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## The Ambassador and the Uzi

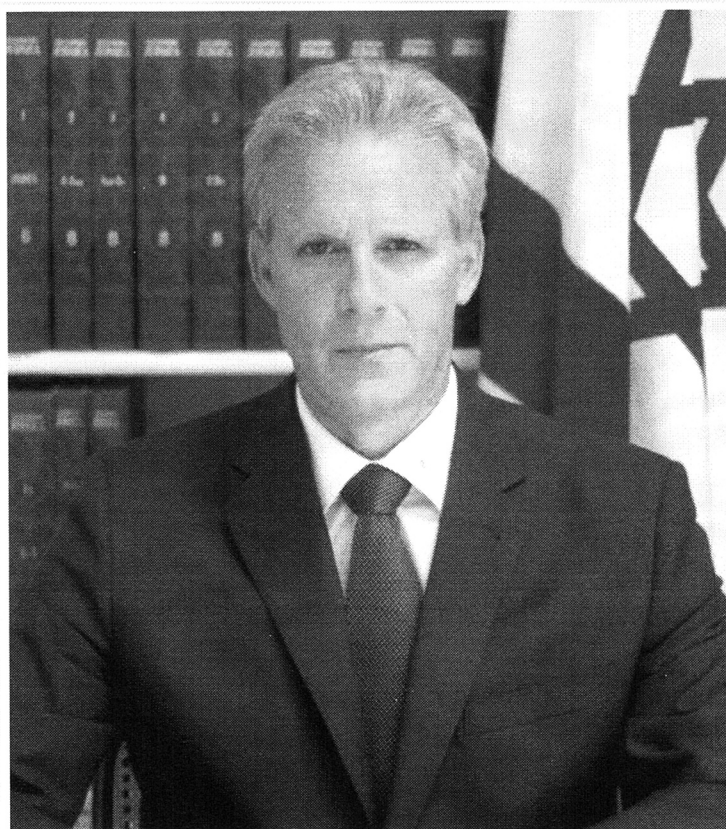
by: **Deborah Kaufman** on October 21st, 2014 | No Comments »

The Israeli Ambassador would be arriving soon. He was back in the Holy Land, on leave from Washington, and wanted to pay his respects to our family in the days after my stepfather Bill suddenly died of a heart attack. We were sitting Shiva at the family apartment in Jerusalem, observing the traditional seven days of mourning. Masses of people had been coming and going, bringing honey cakes and fruit plates to the apartment where they piled up in a sugary mass on the dining room table.

My mom, whose dementia had been accelerating, was hardly aware of the guests and their gifts, of the tales they told about Bill as a Haganah freedom fighter in pre-state Israel and later as an academic star and head of the English Department at the Hebrew University.

Mom's eyes were cloudy as she sat on the couch in a pink cashmere sweater, sipping tea, and smiling vaguely at the close friends and relatives whose names she could no longer remember.

My two sisters, our husbands, and I had rushed from America to be with mom during those intense and chaotic days. Mom couldn't be alone now, and we began a frenetic effort to find her a live-in caregiver. After a flurry of interviews, we hired Yevgenya, a cheerful blond immigrant from Belarus, who on a day's notice had moved into the apartment to look after mom. Yevgenya was a great fan of Alexander Lukashenko, the post-Communist dictator who had brought "security and order" to her homeland. She had moved to Israel to be near her children, and as a Jew had been welcomed as part of the tribe.



Credit: Creative Commons/Wikipedia

Meanwhile, the bright lights of academia, — writers, translators, and the liberal Ashkenazi elite of Jerusalem — had all come and gone. The seventh and final day of the official mourning period was upon us. The Ambassador's wife, Sally, and her parents, who had emigrated from America to Israel at the same time as my mom, had been among mom's inner circle for decades, so it was not a surprise when Sally called to say that she and the Ambassador were on their way over. They would be bringing their son who was on leave from the army for a day.

A clean tablecloth was spread out, plates were arranged, and trays of sweets were hurriedly prepared. Yevgenya made a pot of coffee. We smoothed mom's silver hair with her favorite brush.

We three sisters were all restless as we waited for the arrival of our guests, who triggered a cascade of memories and associations for each of us. The two families had been deeply connected for more than fifty years, first in San Francisco and now in Jerusalem. But as time passed, our destinies had greatly diverged.

My eldest sister, Sharon, now a Professor at the University of California, had been an intimate childhood friend with Sally's eldest sister, Joanie, who had been the sunny optimist of her family. That was in the heyday of the 60's, when we all lived in San Francisco, before everything got complicated. Before the years of the Oslo peace accords, when Joanie, visiting Israel one summer, was suddenly, tragically taken from our world by a Hamas suicide bomber riding on a Jerusalem bus towards martyrdom.

My middle sister, Rabia, and I had our own set of memories with Sally and her family — birthday parties, Jewish holidays, and lazy days by a pool amidst oak trees and wild blackberries. Rabia had left that world far behind and had become a faithfully observant Moslem pilgrim who traveled the world to visit the tombs of Sufi saints. Rabia remains the only deeply religious soul left in our family, but is probably not what the Ambassador would call a "keeper of the faith."

I had become a documentary filmmaker alongside my husband Alan. Alan knew the Ambassador and his family only from his frequent appearances on television news and talk shows, and from the Ambassador's op-eds in the New York Times where he defended Israel's illegal settlements and the human rights record of the most ideologically right wing government in Israel's history. Alan, whose progressive and pragmatic politics demand compromise with the Palestinians, did not have a favorable impression of the man, regardless of his celebrity status. Alan used to say of the Ambassador, "Bibi's man — he's the charming face of the boot."

After immigrating to Israel, Sally, a serene beauty, had married the Ambassador and raised their three children in Jerusalem. We appreciated her solidarity, and we thought the impending visit would be a show of respect for Bill and mom during this period of comforting tribal ritual.

But when our guests finally arrived with their hugs of sympathy, it wasn't the handsome hardline diplomat who stole the show. It was his gangly son who stepped inside the apartment with an Uzi slung over his shoulder, casually placing it upright between his legs as we all sat down at the dining room table. Its appearance as an erect appendage of the young soldier, its muzzle peeking over the tabletop, was striking in this room full of poetry books and bone china.

As various cakes were served, Rabia gently but firmly asked the good soldier to put his Uzi down, "Our family doesn't eat with firearms at the table." The boy nervously fingered the steel instrument and answered, "I have

to carry my gun at all times.” The temperature in the room began to climb. Rabia is not one to let things pass. She shook her head like a schoolteacher and replied that given the occasion and mom’s condition, his being a guest in our home, and our families’ longstanding relations, it was really okay for him to put the gun down. Again, with a distinctly adolescent pout, he refused, “Orders are orders”. Rabia began to quiver with anger, her voice rising a notch higher, “We’re in mourning.”

At this point, the Ambassador intervened, a small smile wafting across his face as if he might settle the problem – but no! “It’s army orders,” he asserted, “Soldiers never relinquish their arms, even in private homes.” Even at a Shiva, he seemed to want to establish “facts on the ground.” A long silence ensued. Enough time, it seemed, to contemplate dementia, self-righteousness, weaponry, life, and death in Jerusalem.

And there we were, with the widow at the head of the table, steel against white linen, our blood pressure rising, and the coffee getting cold. Rabia looked at Sally, Sally looked at the Ambassador, the Ambassador’s jaw settled into his square face, the insolent boy tightened his grip on the metal rod. It was going to be a stand-off.

Suddenly, with a flourish, Rabia stood up, and with a regal gait, her hijab gracefully trailing behind her, went off to the kitchen where she dined – Uzi-free – with the happy totalitarian from Brest-Litovsk for the rest of the Ambassador’s visit. Mom looked confused and dragged her fork slowly across the crockery, trying to tidy up the last bits of her apple crumble.

Alan, considerably more diplomatic than the Ambassador, kept a little flame of conversation going with the guests for mom’s sake, quietly telling stories about his days as a television news producer, while I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. I began to count the minutes until this encounter would be over. The Uzi remained, like a small occupying army that wouldn’t go away.

Time passed. The courtesy call finally ended, and the Ambassador, Sally, soldier boy and Uzi departed. While Alan held my mom’s hand, my sisters, Yevgenya, and I cleared the table, shaking the crumbs off the tablecloth. But, I still can’t shake the memory, and the thought that what happened embodies so much of this moment in Israel’s history.

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