

## Holocaust denial, early Israeli style

**ISRAELI  
DOWN UNDER**  
**CHEMI SHALEV**



Although Holocaust survivors comprised almost one-quarter of the population of the fledgling Jewish State, they hid themselves, and Israelis kept them hidden – until the Eichmann trial changed all that.

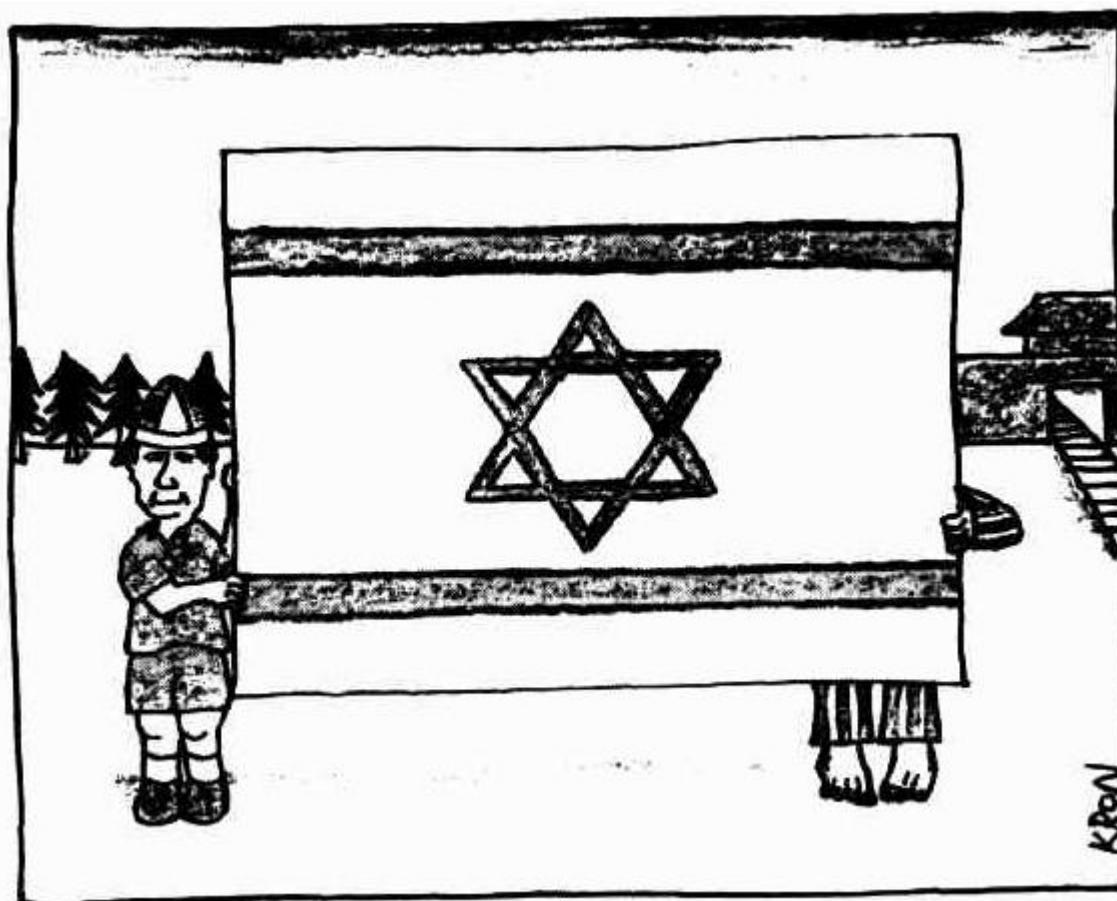
**W**HEN I was a child growing up in Jerusalem, my friends and I used to make fun of Holocaust survivors. They would walk down the street, in their peculiar Eastern European clothes, with that haunted look in their eyes, always averting your gaze. We could sense them from miles away, and

sense them from miles away, and when they passed, we would point and snicker.

Our “neighbourhood survivors” were a Polish couple who owned a small grocery store. We would march into their store and ask to buy something that was sufficiently distant so that they would have to reach, stretching the long sleeves that they perennially wore. Then we could see the numbers tattooed on their arms, and we would run outside, chuckling gleefully at our success.

Such is the boundless cruelty of

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children, fuelled, in this case, by the general atmosphere in the then new and ultra-Zionist Israel. The survivors came from the never-named "over there". They were the embodiment of "galuti", or Diaspora Jews, representing everything that we aspired not to be. Though they were numerous, comprising almost a quarter of the population at the inception of the state, they were virtually invisible. They hid themselves, and we kept them hidden. They reminded us of things we preferred not to know.

The Holocaust was not spoken of, not in our homes, not in our youth movements, not on the state-controlled radio. As meticulously

trolled radio. As meticulously detailed in *The Seventh Million*, by journalist Tom Segev, Holocaust survivors were seen as the antithesis of the "new Jew" being forged by the Zionist ethos. The official day to commemorate the Holocaust, our Yom Hashoah, was thus designated as "martyrs and heroes" day, as if the former did not vastly outnumber the latter.

There was something vaguely embarrassing about them. Holocaust victims had "allowed themselves" to be carted off like "lambs to the slaughter", defying the Zionist ideal of self-defence. Holocaust survivors were even worse, damned by a collective cloud of suspicion that

collective cloud of suspicion that

they had cheated the devil by cheating their fellow Jews.

It was, in many ways, the collective Zionist conscience, trying to suppress its pangs of guilt. The fledgling pre-state Jewish leadership in Palestine may have been objectively impotent to help, but nonetheless, while their brethren were being led to the gas chambers, the Zionists found time for incessant internal bickering over ideological matters of infinite triviality.

And while the Jews of Europe were entering the gates of hell, the people of Palestine were having a bash. The war against the British was temporarily suspended and the country was awash with swashbuckling Allied soldiers of all nationalities. Among these, of course, were the Anzacs, and my mother would recall splendid afternoons in Jerusalem cafes, peeking at Aussie soldiers, who, she always said, were the handsomest of the lot.

**T**HE cathartic change came in 1961, when Adolf Eichmann was brought to trial. I remember as a child standing on Bezalel Street in Jerusalem, near the makeshift court house, surrounded by thousands of people who stood at rapt attention for hours on end, listening to the harrowing testimonies blaring from large black loudspeakers. Many were survivors, overcome by the sudden explosive exposure of

by the sudden explosive exposure of their hitherto hidden ordeals. But many others were plain Israelis, realising for the first time the enormity of the Nazi crime, as well as the atrociousness of their own callous attitude towards those broken human

beings who had somehow survived.

It was only then that I heard that my mother had escaped Nazi-occupied Prague in 1939, leaving behind her elderly parents, who went on to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz; that my father's four brothers and sisters, their wives, husbands and children, had been carted off to Auschwitz as well; that my aunt and uncle, eternally and frustratingly grim, had lost both their children to Nazi executioners.

And it was only in later years that I understood that the silence in our house, and in most other houses, was not one of wilful disregard, but rather of guilt and remorse. Only then did my mother muster the fortitude to go to Yad Vashem every Yom Hashoah to light a candle in memory of her murdered parents.

Then came the Six-Day War, with its sense of impending doom, the Yom Kippur War, with its near-catastrophic results, the rise to power of Menachem Begin, who literally breathed the Holocaust, and finally, the universal wave of recognition, much of it inspired by Hollywood, which swept the world, and Israel as well.

Thus it is only recently after

Thus it is only recently, after decades of denial, that Israel truly became a nation of survivors, in the psychological if not in the physical sense. As for me, while lenient towards my other youthful indiscretions, my mockery of survivors is a stain I will never erase.

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