

Grapevine: Samuel Willenberg, hero of Treblinka Revolt, eulogized by Israeli, Polish heads of state

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By GREER FAY CASHMAN FEBRUARY 23, 2016 20:18



SAMUEL WILLENBERG
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It's not often that someone is eulogized by two heads of state. It is equally rare for a large number of teenagers to attend the funeral of a 93-year-old man, but then again, Samuel Willenberg, the last survivor of the Treblinka Revolt, was an exceptional man who deserved an exceptional farewell en route to his final resting place in the relatively small cemetery of Moshav Udim, where the pastoral countryside is so reminiscent of the green fields of his native Poland.

Willenberg, who participated in the Treblinka Revolt, and who subsequently fought together with the Polish resistance forces and later served in the Polish Army, was recognized more than once as a Polish hero. In a lengthy eulogy by Polish President Andrzej Duda read out in Polish by Polish Ambassador Jacek Chodorowicz, Willenberg was described as a Polish patriot as well as a valuable contributor to the Polish-Jewish dialogue. Last weekend after learning of Willenberg's death, Duda had tweeted a shorter message of tribute. Willenberg's passing was widely reported by the Polish media.

President Reuven Rivlin said at the funeral that in conversation with Willenberg, the latter had told him that in Israel he was not recognized as a hero. Israel has other heroes, he had said. Standing in front of the coffin, Rivlin said: "Samuel, I have come here today to tell you that you are a hero – and what a hero. You are a symbol of heroism, a symbol for an entire generation of Holocaust survivors."

Conscious of the presence of many other Holocaust survivors, Rivlin noted that every month a thousand Holocaust survivors pass away. Their numbers are dwindling rapidly.

“Time is running out,” he said, “and we must do all that is possible to enable the remaining survivors to live out their lives in dignity. This is our moral imperative.”

Aryeh Golan, the Polish-born chief anchor at Israel Radio, whose Holocaust survivor parents each lost all their immediate family in the war, said that Willenberg was the uncle he never had. He recalled the occasions on which he and Ada and Samuel Willenberg happened to be in Poland at the same time and with what joy they had traversed the streets of various Polish cities.

Alon Goldman, chairman of the Association of Czestochowa Jews in Israel, spoke of the devotion with which Willenberg, who was born in Czestochowa, had created a monument to the thousands of Czestochowa Jews who went to the gas chambers.

Willenberg’s grandson Ben said that he’d heard what everyone had said about his grandfather, but for him and his siblings, Willenberg had first and foremost been a loving, exciting and ever-optimistic grandfather, whom they did not call Shmuel or Samuel but by his nom de guerre, which was Igo.

Recommended by | Willenberg’s daughter, world-renowned architect Orit Willenberg-Giladi, spoke of her father’s love and unfettered generosity, and said that while it had been a privilege to be his daughter, that role also carried with it an obligation to perpetuate the knowledge of what so many had endured at Treblinka.

Over the years, Willenberg returned to Treblinka more than 30 times to tell the story to Israeli youth groups and Jewish youth from elsewhere. It was emotionally painful for him, but he did not flinch, because transmitting the cruel facts to a younger generation was so important.

Some of those young people who had sat on the ground in Treblinka and listened, transfixed, as he spoke came to escort him on his last journey. They wore tee shirts and sweatshirts which designated their schools, though most came from a high school yeshiva in Modi’in. Among the hundreds of people present were several representatives of the Polish Embassy, including the military attaché, several people in wheelchairs – all of them Holocaust survivors, and some of Willenberg’s former comrades in arms.

One such person, who had also escaped from a death camp and had joined the Polish resistance and later the army, came with a chest full of medals, stood in front the flower-decked grave and saluted. His wife, who had been a kindergarten teacher in Lodz after the war, said that so many people

speak of what Willenberg did during the war. They forget to mention what he did after the war.

He went looking for Jewish children who had been hidden in Catholic monasteries and nunneries or with Christian families, and with his charm and charisma had succeeded in bringing many back to the fold. Ada, who overheard, retorted: "There are so many stories which have not yet been told."

■ INTERNATIONAL SCOUTS Day was celebrated in Israel and around the world on Monday and continued on Tuesday, February 23, which is the birthday of Robert Baden Powell, who founded the Boy Scouts Association in England in 1908.

As is customary among many organizations in Israel, the scouts sought to have their special celebration at the President's Residence, with the participation of Rivlin. In this case, there was absolutely no problem. The delegation was from the Masada tribe, which was Rivlin's own scout tribe in his youth.

Originally, boy scouts and girl guides were in separate movements. In some countries this is still the case. In Israel boys and girls are in the one movement and the girls are also known as scouts.

In Israel, the Scouts Movement, known as Tzofim in Hebrew, was founded in 1919, well before the establishment of the state, and is believed to have been the first Zionist youth movement in the country. It was the first egalitarian scouting movement in the world, in which boys and girls participated together on an equal footing. Scout groups are known as tribes, and today there are 160 such tribes in Israel in some 100 cities, towns and kibbutzim, with a large concentration of youth from the Ethiopian community.

Approximately 1,500 Ethiopian youth and around 3,000 from the former Soviet Union belong to Tzofim.

The Masada tribe will celebrate its 80th anniversary next year.

In 1951, the Israeli Scouts Movement became a member of the World Organization of the Scout Movement.

Rivlin shared some of his own Tzofim memories with the eight-member Masada delegation, which presented him with an oversized pale khaki scout shirt replete with Masada insignia and green-and-white scarf.

He recalled that the Tzofim had been an integral part of his life from age 10 throughout his youth, and that almost everyone at Gymnasia Rehavia, where he was a pupil, was a member of Tzofim, which was apolitical and therefore included religious and secular youngsters who came from families of leftwing and right-wing political orientation.

Two of his classmates at school who were also members of the Masada tribe grew to be best-selling authors Amos Oz and A.B.

Yehoshua. One of his teachers was Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, who went on to become Israel's second president.

In Tzofim, said Rivlin, he was able to give expression to camaraderie, his love of the land and helping others. "Tzofim influenced my whole life," he declared, adding nostalgically: "We even met our first sweethearts in Tzofim."

He is pleased that in Israel today there are Jewish, Arab, Christian, Muslim and Druse members of Tzofim, but was disappointed that the delegation that met with him did not know the scout songs that were popular in his day. At least the hymn remained, and as they sang it together, Rivlin raised his hand in the scout salute and uttered the scout pledge that it is the duty of the strong to take care of the weak.

■ HOSPITALS ARE among the prime examples of coexistence in Israel, with veteran Israelis, Jews, Arabs, new immigrants, secular and religious medical staff and patients all coming together under one roof for purposes of healing and health. This diversity in togetherness is reflected in a delegation of 10 young Israeli specialists who will visit the UK from February 28 to March 6.

The group includes three Israeli-Arab surgeons, in addition to Russian immigrant and South American surgeons and of course some Israeli-born Jewish surgeons. This reflects the makeup of Israeli hospital staff. Israeli hospitals employ Arabs or Jews simply by virtue of their qualification, just as they treat Arabs or Jews simply by virtue of their needs. As former president Shimon Peres has frequently pointed out, the hospitals are one of the places in Israel where there is peace and coexistence among all ethnic and religious groups.

All the members of the delegation are qualified in general surgery and will participate in a joint academic meeting at University College with the Jewish Medical Society UK.

They will attend the prestigious Basingstoke M25 course in colorectal surgery. They will also attend colorectal departments at University College Hospital, St. Thomas's Hospital and Kings College Hospital. They have also been invited for a special visit to the Houses of Parliament.

The visit is sponsored by the John Furman Fund of the Israel, Britain and Commonwealth Association, with the help of the David Yanir Foundation for the Advancement of Colorectal Surgery in Israel, and it is hoped that the meetings between the surgeons and their British counterparts will raise the standard of colorectal surgery in Israel. The participating surgeons are doctors Forat Swaid of the Bnai Zion Hospital in Haifa; Ahmad Mahamid of the Hillel Yaffe Medical Center in Hadera; Hussam Menzal from the Emek Medical Center in Afula; Anton Kvasha of the Galilee Medical Center in Nahariya; Ronen Ghine of the Meir Medical Center in Kfar Saba; Nikolai Menasherov of The Rabin Medical Center in Petah Tikva; Hayim Gilshtein of the Rambam Health Care Campus in Haifa; Itay Zoarets of Sheba Medical Center, Tel Hashomer; and Aner Keinan at Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem. Ruben Weil, a senior colorectal surgeon from The Rabin Medical Center-Hasharon Campus, Petah Tikva, will accompany the group together with Prof. Alex Deutsch of the The Rabin Medical Center-Beilinson Campus. Deutsch also happens to be the chairman of IBCA.

■ THINK OF how many people in the world might never have heard of Kabbala but for the fact that Madonna became a Kabbala student and during classes preferred to be called Esther. When she came to perform in Israel in May 2012, Madonna also met with local leaders of the Kabbalah Center, and may meet them again with relative frequency after having purchased the penthouse in Tel Aviv's luxury residential tower designed by Richard Meier.

Meanwhile, the Kabbalah Center had some diplomatic visitors who are members of the Israel branch of the International Women's Club, and at the conclusion of an introduction to Kabbala and a lecture by Avner Madar, they were no less entranced with Kabbala than is Madonna. Among them were Julie Fisher, wife of the US ambassador; Shahnaz Al Mz'ali, wife of a Jordanian diplomat; Catherine de Renesse D'Elzius, wife of the Belgian ambassador; Aline Bizimana, wife of the Rwandan ambassador; Monika Chodorowicz, the wife of the Polish ambassador; Doris Barahona, the wife of the Guatemalan ambassador; and veteran IWC member Daniella Oren, who is not a diplomat's wife but who spends so much time in diplomatic circles that she could almost qualify as an honorary diplomat.

Madar made it clear that Kabbala is not a religion in itself but provides the tools for life that help every individual to realize his or her unlimited potential. It also emphasizes the value of mutual respect. The time has come

to let in the light and banish the darkness by demonstrating mutual respect for one another as human beings, he said.

■ MOST PEOPLE have some degree of awareness of the destruction being wrought by Islamic State, and its callous attitude to human life. But apparently it has no concern for anything, including historic sites. Many important archeological sites are being destroyed by Islamic State, and although human life is most certainly more important than ancient stones, hopefully there will be a post-ISIS era in which archeologists, historians and others will be able to explore past civilizations of the Middle East and North Africa, unhampered by violence, fear or threats.

Many historians and archeologists are profoundly disturbed by the ruination of antiquities, and some will attend a panel discussion taking place Friday, February 26, at 11 a.m. at the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem. Panelists will include Channel 2's Middle East expert, Ehud Yaari, Bar-Ilan University's Dr. Mordechai Kedar, who specializes in Middle East affairs, and Bible Lands Museum curator Yehuda Kaplan. The panel will address, among other topics, the ideology of the Islamic State organization and its activities, focusing on the deliberate destruction of heritage and archeology sites in areas under its control, and whether Islamic State is an unusual phenomenon in the history of the Middle East.

■ FOUR AMBASSADORS with the word "designate" in their titles will be able to redefine their status on Thursday when they present credentials to Rivlin. First in line is Japanese Ambassador Koji Tomita, followed by Egyptian Ambassador Hazem Khairat, Malta's Ambassador Cecilia Attard-Pirotta and Jelena Rajakovic, the ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The latter two will boost the number of female ambassadors to nine. The others are Vivian Bercovici, Canada; Thessalia Shambos, Cyprus; Malle Talvet Mustonen, Estonia; Leesa Kaisa Mikkola, Finland; Alison Kelly, Ireland; Gabriela Moraru, Moldova; and Barbara Susnik, Slovenia.

■ FRENCH AMBASSADOR Patrick Maisonnave met last week with Alon Ushpiz, political director at the Foreign Ministry, to discuss the French initiative which aims at relaunching the peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. This working meeting provided an opportunity for dialogue on the objectives and the method of the French proposal, the goal of which is the resumption of the negotiation process between the parties, with the support of the international community.

France will continue to consult with Israeli authorities on this project in the coming weeks, Maisonnave said after the meeting.

France's foreign minister has appointed Pierre Vimont as France's special peace envoy to liaise with all the parties concerned.

■ NETANYA IS fast becoming the France of Israel, and it is therefore no wonder that Christian Estrosi, the mayor of Nice, finds it so charming. Estrosi, who is also the president of PACA, an acronym for the Provence-Alpes- Cote d'Azur region, is one of Israel's strongest political friends in France, and happens to be particularly partial to Netanya. During this past week he led a municipal delegation from Nice to Netanya and naturally met up with his longtime friend and colleague, legendary Netanya Mayor Miriam Feierberg-Ikar. Estrosi is very popular in Netanya and two years ago, Netanya Academic College awarded him an honorary degree.

In greeting him on this occasion, Feierberg- Ikar reminded him that after the terrorist catastrophe in Paris, she had sent him a letter of condolence to which he had replied that the bonds between France and Israel and the common values of democracy and mutual respect for human life that they share would not be broken by the threat of terrorism. What unites France and Israel, just like Nice and Netanya, which has experienced 15 terrorist attacks, he had responded, is a meaningful relationship and a show of strength in the face of adversity. As it happens, Nice and Netanya are twin cities.

Part of Netanya's municipal agenda is to make the city as attractive to tourists as possible.

Using Estrosi's delegation as guinea pigs, council members showed them all the highlights of the city, and some of the Nice council members were extremely enthusiastic about what they saw.

Estrosi is regarded as a true friend of Israel, and his popularity soared in Netanya after he triumphed over Marion Maréchal-Le Pen. As an expression of appreciation, Feierberg-Ikar hosted a gala reception in honor of Estrosi and his delegation.

■ BRITAIN'S MINISTER for the Middle East, Tobias Ellwood, visited Israel last week for peace process and Gaza reconstruction discussions with Israeli colleagues. He met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Interior Minister Arye Deri, Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely, opposition leader MK Isaac Herzog and the leader of the Joint List, MK Ayman Odeh. The discussions also included regional security threats and UK-Israel bilateral relations. Ellwood was briefed on Israel's security concerns and challenges by Micky Rosenfeld, the foreign press spokesman of the Israel Police. Ellwood also met with representatives of several British companies operating

in Israel as well as heads of Israeli companies to hear about opportunities for further development of commercial ties.

Ellwood's constituency of Bournemouth is twinned with Netanya, so it was on the cards that Netanya would be on his itinerary. He met a number of British expats at an event organized in conjunction with Feierberg-Ikar, the Netanya Academic College and the Israel Britain and the Commonwealth Association.

Some of his former fellow countrymen shared their impressions of Israel, after which he wrote in his report that a number of British expats had told him about living in such a vibrant and fascinating country. Visiting Israel at the same time was Minister for the Cabinet Office Matthew Hancock MP, who participated in several of the meetings attended by Ellwood.

■ AUSTRALIAN AMBASSADOR Dave Sharma tweeted last Friday that he was boarding a plane for Australia and wished everyone Shabbat Shalom. Nothing too unusual about that except for the fact that the tweet was in Hebrew, and it wasn't quite accurate because, as yet, there are no direct flights between Israel and Australia.

While in Canberra, Sharma will be taking care of some of the details related to the state visit to the southern continent by Rivlin, who is scheduled to leave Israel on March 13 and fly to Australia via Hong Kong. He is due to return to Israel on March 22. This means that for two or possibly three days Israel will be without a president or a prime minister, as Netanyahu is scheduled to go to Washington to address the AIPAC Conference before Rivlin returns from Australia.

Apropos Australia, the ratio of the population increase is almost on a par with that of Israel. The Australian population this month passed the 24 million mark. At federation in 1901, the population was 3.7 million, but by 2003 it had already reached 20 million.

■ MOST PEOPLE are familiar with biblical heroes but seem to have forgotten those who are part of modern Israeli or Jewish history. In advance of International Women's Day there is a sudden flurry to retell the stories of heroines of yesteryear or to run multidisciplinary panel discussions with women of our times who are great achievers.

Jerusalem's Beit Avi Chai has opted to delve into the not-so-distant past and to start its series of generally forgotten heroes and heroines with someone whose name should be familiar, but whose identity was overshadowed by someone else. The series, which begins on Tuesday, March 1, will introduce

the audience to Haviva Reich, who parachuted behind enemy lines during World War II together with Hanna Szenes.

There is a common belief that Szenes was the sole heroine of that particular mission, partly because she was also a poet, whose lines were set to music and are sung to this very day. The team also included Surika Braverman who survived and returned to her kibbutz.

Yet another unsung heroine was Ada Sereni, whose husband, Enzo Sereni, a prominent Zionist activist from Italy, overshadowed her historically. Enzo Sereni, also parachuted behind enemy lines, was captured by the Nazis, and executed in Dachau in November 1944. After the war, when her husband had been declared missing in action, Ada Sereni approached Shaul Avigur, who had been among those who planned the parachute operation, but who was now engaged in Aliya Bet illegal immigration, and offered her services.

She returned to Italy and dedicated herself to getting Holocaust survivors who had been sent there, or found their way to Italy, to continue on to what was then Palestine.

She remained in Italy for three years, helping a total of 28,000 Jews to reach the Promised Land.

The stories of these unsung heroines whose names have disappeared from public consciousness were researched by historian Dr. Lilach Rosenberg-Friedman, who says that history is largely his story and not her story.

■ JERUSALEM MAYOR Nir Barkat is so busy with capital affairs that he seldom has time to visit other parts of the country. But he did find time to go to Tel Aviv next week to update himself with plans for the Geek Picnic that will take place in Jerusalem's Sacher Park from April 26 to 28 during the intermediate days of Passover.

The imagination of a collective has no limits, and when Geeks get together, the imagination stretches beyond any horizon of creativity.

The Geek Picnic will combine science, robotics, art and more, and the geeks will obviously feed off each other's ideas and come up with something new time and again.

Before entering politics, Barkat was somewhat of a geek himself. In fact, he made his fortune out of his geekiness, so for him the Geek Picnic will be a combination of business and pleasure, because he has a little brinkmanship

over some of his fellow mayors in that he has a well-developed understanding of technology and how it works.

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