

Israel's 60th Birthday

by Inge Sadan

Almost sixty years old! That's quite an age to look back upon. Even if it is sixty years in the life of a country, and a new country at that. What was it like, starting out as a newly declared state, and already at war in a bitter fight for its existence, surrounded on three sides by an implacable enemy, and the fourth side a beautiful, blue sea?



Tree planting in 1952 (today there is a forest)
(photo: private)

A primitive life

The war wasn't even over, before an influx of new immigrants, mostly refugees from the European Holocaust and the Arab countries, met and mixed in the hastily erected tent camps. Iraqis, Moroccans, Poles, Germans, French, Rumanians, East Europeans, West Europeans, their only common factor being that they were all Jews. In the winter the camps became a mass of mud, and in the summer they sweltered in the heat.

The old-established settlers themselves lived in small apartments with various ingenious methods of turning a living room into bedrooms at night. Balconies were closed in to provide more sleeping accommodation. Food was rationed of course, with a shortage of anything that was not in season.

Electricity cuts were frequent, and water could be turned off at the mains whilst one was having a shower ...

The few things that were in plentiful supply were cockroaches and bedbugs, requiring the services of fumigator firms every so often. Mosquitoes, flies and other flying pests ruled the air, day and night, according to their preference.

Of course there was no television, this being introduced only around 1969 in order to stop the inhabitants watching Arabic propaganda programmes from nearby countries. On the other hand, there was music, both popular and classical; cinemas and theatres, and people would just drop in on their friends for a cup of coffee and chat.

Telephones were a nightmare, with very few private phones, and one could wait for years before being connected, usually to a “party-line”, also used by a neighbour. So one would have to wait until the neighbours had finished their conversations before the co-owner would be able to use the phone.

My immigration

I arrived in Israel just three years after its official establishment, on a five weeks visit to see my grandmother (aged 97!) and uncles and aunts, who had immigrated in 1935. A few months later I returned, just before Passover. At that time the main transport to Israel was by ship, the Israeli shipping line ZIM possessing about four small boats plying between Marseilles and Haifa.



Inge in 1952
(photo: private)

There were no stabilisers, so traversing the Straits of Messina was horrible, when one wanted to die in the heaving ocean, this lasting a day at least. But on approaching the port city of

Haifa, everyone rushed to the rails to see the beautiful mountain, with red-roofed houses dotting the hillside, and the sun shimmering on the blue, blue sea.

I made my way to Jerusalem, which I loved on sight. The golden stone buildings, the small alleys leading in and out of the market, the green hills, which would soon turn to brown in the searing heat of summer, the bone-shaking buses with uncomfortable seats, and interurban buses loading luggage onto the roof, it was certainly a change from London where I lived before!

The food shortage didn't bother me at all, having lived on English rationing during the war, and I found Israel an exciting country, full of young people, with the hopes in those days of being part of building a future. However, there were so many people with concentration camp numbers tattooed on their arms, both young and older ones.

All the languages on earth were spoken, including a lot of Yiddish, as well as Arabic by those coming from the Middle East. *Everybody* wanted to learn English, so if one heard a new immigrant or tourist speaking bad Hebrew with an English accent, people would automatically try their English on the newcomer. That is why so many English speakers nowadays still speak bad Hebrew ...

New experiences: transportation ...

Very few people had cars, and the main form of transport was bus, taxi, or in Tel Aviv shared taxis, which were almost as cheap as buses.

In Jerusalem the bus company has a monopoly which excludes shared (service) taxis; a pity. The bus drivers then - and now - take the money, give change, clip the multi-ticket cards, and drive the bus all at the same time, occasionally jolting to a sudden stop which causes standing passengers to stagger, and sometimes fall. The bus company has a busy complaints department.



Inge with her cousin Bobby Engelhard (and a horse and a camel) in southern Israel, 1952

(photos: private)

food ...

In the early days eating in a restaurant was not an exciting experience. Meat was scarce, as were potatoes, and fish was inevitably Norwegian cod fillet. Israel had a deal with Norway, who supplied this staple product, and it was cooked in a dozen different ways, but always ended up as cod fillet.

Many years later, I happened to be in a London restaurant, sitting next to an English lady taking out an Israeli young girl. She asked the girl if she would like fish (to the hostess a special treat) and I saw the Israeli girl shudder and decline, opting for an omelette. I knew exactly how she was feeling.



Inge in Jerusalem, 1954
(photo: private)

In the early Israeli eating experience, dairy food was the staple nourishment. Yoghurts of 1, 3 or 5 % fat, semolina, watery custard “puddings”, Turkish coffee, and of course bread. Bread was eaten with everything, even with bread!

Funnily enough, rice was always available, as well as the staple vegetables.

If someone from abroad was visiting, then the ideal gift was a tin of Nescafe (for which the host would gladly supply overnight lodging).

Oranges were eaten from December to around March, then came apricots, peaches, water melons, grapes, and anything that was grown locally. Apples were definitely *out*, as were pears and all the exotic fruits now available (and also now grown locally).

Before festivals, a live fish would be available, on the ration card, and I would obligingly take my carp to my aunt, to swim in the bath tub until needed.

A marshmallow chocolate concoction, called Kushi, was not rationed, and I once won a bet that I could eat ten of them at one go. After that I never touched a Kushi again.

There was one treat I did buy myself, every so often. If you had foreign currency you could buy chocolate at a tourist hotel, and when I had a few English shillings I would buy a bar of “export chocolate”. It was delicious.

The local filler-food was Falafel, a middle-eastern item, where a pita (or half) would be filled with fried chick-pea balls, and salads. The locals of Middle Eastern descent would also include hot pepper paste, which could take a European’s breath away.

... and education

Education was another peculiarity. At that time it was cheaper to attend university than Kindergarten. So, being well after infancy, I was persuaded to improve my mind, and managed to go to the Hebrew University for a year.

Most students also had to work at the same time, so in my case it was not what I really wanted to study but what was available to me in the afternoons and evenings, after I finished work. I also had a lively social life, and not much money, so after a year my official higher education petered out ...

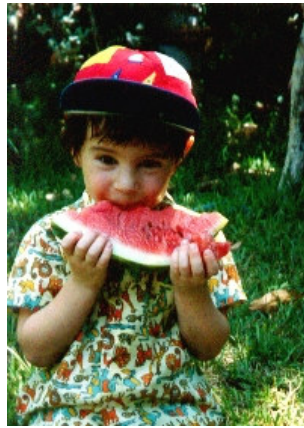
Then and now

The first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, had his office in the same complex as mine, when I worked for the Jewish National Fund. We shared a courtyard, and his one and only bodyguard would have a lot of free time before his duties were required to guard his “boss” who would walk home for lunch every day. The young bodyguard would chat with me through my office window, until he had to escort Ben-Gurion home, walking at a discreet distance behind him. Occasionally Ben-Gurion would stop and greet someone in the street, and then slowly proceed on his way.

Nowadays, a whole motorcade takes the present Prime Minister and his entourage at break-neck speed, sirens blaring, forcing anyone in their path to quickly get out of the way, or being screamed at by loudspeakers. A very unnerving experience, especially if a driver is not a resident of Jerusalem and does not understand what is happening. One of the modern developments which I don’t find very reassuring.

Sixty years later:

What a tremendous change! Israel is no longer a third world economy. There are highways connecting all parts of the country, buses are extremely comfortable, with plush seats, one can get any food one wishes, including Chinese, Japanese, Indian, French, Italian, English fish and chips, huge steaks, cream cakes where the cream does not taste like shaving soap, first-rate hotels, large apartments (as well as the smaller ones still in existence), golf, first-rate tennis and all the other sports (Israel even beating Russia in a football match recently!), universities in the major towns, a huge airport where one can walk and walk and walk until reaching one's departure point, and all modern conveniences.



Inge's grandson Jonathan, five years old
(photo: private)

Israeli technology and computer expertise, diamond industry, and exports to all parts of the world are famous, whilst Eilat, our luxury southern seaside resort, hosts thousands of sun starved European tourists year-round.



Inge today
(photo: private)

We still have major tree-planting ceremonies by the Jewish National Fund, the Weizmann Science Institute is world famous for its research, and if one wants to order a telephone, one can have it fixed within a day!! That is a major miracle. Oh yes, we also have traffic jams, strikes, and the same problems as other advanced countries. Peace with our neighbours still eludes us, though we did make peace with our once hostile enemies, Egypt and Jordan. Maybe one day our other neighbours will follow their example. And then it could be one of the most enlightened and prosperous areas in the whole world. As one of our finance Ministers once replied when asked if he believed in miracles, "*Believe* in miracles? *We rely* on them!" And there is one other small point which so many people have long forgotten: Jesus of Nazareth was an Israelite!

Jerusalem, January 2008

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