

SUKKOT

Ofer Aderet

“We turned a mahogany closet into a chicken coop and we swept up the garbage with a silver tray. There was chinaware with gold embellishments, and we would spread a sheet on the table and place chinaware and gold on it, and when the food was finished, everything was taken together to the basement. In another place, we found a storeroom with 10,000 boxes of caviar, that’s what they counted. After that, the guys couldn’t touch caviar again their whole life. There was a feeling on one hand of shame at the behavior, and on the other hand a feeling of lawlessness. We spent 12 days there, when Jerusalem was groaning under horrible shortages, and we were putting on weight. We ate chicken and delicacies you wouldn’t believe. In [the headquarters at] Notre Dame, some people shaved with champagne.”

– Dov Doron, in testimony about looting in Jerusalem

On July 24, 1948, two months after establishment of the State of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, head of the provisional government, voiced some extreme criticism about its people: “It turns out that most of the Jews are thieves... I say this deliberately and simply, because unfortunately it is true.” His comments appear in black and white in the minutes of a meeting of the Central Committee of Mapai, the forerunner of Labor, stored in the Labor Party Archives.

“People from the Jezreel Valley stole! The pioneers of the pioneers, parents of Palmach [pre-state commando force] children! And everyone took part in it, *baruch Hashem*, the people of [Moshav] Nahalal!... This is a general blow. It’s appalling, because it shows a basic flaw. Theft and robbery – and where does this come to us from? Why have the people of the land – builders, creators, pioneers – come to deeds like this? What happened?”

The protocol was unearthed by historian Adam Raz in the course of his research for his new book which, as its title suggests, addresses a highly charged, sensitive and volatile issue: “Looting of Arab Property in the War of Independence” (Carmel Publishing House, in association with the Akevit Institute for Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Research; in Hebrew). The task he undertook was daunting: to collect, for the first time in a single volume, all existing information about the pillaging of Arab property by Jews during the 1947-49 Israeli War of Independence – from Tiberias in the north to Be’er Sheva in the south; from Jaffa to Jerusalem via the villages, mosques and churches scattered between them. Raz pored over 30 archives around the country, perused newspapers of that era and examined all extant literature on the subject. The result is shattering.

“Many parts of the Israeli public – civilians and soldiers alike – were involved in looting the property of the Arab population,” Raz tells Haaretz. “The pillaging spread like wildfire among that public.” It involved the contents of tens of thousands of homes, stores and factories, of mechanical equipment, farm produce, cattle and more, he continues. Also included were pianos, books, clothing, jewelry, furniture, electrical appliances, engines and cars. Raz has left to others investigation of the fate of the land and buildings left behind by the 700,000 Arabs who fled or were expelled in the war. He focuses on movables only, items that could be stuffed into bags or loaded onto vehicles.

Ben-Gurion is not the only senior figure Raz quotes. Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, Ben-Gurion’s fellow law student decades earlier, and later Israel’s second president, also mentioned the phenomenon. According to his account, those who engaged in looting were “decent” Jews who view the act of robbery as natural and permissible.” In a letter, dated June 2, 1948, to Ben-Gurion quoted by Raz, Ben-Zvi wrote that what was happening in Jerusalem was doing “dreadful” damage to the honor of the Jewish people and the fighting forces.

“I cannot remain silent about the robbery, both [that which is] organized by groups and [that which is] unorganized, by individuals,” he wrote. “Robbery has become a general phenomenon... Everyone will agree that our thieves fell upon the abandoned neighborhoods like locusts on a field or an orchard.”

Raz’s thorough archival work turned up countless quotes, which make for painful reading, from senior and junior figures in the Israeli public and establishment, from leaders to low-ranking troops.

In an archival file of the Custodian of Absentees’ Property (i.e., property owned by Palestinians who left their homes or the country after passage of the Nov. 29, 1947, UN partition resolution, which was seized by the Israeli government), Raz located a 1949 report by Dov Shafir, the official custodian, which states: “The panicky mass flight of the Arab residents, leaving behind immense property in hundreds and thousands [of] apartments, stores, warehouses and workshops, the abandonment of crops in the fields and fruit in gardens, orchards and vineyards, all this amid the tumult of the war... confronted the fighting Yishuv [pre-1948

‘Like a swarm of locusts’

Refrigerators and caviar, champagne and carpets – a first-ever comprehensive study by historian Adam Raz reveals the extent to which Jews looted Arab property in 1948, and explains why Ben-Gurion stated: ‘Most of the Jews are thieves’



Haifa, April 1948. “As they fought and conquered with one hand, the fighters found time to loot, among other items, sewing machines, record players and clothing, with the other hand,” according to one observer.

Fred Chesnik / IDF and Defense Establishment Archive

Jewish community in Palestine] with a grave material temptation... passions of revenge, moral justification and material allurements tripped up a great many... Events on the ground rolled down a slope unchecked.”

The testimony of Haim Kremer, who served in the Palmach’s Negev Brigade and was sent to Tiberias to prevent looting, was found in the Yad Tabenkin Archive, in Ramat Gan. “Like locusts, the residents of Tiberias swarmed into the houses... We had to resort to blows and clubs, to beat them back and force them to leave things on the ground,” Kremer stated.

The diary of Yosef Nachmani, a Tiberias resident who had been a founder of the Hashomer Jewish defense orga-

shops broken into and its homes empty of occupants... The most shameful spectacle was of people rummaging among the heaps that remained after the great robbery. One sees the same humiliating sights everywhere. I thought: How could it be? This should never have been allowed to happen.”

Netiva Ben-Yehuda, an iconic Palmach fighter who took part in the battle for Tiberias, was uncompromising in her description of the events. “Such pictures were known to us. It was the way things had always been done to us, in the Holocaust, throughout the world war, and all the pogroms. Oy, how well we knew those pictures. And here – here, we were doing these awful things to others,” she wrote. “We loaded everything onto the van – with a terrible trembling of the hands. And that wasn’t because of the weight. Even now my hands are shaking, just from writing about it.”

Tiberias, conquered by the Jewish forces in April 1948, was the first mixed, Jewish-Arab city to be taken in the War of Independence. It was “an archetype in miniature of everything that would take place in the months ahead in the country’s Arab and mixed cities,” Raz says. In the course of his research, he discovered that no official data exist about the looting, its physical and monetary scope. But clearly, such acts took place extensively in every such town.

Indeed, Raz found accounts similar to those about Tiberias in documentation of the battle for Haifa, which took place a few days later, on April 21 and 22. “As they fought and conquered with one hand, the fighters found time to loot, among other items, sewing machines, record players and clothing, with the other hand,” according to Zeév Yitzhaki, who fought in the city’s Halisa neighborhood.

“People grabbed whatever they could... Those with initiative opened the abandoned shops and loaded the merchandise onto every vehicle. Anar-

chy reigned,” added Zadok Eshel, from the Carmeli Brigade. “Along with the joy at the city’s liberation and the relief after months of blood-soaked incidents, it was shocking to see the eagerness of civilians to take advantage of the vacuum and raid the homes of people whom a cruel fate had turned into refugees.”

Yosef Nachmani, who visited Haifa after it was taken by the Jewish forces, wrote, “Old people and women, irrespective of age and religious status, are all busy looting. And no one is stopping them. Shame and disgrace overwhelm me; there’s a desire to spit on the city and leave it. This will take its revenge on us and in the education of the youth and the children. People have lost all sense of shame, acts like these undermine the society’s moral foundations.”

So widespread was the looting and theft that the general prosecutor who accompanied the fighting forces in Haifa, Moshe Ben-Peretz, stated in June 1948: “There is nothing [left] to take from [the] Arabs. Simply a pogrom... And the commanders all have excuses; ‘I just got here two weeks ago,’ etc. There is no one to detain.”

“There were so many houses in ruins, and smashed furniture lying amid the heaps of rubble. The doors of the houses on both side of the street were broken into. Many objects from the houses lay scattered on the sidewalks... On the threshold of the house was a cradle leaning on its side, and a naked doll, somewhat crushed, was lying next to it, its face pointing down. Where is the baby? Which exile did he go into? Which exile?”

– Moshe Carmel, commander of the Carmeli Brigade, about the looting in Haifa

Members of the Yishuv’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry had warned about possible looting. “In the future we will stand before history, which will address the subject,” they wrote to the pre-state leadership body the Emer-

gency Committee. The army’s Judicial Service Staff, part of the military justice apparatus, noted, in a document entitled “Epidemic of Looting and Robbery”: “This affliction has spread to all the units and all the officer ranks... The robberies and the pillage have assumed appalling dimensions, and our soldiers are occupied with this work to an extent that endangers their preparedness for battle and their devotion to their tasks.”

Members of the Communist Party also spoke out on the subject. In a memorandum to the People’s Administration (the provisional government cabinet) and Haganah headquarters, the party referred to “a campaign of looting, robbery and theft of Arab

Nachmani, of the Haganah: ‘Old people and women irrespective of age and religious status, are busy looting. Shame and disgrace overwhelm me. This will take its revenge on us and in the education of the youth and the children.’

property in frightening dimensions.” Indeed, “The great majority of the homes of the Arab residents have been emptied of all valuables, the merchandise and commodities have been stolen from the shops, and the machines have been removed from the workshops and factories.”

After the conquest of Haifa, Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary about “total and complete robbery” in the Wadi Nisnas neighborhood, perpetrated by the Irgun, the pre-state militia led by Menachem Begin, and Haganah forces. “There were cases in which Haganah people, including commanders, were found with stolen items,” he wrote. A few days later, in a meeting of the Jewish Agency executive, Golda Meir noted that “in the first day or two [following the city’s conquest], the situation in the area of conquests was grim. In the sector taken by the Irgun, especially, not a thread was left in [any] house.”

Reports about the looting also appeared in the press. At the end of 1948, Aryeh Neshet, Haaretz’s Haifa correspondent, wrote, “It turns out that the Jewish people has also learned this profession [theft], and very thoroughly, as is customary with Jews. ‘Hebrew labor’ now exists in this vocation, too. Indeed, the scourge of thefts has struck Haifa. All circles of the Yishuv took part in it, irrespective of ethnic community and country of origin. New immigrants and former denizens of Acre Prison, long-time residents from both East and West without discrimination... And where are the police?” A reporter for Maariv, who took part in a tour of Jerusalem in July 1948, wrote, “Bring judges and police officers to Jewish Jerusalem, for

we have become as all the nations.”

“All along the way there is no house, no store, no workshop from which everything was not taken... Things of value and of no value – everything, literally! You are left with a shocked impression by this picture of ruins and heaps of rubble, among which men are wandering, poking through the rags in order to get something for nothing. Why not take? Why have pity?” – Ruth Lubitz, testimony about looting in Jaffa

Raz, 37, is on the staff of the Akevit Institute (which focuses on human-rights issues related to the conflict), and edits the journal Telem for the Berl Katznelson Foundation. (He is also a frequent contributor of historical pieces to Haaretz.) Though he does not possess a doctoral degree, his résumé includes a number of studies that could easily have served as the basis for a Ph.D. thesis – about the Kafr Qasem massacre, the Israeli nuclear project and Theodor Herzl. The looting of Arab property by Jews has been written about before, but Raz is apparently the first to have devoted an entire monograph to the subject.

“Unlike other researchers who have written about the war, I view the looting as an event of far greater order than what has been said about it previously,” the historian notes. “In the book, I show how disturbed most of the decision makers were about the looting and the dangers it posed to Jewish society, and the degree to which it was a contentious issue among them.”

He also maintains that there has been a “conspiracy of silence” about the phenomenon. As a result, even now, in 2020, colleagues who read the book prior to its publication were “surprised by its scale,” he says.

He describes the plundering of Arab property by Jews as a “singular” phenomenon, because the looters were civilians (Jews) who stole from their civilian neighbors (Arabs). “These were not abstract ‘enemies’ from across the seas, but yesterday’s neighbors,” he says.

On what grounds do you claim that this was a singular event? History shows that in World War II, the Polish public also looted the property of their Jewish neighbors, who had lived alongside them peacefully for centuries. Maybe this is a response that’s not unique to our case? Maybe it’s human nature?

Raz: “Looting in wartime is an ancient historical phenomenon that is documented in texts thousands of years old. My book does not deal with the phenomenon in general, but with the Israeli-Arab-Palestinian case. It was important for me to emphasize that the looting of Arab property was different from ‘regular’ wartime looting. These weren’t American soldiers, for example, who plundered the Vietnamese, or Germans thousands of kilometers from home. These were civilians who looted their neighbors across the street. I don’t mean that they necessarily knew Ahmed or Noor whose property they stole, but that the neighbors were part of a shared social civil fabric.

“The Jews from Haifa and the area who looted the property of close to 70,000 Arabs in Haifa, for example, knew the Arabs whose homes they pillaged. That was certainly the case also in the mixed cities and the villages that existed next to kibbutzim and moshavim. The book is rife with examples attesting to the fact that the looters knew that what they were doing was immoral. Furthermore, the public knew that the majority of the Palestinian community had not taken an active part in the fighting. In most cases, in fact, the looting took place after the fighting, in the days and weeks following the Palestinians’ flight and expulsion.”

Still, it’s not the only case of its kind. “As a historian, I am not an advocate of comparative history, and I didn’t find that much could be gleaned about the Israeli case from pillaging that took place in history.”

From Haifa, Raz’s book moves to Jerusalem, where the looting went on for months, he says. He quotes the diary of Moshe Salomon, a company commander who fought in the city: “We were all swept up by it, privates and officers alike. Everyone was seized by a craving for possessions. They rummaged through every house, and some found food, others found expensive objects. The mania attacked me, too, and I was barely able to stop myself. In this regard there is no limit to what people will do... It’s here that the moral and human slope starts, so one can understand the meaning of the doctrine that says that moral values and humanity become blurred in war.”

Yair Goren, a Jerusalem resident, related that “the hunt for booty was intense... Men, women and children scurried hither and thither like drugged mice. Many quarreled over one item or another in one of the heaps, or over a number of items, and it reached the point of bloodshed.”

The operations officer of the Harel Brigade, Eliahu Sela, described how “pianos and armchairs in gold and crimson were loaded onto our trucks. It was awful. It was awful. Fighters saw a radio and said, ‘Hey, I need a radio.’ Then they saw a dinner set. They threw out the radio and took the dinner set...”

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Raz. “The looting of Arab property... exerted, and continues to exert, considerable influence on the relations between the two people who share this land.” Tomer Appelbaum

SUKKOT

‘LOCUSTS’

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Soldiers pounced on bedding. They loaded and loaded [things] in their coats.”

David Werner Senator, one of the leaders of Brit Shalom, which advocated Arab-Jewish coexistence in one state, and a senior administrator at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, described what he saw: “These days, when you pass through the streets of Rehavia [an upscale Jerusalem neighborhood], you see everywhere old people, young folk and children returning from Katamon or other neighborhoods with bags filled with stolen objects. The booty is diverse: refrigerators and beds, clocks and books, undergarments and clothing... What a disgrace the Jewish robbers have brought on us, and what moral ruin they have brought on us! Clearly, a terrible licentiousness is spreading among both younger and older people.”

An operations officer in the Etzioni Brigade, Eliahu Arbel, described soldiers “wrapped in Persian rugs” that they had stolen. One night, he came across a suspicious armored vehicle. “We discovered that it was filled with refrigerators, record players, carpets and what have you.” The driver said to him, “Give me your address, I’ll bring whatever you want to your house.” Arbel continues: “I didn’t know what to do. Arrest him? Kill him? I told him, ‘Get the hell out of here!’ And he drove off.” Subsequently, he recalled, “A neighbor told my wife that an electric refrigerator could be had cheaply in a certain store. I went to the store and encountered the man from the armored vehicle there. He said, ‘For you, 100 liras!’ ‘Aren’t you ashamed?’ I said to him. He replied, ‘If you’re an idiot, I have to be ashamed?’”

“I brought a few fine things from Safed. For Sara and me I found exquisitely embroidered Arab dresses, and they might be able to alter them for us here. Spoons and kerchiefs, bracelets and beads, a Damascene table and a set of gorgeous coffee demitasses made of silver, and above all, yesterday Sara brought a huge Persian carpet, totally new and beautiful, beauty like I never saw before. A living room like that can compete with that of all the rich folk of Tel Aviv.”

– A Palmach fighter, about the looting of Safed

There are only marginal references in Raz’s book to the reverse phenomenon: cases in which Arabs looted Jewish property.

In a footnote you write, “Arabs, too, looted and pillaged during the war.” One might also wonder why you didn’t de-

scribe the plundering of Jewish property in Arab countries after the Jews fled or were expelled from them. Wouldn’t it have been proper to refer to that?

“The book is a historical document, not an indictment. Let me tell you a story. I was invited to deliver a lecture at Ariel University [in the West Bank] in the wake of the publication of my book about the Kafr Qassem massacre. At the end, someone in the audience, who was apparently overwrought by what I had said, asked me, ‘Why didn’t you write about the massacre that the Arabs perpetrated against the Jews in Hebron in 1929?’ Well, the title of this book is ‘Looting of Arab Property by Jews in the War of Independence.’ It’s not ‘Looting and robbery in the history of the Israeli-Arab conflict from the First Aliyah to the Trump Plan.’

“I think that the looting of Arab property during the war is a singular and distinctive case – at least singular enough

‘The great majority of Arabs thought they would be back in a short time. The country was emptied of its Arab population within days, and civilians and soldiers quickly plundered their possessions.’

to write a book about it. I think that this plundering of property exerted, and continues to exert, considerable influence on the relations between the two people who share this land. The book shows, on the basis of much documentation, that an integral part of the Jewish public took part in the looting and theft of the property of more than 600,000 people. It doesn’t resemble the pogroms and the robbery carried out by the Arabs during the Palestine riots. The plundering of Jewish property in the Arab states – a fascinating subject in itself – is also unrelated to my book, whose first section is intended to describe the looting as a widespread phenomenon over the span of many months, and whose second section explains how such acts are interwoven with a political approach.”

You write that “there is no comparison between the scale of looting” by the Arabs and that of the Jews, and that in any case most of the Arab plunderers “were from neighboring countries and not local residents.” What is the basis of that assertion?

“It’s a simple matter. The Arab residents fled or were expelled – and fast. They didn’t have the time or ability to

start dealing with closets, refrigerators, pianos and with the property in the thousands of homes and shops that were left behind. They fled in a hurry and the great majority of them thought they would be back in a short time. The country was emptied of its Arab population within a span of days, and civilians and soldiers moved quickly to plunder their possessions.

“The Arab fighting forces, the great majority of whom were not local residents, also engaged in looting. But the scale is completely different. And, of course, the conquests of the Arab fighters were, happily, quite few. Kibbutz Nitzanim, which was taken by Egyptian forces, was looted and subjected to massive destruction. I do note in certain places (in the case of Jaffa or the Etzion Bloc, say) that the Arab forces engaged in looting. Even the British did some pillaging in the tumult of the hasty evacuation. But not on the same scale. You have to understand that the Jewish forces captured Tiberias, Haifa, West Jerusalem, Jaffa, Acre, Safed, Ramle, Lod and other locales. On the other side, the Arab fighters captured, for example, Kibbutz Yad Mordechai, Nitzanim and the Etzion Bloc.

“Haifa, for example, had a population of 70,000 Jews and a similar number of Arabs before the war. After the Israeli conquest of Arab Haifa, around 3,500 Arabs were left in the city. The property of the 66,500 Arabs who fled from the city was looted by the Jews, not by the beaten and frightened Arab minority.”

What befell the looters? Archival documents show that between dozens and hundreds of cases were opened against suspected looters, both civilians and soldiers. However, Raz points out, “As a rule, the punishments were always light, if not ridiculous,” ranging from a fine to six months in jail. Raz’s opinion was apparently shared by some of the cabinet ministers, as is attested to by correspondence from 1948.

Justice Minister Pinhas Rosen wrote, “Everything that has been done in this area is a disgrace to the State of Israel, and there is no appropriate response by the government.” His colleague, Agriculture Minister Aharon Zisling, complained that “the greatest robbery in the few cases of trials... received the lightest punishment.” Finance Minister Eliezer Kaplan wondered “whether this is the way to do battle against robbery and thefts.”

“The people who came with the trucks went from house to house and removed the valuable items: beds, mattresses, closets, kitchen utensils, glassware, sofas, curtains and other objects. When I returned home, I wanted very much to ask my mother why they were doing this – after all, that property belongs to someone... But I didn’t dare



Haifa, 1948. The pillaging, says Raz, “was tolerated” by the leadership, and first and foremost by Ben-Gurion – despite his condemnations in official forums.

Fred Chesnik / IDF and Defense Establishment Archive

ask. The sight of the empty city and the taking of all the possessions of its inhabitants, and the questions all this aroused in me, haunted me for years.”

– Fawzi al-Asmar, about the looting in Lod

Following a comprehensive discussion about the plundering that went on in the country, Raz turns to its political implications. “This is not purely an account of looting, it is a political story,” he writes. The pillaging, he maintains, “was tolerated” by leaders in the political and the military arenas, and first and foremost by Ben-Gurion – despite his condemnations in official forums. Moreover, according to Raz, the looting “played a political role in shaping the character of Israeli society. It was allowed to proceed apace with no interference. That fact calls for a political explanation.”

And what is that explanation, as you see it?

“The plundering was a means to realize the policy of emptying the country of its Arab residents. First, in the simple sense, the looting turned the looters into criminals. Second, it turned the looters who perpetrated individual acts willingly into accomplices to the political situation – passive partners in a political-policy approach that strove to void the land of its Arab residents, with a vested interest in not allowing them to return.”

That may be so in certain cases, but do you really think that the ordinary person on the street who saw a beauti-

ful table and stole it, considered the matter carefully and said to himself, “I am stealing this table so that its owners will not be able to return, for political reasons”?

“The person who looted his neighbor’s property was not aware of the process in which he was an accomplice to a political line that aimed to prevent the Arabs’ return. But the moment you enter your neighbor’s building and remove the property of the Arab family that had been living there until the day before, you have less motivation for them to return in another month or another year. The passive partnership between a specific political approach and the individual looter also had a long-term influence. It reinforced the political idea that espoused segregation between the peoples in the years after the war.”

Without justifying the thieves, what do you think should have been done with this property? Transfer it to the Red Cross? Distribute it to the Jews in an “orderly” way?

“The question is not what I, the historian, would want to happen to the Arab property. To offer recommendations 70 years after the events is inane. The book shows that there were decision makers who were critical of what was happening in real time, both at the level of the events on the ground and at the political level. They thought that the fact that Ben-Gurion had permitted the looting was intended to create a particular political and social reality, and was a tool in Ben-Gurion’s hands to

achieve his purposes. The reason [for such an approach] lies in the fact that there is a substantive difference between the looting by masses of Jewish citizens of the property of Palestinians who left their homes, shops and farms, and the collection of the property by an authorized institution. Socially and politically, it’s significantly different.

“And that was exactly the point of Ben-Gurion’s critics: that the looting was creating a corrupt society and served the line of segregation drawn between Arabs and Jews. Ministers and decision makers, such as the minister of minority affairs, Bechor Shalom-Sheetrit, and Zisling and Kaplan, were critical of the plundering by individuals. In their view, one authority, effective and with concrete power, should have been created to aggregate all the property and see to its distribution and handling. Ben-Gurion objected to this idea and torpedoed it.”

What did you take away personally from the comprehensive research you conducted, beyond the historical documentation? As a person, as a Jew, as a Zionist?

“The looting of Arab property and the conspiracy of silence around it constitute to this day actions with which the Jewish public, and the Zionist public, of which I am a part, must come to terms. Martin Buber said in this context (in a letter written at the time), ‘Inner redemption cannot be acquired unless we stand and look into the face of the lethal character of the truth.’”

Itay Levy, 23; lives in Modi’in, arriving from New York

Hi, where are you coming from?
New York. Two months ago, we flew to Los Angeles and did a coast-to-coast trip in a van. Friends of ours bought it last year, refurbished it, used it and then left it with a relative. He was just waiting for someone to come and take it.

Where did you get the idea?
A friend suggested we make the trip. It was during exam period, there was the coronavirus, I had no money, so I told him it wasn’t going to happen. A quarter of an hour later, we agreed that we’d go for it.

What happened in that quarter of an hour?

First of all, I realized that it would be relatively cheap, because the van was already there. We didn’t slum it; we lived well but we always cooked in the van and hardly ever ate out. There weren’t many attractions to pay for. Almost all we did was hike in parks. We flew out three days deciding, and returned at the last possible moment. Overall, we were guided by the parks, wherever there were beautiful things to see. And also what Luke wanted to do.

Who’s Luke?

The van! We knew it would cost us around \$2,000 to fix it completely and we worked that into the expenses. When we got there, though, we discovered that we could save that money if we traveled across the whole United States by sticking to 60 kilometers an hour [37 miles an hour].

Coast to coast, in a motorized wheelchair.

Yes, we did 10,000 kilometers all told, and I think we passed about 10 cars the whole time, including on the highways. I’m not exaggerating.

Tell us about a special experience you had.

We have a sort of ugly Israeli story. Or maybe not really so ugly...

We can handle it.

We were in Nevada and there was a really lovely spring in the middle of the desert, 300 kilometers from nowhere, that it took two days to get to. Google said the place was temporarily closed, but a lot of things are listed as temporarily closed these days, so we said: Yalla, let’s go for it. We got there, and it really did say, “Closed, entry for local residents only.” We said we’d see; maybe we’d stay outside or just make

Arrivals | Departures



food there. We saw a few local folks there who said great, we should go in. We went in and took a dip and it was amazing. We went back out and sat there a little longer, and then someone arrived in a car. After about 10 minutes of looking at us, he said: “If you don’t leave now, I’m calling the police.” So we said, no problem, we’re going. We got into our van and start it up. Then a big pickup pulls up and a policeman in civilian clothes with a vest, holding his Taser, gets out.

Oh, no.
Now, what do we know about policemen in America? That they shoot. Even though I have the right skin color. We open the window. In this situation what we need to do is play the tourist to the hilt, someone who’s clueless. The guy comes over and we see that he’s prepared a line in advance: “Show me your licenses, and yes, you’re under arrest.” We look at each other, not believing that this is happening. Our English is all right, but we start to say, “Licenses? Passports? We don’t know...” We say we’re sorry and that we don’t understand English all that well. He saw that we were tourists, and he said, “All right, no problem, just take note that in America, when it says ‘Closed,’ that means it’s

closed.” In the end he let us go.
You got off easy. So what America did you see on your trip?

In California and New York they really experience the coronavirus pandemic much better than here, and in country’s center, they look at you strangely if you wear a face mask. It’s totally political. It was my first time in America, and I was always sure that the movies and the TV series exaggerated the situation there, but it was spot on.

In what way, for example?

When we got to Los Angeles, we took the Metro. You see one kind of L.A. there, the people who travel by subway, and that was stressful. And then we took Luke, and within 20 minutes we’re in Beverly Hills. The poverty is such real poverty there and the wealth is such real wealth that it’s crazy. And the lines. There aren’t any lines like that in Israel. We were at the Department of Motor Vehicles, and people stood in line there for six hours. Did you ever see a line a whole block long? Like in the movies; people put up a tent. So we slept in the van there and we got up at 6 A.M. to be first in line, and even so, we were still 20 meters back. Maybe it’s just me, but I think Israel is a lot better in lots of things. That’s my feeling.

Yael Benaya, Photos by Tomer Appelbaum



Kostiantyn Prysizhnyiuk, 27; lives in Eilat, flying to Sofia, Bulgaria

Hi, what awaits you in Sofia?

My girlfriend – she came from Ukraine to meet me there. We’ve been together almost two years. I met her in Ukraine when I was in the army. Before the coronavirus we would meet once every few months, and since the pandemic started I haven’t seen her. Bulgaria is about the only country you can fly to both from Israel and from Ukraine without being quarantined.

Is it hard to maintain a relationship by remote control?

Yes, but I’ve been far away from almost all the girlfriends I’ve had. Somehow I’m used to it. But we talk a few hours a day on video. So that helps. She still tells me that it’s not enough, and I understand. We need to be together physically. But there are couples who live in the same city and see each other only once every few days.

Do you want to change that situation?

Just before the coronavirus started, I planned to buy a plane ticket to bring her

to Israel for the first time. We thought that maybe she would come for a longer period. Now we’re thinking about that again. She’s doing a master’s in law in Ukraine, so until she’s done she won’t be able to come for a long visit.

What are you doing in the meantime?

I live in Eilat and work in a hotel; I’m shift manager for room service. I made aliyah from Ukraine five years ago, and since then I completed my army service.

Why did you immigrate to Israel?

Mostly because of the economic situation in Ukraine. I made aliyah with my brother, who’s four years older than I am, and it really helped to do it together. If I’d been alone, I’m not sure I would have succeeded. We worked together, we went to ulpan [Hebrew language course], we did the whole route together. My parents stayed in Ukraine, and I live with my brother, his wife and a niece.

Are your parents also considering moving here?

The truth is they’re not. They’re divorced. Our father is not Jewish, so he can’t come. Our mother is Jewish, but she thinks that she’s too old to move to Israel and that she wouldn’t be able to learn the language. So she prefers to

stay there, where everything is familiar. I’m not sure what to tell her. We used to help her in whatever way we could, but even we haven’t been able to manage here completely. Every day you learn something new.

Why did you choose Eilat, of all places?

The first time we visited Israel, we really loved Eilat and decided to go straight there. I loved the landscape, the sea, the fact that everything is close by. But the truth is that in the past two years I’ve been at the beach maybe five times. Whenever I’m on a break, I’m so tired that I don’t want to leave the house. I also got burned; we went to Timna a month ago and I got a sunburn. You can still see the stripes on my hand, and I prefer to stay home.

How do Israel and Ukraine differ?

People are a little calmer in Ukraine, and here it was hard for me to get used to everyone shouting all the time, in every line, in every shop you enter. I can’t say that they are angry or anything, but they’re always shouting. And nothing is orderly.

Such as what?

The way I was drafted. I live in Eilat and the recruiting office is in Be’er Sheva. I had a medical problem, with blood pressure, and the doctor gave me a few months to complete all the tests, and then to report. After two weeks I get another letter from the office to come and finish filling in forms, so I took time off from work, went to Be’er Sheva, went there, and then they ask, ‘Why are you here?’ That happened to me maybe five times. I didn’t finish with the forms, I didn’t receive a proper army profile, but I was still drafted.

Did you want to serve?

Not really. At the age of 24, I didn’t take the army all that seriously. If I’d been 18, I might have wanted to enlist in a combat unit, but at 24 you’re thinking about other things, about how to organize your life. And they’re all kids there. In the end it worked out all right, because I also worked and received ‘lone-soldier’ conditions. But if I’d made aliyah half a year later, I wouldn’t have needed to serve.

What’s the story with the beard?

I had a beard before the army, too, and I made the mistake of shaving it off before being drafted, because they said it was forbidden. I thought: If it’s forbidden, it’s forbidden. And then I got to the army and I saw that everyone had a beard. By the time we were discharged, everyone had a beard, but I only managed to get a beard permit in the last month before my discharge.