhi or a Palestinian Mandela is the only hope, but from where will he or she come amid such anger and the politics of victimization? Apolitical in tone and packed with insight, this book is a must read for those interested in the Middle East, from policy makers to the curious who just want to make sense of what is going on. ■■

## FEATURE

*Continued from page 4*

### Scent of Jasmine

and lovers. I took the postcard out of my bag. His handwriting was so familiar, and while it had seemed rushed, soothing in its simple sentences. "I'm fine. I love you. Bring this to my mother."

I had called before to tell them I was on my way. They would expect me. I knocked on the door. I don't know who opened the door for me. The living room was full of people. I noticed that Michael's mother was kneeling on the floor, her head bent as if in prayer. This confused me. I knew his mother was not religious: what was she doing on the floor in that position? All eyes turned towards me, and there was a silence.

Then, one of Michael's next door neighbors whom we had spoken to occasionally, a harried blonde mother who had two children, looked at me. I stared at her, at her eyes. I noticed the door of his room was closed. I knew that room intimately. It was his childhood room, and contained a single bed, a desk, some of his childhood souvenirs and photos. We had made love in that bed and once his mother had walked in on us. I was so embarrassed, humiliated that she had "caught" us. He merely laughed, and said that it did not affect her. They had a mature relationship, certainly not close. He had lost his father early, and as a single mother, with three

children to raise, she had tried her best, but was never loving or warm or maternal. They were almost like "friends" rather than mother and son.

I looked back at the neighbor. Then she said it. It seemed scripted, as my response to her seemed scripted. "Michael was killed today," she said, "He is dead." I felt as if I were in a movie. My response was so pat, so on cue. "No, no, no, it can't be," I said. "It can't be, no, no, no, no." I just kept repeating no over and over again and looking at this closed door. It was the sight of the door that made me realize that he was dead. Not what the neighbor had said, the sight of so many people, just the closed door, which I knew, would not open. He wasn't going to walk through that door, and we were not going to make love anymore.

When had it happened? I tried not to think what I had done that day. I tried not to imagine that while I had made love with the photographer, that he had been killed. I still held the postcard in my bag. It didn't seem to make sense to show it to her. I could not talk to his mother. I could not bridge that step between the door to her kneeling on the floor, to his closed door, to the neighbor's words, to the fact that he was dead. I seemed mechanical. Everything I did repeated itself in slow motion.

I stood there in the open doorway of his apartment staring at the door to his room and crying but not deeply, again as if I were in a movie and my crying was scripted, as was my dialogue of "No, no, it can't be." Were these words coming out of my mouth? Where had I heard them? They seemed so trite, so unreal. And yet, there they were. I don't remember being held, embraced, caressed, or comforted. I called Annemarie, my South African friend who lived in Tel Aviv with her husband and young child. She and I were close friends and the four of us had recently taken a trip together to the Sinai desert. Michael and I had often sat in their living room drinking coffee or tea or beer and listening to music and talking politics. I needed to hear her voice, but she was pregnant with her second child and I worried that the shock might affect her. I called her and made sure she was sitting down before I told her the news. She told me she'd be right over.



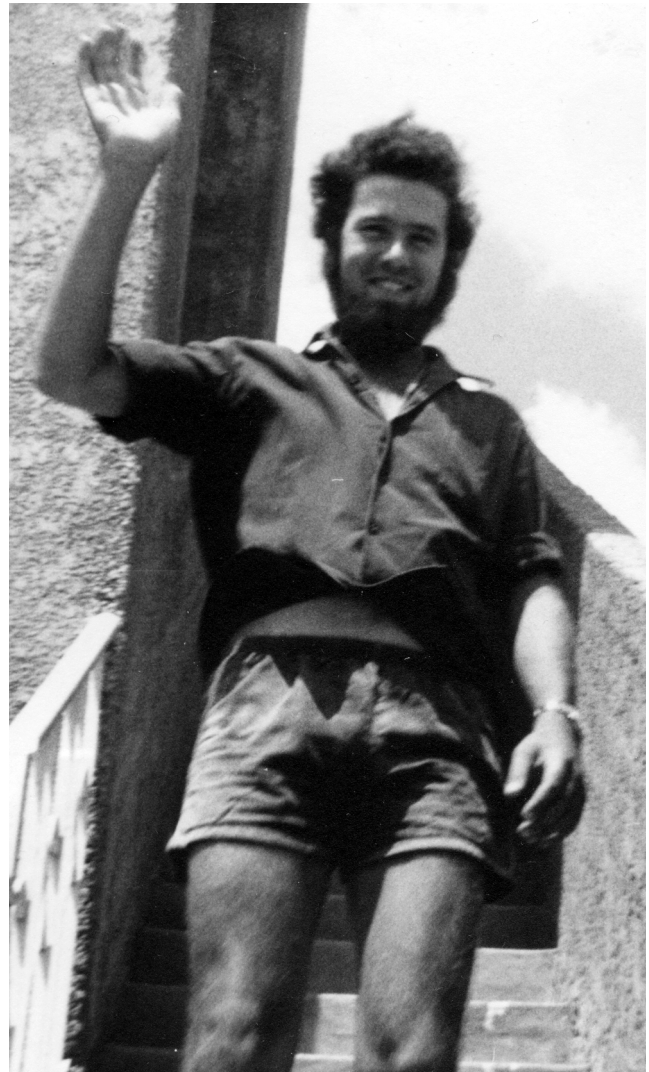
---

I didn't want to go to my grandparents. This would devastate them. They loved him so, and looked forward to us getting married. I couldn't face them, yet. My parents were abroad, and I knew that Annemarie would help me get through this night. The next image I remember is sleeping with Annemarie on her floor with pillows and a mattress, and her holding me the entire night. She held me close, and let me cry, allowed me to be comforted, and I don't remember crying or talking, just the sense of her closeby and her warm, open, loving presence next to me. Her large stomach touched me, the signs of life inside her contrasting my reality.

Somehow, after being held by her that night, I would be able to get through the next day and inform my parents who were visiting in the U.S, my friends, and my grandparents. There was no funeral, no memorial service. A war was being waged, and soldiers were being killed and wounded, and those killed buried in a temporary military cemetery. Families would be informed after the war where that cemetery was, and proceed to find the marker and the number and name that signified the person. Funeral services were a luxury that war did not afford till the war was over.

I stayed at my grandparent's home in Tel-Aviv. My women friends descended on me, and surrounded me with their love, their physical presence. I was grateful for their touch, their caresses; it was so important for me to touch and be touched. It made that horrible emptiness more bearable.

That next day, the photographer called to see how I was. He had no idea that Michael had been killed. He was simply calling to check on me, and to see if I had delivered the postcard. Of course, the postcard was still in my bag. I didn't know what to do with it. I couldn't give it to her. I never gave it to her. I told him simply what had happened. He wanted to immediately come to see me. I couldn't see him. I remembered our encounter, his fantasy of photographing our wedding, the garden, the scent of jasmine, my sinking into the sofa and into his arms, the slow, sensual kisses, and I was both repelled and drawn to him for having made love on the day Michael was killed.



*Nitzan "Michael" Oppenheimer Noy, 1948-1973. Born in Gedera, Israel; died as an officer in the Shiryon [tank] unit in the Yom Kippur War.*

I didn't know if I could see him. I wanted to escape into his garden as I had done before. But now, there was no fantasy of a wedding, any plans to make, or hesitations to think of. Only shame, shame at our encounter, shame at my desire which still burned deep inside. I wanted Michael back, I wanted us to make love again. How could I want him when he was dead? Did I really want the photographer? Why had I made love to him when I was in love with Michael? To see him now would only remind me of my humiliation, and my need for Michael, which did not end with his death. I still remembered his kisses, his touch, how it felt when he was inside me. Would I have told him

about the photographer? He would not have understood; he would have been angry, and would have felt betrayed. Who could I tell about the photographer? I would have to live with it, and at night, before I fell asleep, when I did not think of Michael's touch, I might think of the scent of jasmine and the ocean which was not far away, and the courtyard which enclosed the small home and had for a brief moment seemed to protect me. I had rested there not knowing I was on my way to find Michael dead, killed near his tank, his lungs blown away, shattered like the glass of car window, with tiny, tiny splinters, so many it could never be repaired.

A few days before the war broke out, the front window of our Volvo had been inexplicably shattered. We had parked it in front of house, and a few hours later, we found it broken. It had horrified me. Now, I thought, the shattered glass had been like Michael's lungs, torn into minute pieces. I was glad that he had not been inside his tank. He hated tanks. He loved flowers and nature.

I dreamt about Michael for many years after the war. In my dreams, I would try to call him on the phone and he would not answer. I would see his face under a helmet on a motorcycle on the Israeli highways. I would see myself holding onto him, tightly. I would feel the wind in our faces, smell the desert wind, smell the sage and the brush. Sometimes, looking out a bus window, I would cry, thinking of him, remembering him. I never cried in bed or in my room, but always on buses. The only other times I cried was when I made love with men I didn't know very well. I cried often. It would take me many years to fall in love again, and even then, I would cry when making love. II

**The Jewish Frontier invites responses from our readers.**

*Please send all correspondence to:*

Editor, Jewish Frontier  
275 Seventh Avenue  
17th Floor  
New York, NY 10001

*[jewish\\_frontier@hotmail.com](mailto:jewish_frontier@hotmail.com)*

*Continued from page 8*

**IN RETROSPECT**

## Camp Kinderwelt: A Memoir

of his sight. I could be anywhere within about one hundred by fifty yards. He reached the weeds and hollered, "*Shloime, cum arois, ich vel dir nit shlugn, ich vel dir nit shlugn.*" ("Come out, I will not hit you.")

But I wasn't taking any chances. He stayed a while and then left. It was the last time I would ever see him. That day ended with a curious postscript. A couple of buses were hired to transport some campers to New York. I stayed behind with my mother, as we would be going to New York together. Just as the buses left, we noticed a tall paper sack by the side of the road. We looked inside; they had left behind a bunch of hard rolls and hard-boiled eggs for the campers. My mother and I ate more hard-boiled eggs than we should have the rest of the day. (You people who pooh-pooh the latest technological marvels, do you realize what we could have done with a cell phone?)

Probably in 1932, which would make her close to 12 years old, my future wife, Betty, maiden name Epstein, was in the same bunk as Meyerowitz's daughter, Ruth. Betty says she was a very nice girl. No doubt Ruth's mother was the good influence. My father told me long ago that Meyerowitz relocated to Chicago, the city he had immigrated to originally. He died a middle-aged man. Mike, a difficult man with many foibles, yet withal, a good instructor, communicated his passion for *Yiddishkeit*.

The last time I saw Kinderwelt was in 1963, the year it gave up the ghost. Betty and I had driven to Highland Mills with her mother. We all visited a bungalow colony named Tel-Aviv. Her mother knew a functionary of Jewish Pioneer Women. After the visit, we took her mother to Unser Camp, and we walked to the Kinderwelt grounds for our last bit of nostalgia. Siegel (I can't think of his first name) was the Executive Director of the Farband in the early years. He had FDR's ear whenever he wanted it. We passed what to us was the new theatre, named, a plaque told us, for the eldest of three sons. The entire family, father, mother, and three sons died of illness in a short time.

---

Betty and I then went to the rock plateau at the top of the hill, near the girls' bunks. I pointed to the boy's bunk 12. We were known as the nature bunk; we captured a rattlesnake, a copperhead snake, bats, beetles and other itinerant creatures. Aaron Nissenson preserved them in carbolic acid. One of the kids in the bunk said that if you took the needle out of a darning needle, a pharmacist would give you fifty cents for it. Of course, a darning needle has no needle—it feeds on mosquitoes—but that's how world rumors get started. When we went home, I and some of the others were given one rattle from the rattlesnake. I lost it some seventy years ago.

While I was talking to Betty, I noticed a woman, who looked to be in her 60's, listening intently. My eyes met hers. She said, "I know you." I said, "You know me?" "Yes, I was your camp-mother in 1930!" **II**

## IN RETROSPECT

*Continued from page 12*

### Justice Denied: The Leo M. Frank Case

entered Frank's hospital room and abducted him. The kidnapers included a clergyman, two former court judges, and a former sheriff. Frank was driven to Marietta, Georgia, the girlhood home of Mary Phagan, where he was hanged on a large oak tree (August 17, 1915). Later one of the members of the lynching party would recall that Frank met his death with courage and silence.

When Frank was discovered swaying from a tree, numerous onlookers gathered to take photographs and to heap abuse on the body. Only reluctantly did the citizens of Marietta permit the corpse to be removed to Atlanta. Here huge crowds threatened to force their way into the mortuary to see "the devil incarnate." When the police fearing for their life gave way, 15,000 boisterous spectators passed by Leo Frank's bier. Finally, Frank's wife Lucille, with the help of a local rabbi, managed to move the body onto a train to New York where it received a decent burial.

Who really murdered Mary Phagan? It was virtually obvious from the very beginning, but the incident would not receive closure until 1982. According to

Alonzo Mann, a thirteen year old employee of the National Pencil Factory at the time of Mary Phagan's death, the murderer was none other than Jim Conley, the prosecution's star witness. Mann did not tell his story until he was on his death-bed, almost seventy years after the event. He stated that he had seen Conley carrying Mary's body at the factory that day long ago. Conley had threatened Mann with death if he ever reported what he had seen. The frightened youngster, however, told his mother, who cautioned him to keep quiet and not risk his life. Alonzo hearkened to his mother's advice.

**E**choes from the Leo Frank case continued long after the tragic event. The chief benefactors from Frank's death were the individuals who had defamed his character to further their personal ambitions. Solicitor General Hugh Dorsey, riding the wave of his new popularity, was elected Governor of Georgia. Tom Watson's demagoguery continued to feed the fires of prejudice, and in 1920 he was elected to the United States Senate. A nucleus of the Knights of Mary Phagan that Watson had helped found met with similar minded rustics on Atlanta's Stone Mountain (October 15, 1915) and revived the Reconstruction Era's Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Finally, the biggest winner of all was Jim Conley, who with the connivance of the police and the prosecutor condemned an innocent man and was spared the noose. **II**

## CONTEMPORARY


*Continued from page 18*

### The December Dilemma: American Jews and Christmas

property will encounter vigorous opposition from non-Orthodox lay and clerical groups. In the meantime, Jews for Jesus—an organization supported largely by Jimmie Swaggart and Jim Bakker and Attorney-General John Ashcroft's mother church, the Assemblies of God—will exploit the holiday season to run off slick ads in major metropolitan dailies and national publications (even Sports Illustrated!) hawking their disreputable wares. For Jewry, 'tis the season to be everything but jolly on the percussive occasion of the most Jewish of Christian feast days. Only in America. **II**

### What Do We Do Now?

that both sides comply with the terms of the roadmap. That hasn't happened yet, despite the commitments the two sides made at the Aqaba summit. The Palestinians did not dismantle their terror organizations while the Israelis kept expanding settlements. But a start was made; a month without major violence was a significant gain, especially when compared to the month since.

It matters less if the United States advances the roadmap or any of a number of different ideas being suggested by government officials and academics to bring Israelis and Palestinians together. What matters is that both sides comply with its terms. And that will require the hands-on involvement of the President of the United States. At some point, that involvement will become unavoidable. Isn't it better to take action before the next unspeakable round of violence, rather than after? 

**MEDIA**

Continued from page 24

### Gangs of New York: What Happens When Hollywood Teaches History

disapproved of land grants to railroads, and gave space in his paper to an early form of socialism. Even more, Greeley himself sponsored several early experiments in cooperative living. Karl Marx, who admired Greeley, contributed to the *Tribune*.

After 1850, slavery became the single most important question of the day. Greeley's antislavery views intensified as the Civil War approached, yet he is vilified in "*Gangs of New York*" as a gun-toting plutocrat whose fear of the angry mob demands the violent intervention of the army. In real life, Greeley's courageous stand in the Civil War lost him many supporters. Greeley first argued to let the "erring sisters go in peace," but eventually demanded a vigorous support of the war. He persistently criticized Lincoln's policy of conciliating the border slave states. On August 19, 1862, Greeley published a

signed open letter to the President Lincoln demanding that they commit definitively to emancipation. Greeley, a friend of the African-American, is shown in the film to be the target of a seemingly-justifiable wrath of a mob which, in real life, lynched and murdered dozens of African-Americans in the anti-draft riots.

### Military Recruitment on the Docks of New York

This scene is Scorsese at his worst, apparently trying to equate the Civil War with resistance to the draft during Vietnam, as well as his opposition to the intervention in Iraq. The 1863 draft law only applied to U.S. citizens, and it took years before new immigrants could become citizens. Some recent immigrants had acquired citizenship within a few days of arriving, rather than waiting the obligatory period of five years. This was due to the influence of Tammany Hall that provided such "favors" in return for votes. Yet in "*Gangs of New York*," grossly exaggerating this phenomenon, we see Irish immigrants arriving at New York Harbor who are awarded citizenship in one hand and given a rifle in the other. From one boat to another, they are shipped off to the front in Tennessee.

### The Corrupt New York Police and Fire Departments

The police and fire department are shown as pawns of Tammany Hall with little sincere concern for the citizens. They only respond to emergencies to partake of the spoils; they are also involved in extensive blackmail racketeers and bribery. In actual fact, the New York Police actively protected African-Americans during the riots of 1863. More than seven hundred were sheltered in the main police station in lower Manhattan, avoiding an otherwise certain death or mutilation. Furthermore, almost one-third of all New York police were of Irish origin at the time. The volunteer New York City fire fighting companies acquired a reputation of gallantry in suppressing the devastating fires in 1835 and 1845. In the wake of the exalted heroism of the hundreds of New York City police and firemen who on 9/11 gave their lives, audiences should have been incensed by the dramatic distortions in "*Gangs of New York*."

---

### The Anti-Draft Riots of 1863

The Draft Riots were four bloody days in duration, going through various changes in “focus” throughout. Much of it was purely criminal behavior—looting, robbery, and gratuitous arson. It was in fact the largest civil disturbance in American history. Some rioters attempted to express their “indignation” over the unfairness of Lincoln's draft law, which allowed rich men to avoid military service by paying a \$300 fee. (Ironically, Tweed was one of those who tried to raise money for poor citizens to buy their way out.)

Among hundreds who were arrested, only three, in real life, came from addresses in the Five Points. Only a few residents from Five Points were among dozens of dead or wounded. At the time, there were persistent reports that the number of dead exceeded the official count of one hundred and five. Some rumors inflated the figure as high as two thousand, claiming a Republican conspiracy attempting to minimize the brutality of the union troops. This is hardly likely. President Lincoln was a Republican, whereas most New York politicians, who controlled the police, were Democrats. They had no reason to protect the Republicans. This conspiracy theory included a supposition of bodies which were tossed into the river. Such mass graves were never found, although we glimpse an intimation of this in Scorsese's movie.

#### Gratuitous Violence

It is the pervasive, graphic violence in “*Gangs of New York*” that is shocking above all. Blood flows in rivers on cobblestone streets, eyes are torn out, flesh is torn apart by butcher cleavers, axes, spears, knives, clubs, bullets, and bricks. Politicians kill one another, as well as any bystander who doesn't agree with them. For the span of the movie, a brawl or riot erupts at every social gathering. Rival fire and police forces hold the public at ransom. Gore is everywhere. Throats are slit, skulls are cracked open and torsos disemboweled. Limbs are severed, arms are broken but strangely enough most of the characters have perfect teeth and the prostitutes all look in vibrant health. There is a public hanging of four men. Crucifixion is not omitted. How true to life is this?

Tyler Anbinder, the author of the book “*The Five Points*,” had this to say about the film in an interview on the History News Network (December 23, 2002, NPR):

#### National Public Radio.

Interviewer: The film begins with a huge gang fight which is set in 1846 in the Five Points. It's between an Irish Catholic gang and a native American gang; that is, people who were not actually born in the United States. That gang is led by Bill the Butcher, played by Daniel Day-Lewis, who in the movie years later recalls his Catholic rival. Suffice it to say, there's a tremendous amount of bloodshed in this movie. That riot at the beginning, reasonably true to history or not?

Prof. ANBINDER: Reasonably true to history with the exception of the amount of the carnage involved. I mean, Scorsese has over-dramatized the amount of bloodshed and death there would have been in a pre-Civil War riot. There were a couple of riots very much like that one depicted in the movie between native-born Americans, Protestants and Catholics in the neighborhood, but at most, they resulted in a death or two, not the huge carnage you see in that scene.

#### Why?

One would expect Italian-American filmmakers to be particularly cautious about ethnic stereotypes. Certainly, Hollywood must answer for the hundreds of movies in which Italian-Americans are portrayed as gangsters and bootleggers. Rudy Giuliani has poignantly pointed out how much pain this stereotype has caused. Whatever its artistic merits, Francis Ford Coppola's big success, “*The Godfather*,” was built on this same image. In creating an epic, historical film dealing with immigration, the difficulties of assimilation, prejudice, and violence, viewers might have hoped for more from Martin Scorsese. Unfortunately, that was not the case. JF

**Happy New Year 5764**

*Deena Greenberg*

## Who Is Ali G.?

understand the youth of today. The best thing you can probably do is to stop trying." An explicit illustration of the difficulty in "connecting" to today's television generation is the "second commandment," page 45: "Tell or show me something I don't already know," which Luntz summarizes in the formula: "Irony + creativity + relevance = success." What Luntz understands about the television generation is our need for an indirect, sophisticated perspective that is creative, ironic, witty, and sincerely insightful. Both in content and expression, it can't be something that's already been said, something passé, "been there, done that."

In other words, we are more complicated than our parents. Historically, one must appreciate the impact of the post-50s counter-cultural revolution. Between civil rights, feminism, rock'n'roll, psychedelic drugs, sexual liberation, the anti-War movement, the breakdown of the traditional family, and everything else since, there has been a massive upheaval of the rigid, white-picket-fence, apple-pie social structure that dominated society for centuries—the radical emancipation, at least on a very basic level, of the individual from society. There was another historical development concurrent with this, perhaps of yet greater consequence: The historical transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. Starting in the 50s and culminating in the 80s/90s with the personal computer, technology is now an extension not only of human muscle power, as in the industrial era, but an augmentation of human cognitive function. Those of us raised in the last twenty or so years in a media-saturated world enhanced by computers, cable television, cell phones, video games, and the World

**Happy New Year 5764**

*Detroit City Committee  
Labor Zionist Alliance*

*Jeremy Salinger, Chairman*

Wide Web, might indeed have deficient rational capabilities relative to prior generations—the result of passively watching television rather than reading books—but thanks to the range and depth of our exposure to the world, the speed in which we process fast-moving data, and the plethora of stimuli which constantly bombard us (ideas, entertainment, million-dollar commercials, myriads of consumer goods, sensory stimuli), we have developed a refined, sophisticated mental acuity relative to that of our elders, namely, a self which is more than ever a Self, yet at the same time a global, cross-cultural self that is likewise more than ever aware of other Selves; and a discriminating perspective which sees beyond the

◆

**To Ed Meese: "How come it's a crime if  
someone steals your telly [television], and it's  
not a crime if he steals your girlfriend?"**

◆

surface, which refuses to passively submit or accept, which demands creativity and innovation, and which is disinclined by its very nature to settle for any less. Love it or hate it, this is what the Ali G. show is all about—the generational-divide in our society. And so, an obnoxious, infantile moron ousts the "leaders" of human civilization.

Ultimately, the show's offensiveness might be a matter of taste, but it certainly has more than few instances of cutting insight and, for some of us, comic relief. Indeed, it's not a matter of putting someone in an uncomfortable position and laughing as he or she fumbles, as some describe the Ali G. show; it's the personality the interviewee reveals in the process of fumbling. As distasteful and jejune as this show might be, there are some remarkably telling moments.

We learn from the show, for instance, that Richard Thornburgh, our former Attorney General, is unaware of the designation "Barely Legal." To his credit, he has apparently steered clear of the vice of pornography; at the same time, not to his credit, he is unaware of the world—the nasty, gritty world—for which he was responsible to oversee legislation. From this show, we also come to appreciate Donald

Trump, the keenest of all subjects whom Ali G. interviews. Ten seconds into the interview, as Ali G. pitches a solution to the problem of ice cream cones which melt and drip on your hands—an ice cream glove—Donald Trump politely but firmly ends the interview and walks away, later indicating to the press that he thought Ali G. was “retarded.” Unlike the idealist Naomi Wolf, Donald Trump clearly has a practical sensibility.

We appreciate, as well, the diplomatic flair of “Boutros, Boutros, Boutros, Boutros-Ghali,” as Ali G. calls the former Secretary General of the United Nations. In good humor, Boutros Boutros-Ghali tries to explain why Disneyland will never be a member of the United Nations. Then, after Ali G. asks him, “What’s da funniest language? It’s French, innit?” he explains how to some people, Arabic might be the funniest language. On the same episode, Ali G. asks Brent Scowcroft “When do you nuke someone?” Mr. Scowcroft explains, “Only if very vital interests are

involved.” Inquisitive as ever, Ali G. continues, “What about nuking Canada?” Brent Scowcroft assures Ali G. that it will never happen: “We don’t want what they have.”

Probably the most revealing moment in the series is the panel on Science, featuring an environmentalist, a creationist, and two futurologists. Towards the end of the show, Ali G. accuses the creationist of not flushing the toilet. The creationist, who takes the Bible literally, also takes Ali G. literally. They argue back and forth—“Yes you iz,” “No I am not”—the creationist adamantly insisting that he is *not* the one who left fecal excreta in the unflushed toilet backstage. That the creationist took this conversation so seriously is one of the funniest and telling of all social commentaries in the history of television. Call it what you will—offensive mockery, pubescent toilet humor, or satire—Ali G. puts creationism and its proponents into stark perspective. Were Ali G. any less irreverent, the impact would not quite be the same. JF

**To advertise in the Jewish Frontier, please call (212) 366-1194.**

**Reminder: renew your subscription!**

To continue receiving the Jewish Frontier, please renew your subscription for 2003. Return this page, with any corrections below.

\_\_\_\_\_ \$20.00      USA-Domestic 2003 Subscription  
 \_\_\_\_\_ \$30.00      International 2003 Subscription

Name:		
Address:		
Address-2:		
City:	State:	Zip:
Phone:	E-mail:	

FPO

**Note:** LZA members outside of NYC and Life Members of Na'amat USA receive the Jewish Frontier as a benefit of membership. All others must subscribe!

**Return to:** Circulation, Jewish Frontier, 275 Seventh Avenue, 17<sup>th</sup> Floor, New York, NY, 10001-6708

NONPROFIT  
ORGANIZATION  
US POSTAGE  
PAID  
NEW YORK, NY  
PERMIT #4124

The **JEWISH**  
**FRONTIER**

SUMMER 2003