

WEEKEND



A still from the documentary "Dear Fredy," by Rubi Gat, who believes that Hirsch's story was quashed by Czechoslovakia's communist regime "because he was a Jew and because he was a homosexual."

Yael Oszinay / Mind the Gap Animation

Michal Aharony

In 1940, an article appeared in Prague's Jewish newspaper entitled, "Healthy Youth – Healthy Homeland." "Which do you prefer," it began, "a proud and tall suntanned lad, or a flabby, nervous youngster with drooping shoulders? Probably the first. But what are you doing about emulating him? Nothing!"

The piece was written by Alfred (Fredy) Hirsch, a 24-year-old outstanding athlete and gymnastics teacher, and a youth counselor in the Maccabee Hatzair Zionist youth movement. He would soon become a revered teacher at Theresienstadt and later in the children's block of the "family camp" at Auschwitz-Birkenau. While his native Germany marked the centenary of his birth two years ago, few in Israel know of Hirsch and his educational efforts, and even fewer are aware that he saved many Jews from death at Auschwitz and brightened the final months of the lives of hundreds of doomed children.

Hirsch's story – that of a gay German-Jewish refugee who had fled his land of birth for Czechoslovakia and chose to sacrifice his life for children – is closely tied to the story of the annihilation of Czech Jewry during the Holocaust. So why is Janusz Korczak, another devoted educator who chose to die with his young charges, known to every Israeli child, while Fredy Hirsch remains an unknown hero?

Hirsch was born on February 11, 1916, in Aachen, Germany. When he was 10 his father, Heinrich Hirsch, died, and his mother, Olga Hirsch, remarried. He had one brother, Paul, who was two years older. Kiryat Ono resident Rachel Massel, 69, Paul's daughter, told me the brothers were very much alike. Both were charismatic athletes and leaders, and both were active from their youth in Germany's Jewish scouting movement.

But while Fredy was a Zionist, Paul, who studied at a Reform rabbinical seminary, was not at all. When Hitler came to power, Olga, her second husband, Martin, immigrated to Bolivia, together with Paul. "Fredy could have gone with them," says Massel, "but he'd already begun working with the children and didn't want to leave them." So he remained in Germany.

In 1935, when the Nuremberg Laws went into effect, Hirsch fled to Prague; he was 19. After a short stay, Hirsch moved to Ostrava and then to Brno, both also in Czechoslovakia, and devoted himself to working with children and teenagers. He worked as a counselor with the Maccabi Hatzair youth movement and as a Maccabi coach, and was an active member of the socialist-Zionist Hehalutz youth movement. Until 1940, he organized summer camps for Hehalutz in the town of Bezpravi and helped prepare Jewish young people for aliyah to British Mandatory Palestine.

Michael Honey, an Auschwitz survivor who knew Hirsch from childhood, wrote in that in 1939, when the Nazis occupied Bohemia, his brother, Shraga, and Hirsch cast lots to decide which of them would leave for Palestine and which would remain to lead the movement in occupied Czechoslovakia. They broke a match and whoever chose the long piece would get to depart. Shraga chose the long piece, and Hirsch stayed behind in Czechoslovakia.

He then moved back to Prague. There, in October 1939, at the last moment Jews could still leave the country, the group of 12-14 year-olds he was working with managed to leave for pre-aliyah training in Denmark. The following year, they immigrated to Palestine. Thus, all of them survived the Holocaust.

After the Nazis completed their conquest of Czechoslovakia, in March 1939, they imposed restrictions on the country's Jews. By 1940, Jewish children

A hero who went down loving, not fighting

Today his name is almost unknown, but both before his death at Auschwitz, Jewish youth leader Fredy Hirsch was revered by hundreds of children. A new film looks at his remarkable educational work and his gay identity, and speculates that in dying, he helped keep dozens alive

were banned from attending Czech and German public schools. Their movements were highly restricted and the number of places where they could play were reduced. The Hagibor sports ground in Prague's Strasnice neighborhood became Hirsch's kingdom, where he gave gymnastic instruction to Jewish children and organized soccer matches, scouting games, camping training and study groups.

"We spent every day doing sports and games and singing," says Dita Kraus, an Auschwitz survivor who knew Hirsch from Prague and Theresienstadt, in Rubi Gat's 2017 documentary "Dear Fredy" (which will be

Why is Janusz Korczak, another devoted educator who chose to die with his young charges, known to every Israeli child, while Fredy Hirsch remains an unknown hero?

shown on Israel's Kan television on Holocaust Remembrance Day). "Every group had a counselor. And above all the counselors was Fredy. Fredy was admired by everyone. And when you look at this picture [a photograph appears in the background in the film], you grasp the catastrophe. All of these children perished. Out of all these children, only a handful survived."

The subject of Hirsch's sexuality comes up as early as the film's first two minutes, in an animated segment in which we are told, "Hirsch couldn't fall in love. That was the gossip in the ghetto." And it is raised again in questions asked of the interviewees. I asked Gat, who is himself gay, and lives with his partner and their three children, why he put such an emphasis on Hirsch's sexual orientation. "It's part of who he was," Gat says. "I tried to tell his story without omissions or pretifying things. He didn't hide it, so I'm certainly not going to hide it."

Indeed, it was well known in Prague that Hirsch was gay. Nor did he hide it at Theresienstadt – Terezin in Czech – or Auschwitz. "We'd heard that Fredy was gay," Kraus told me in an interview, "but we didn't care about that at all. It wasn't an issue anywhere."

Head held high

In early December 1941, in one of the first transports of Jews from the Czech capital, Hirsch was sent to Theresienstadt, north of Prague; the ghetto at this former military garrison had been set up only a month earlier. It had two purposes. One was to serve, when needed, as a "model ghetto," in order to disguise the implementation of the "final solution," and to mislead the International Red Cross delegation in its anticipated

visit there. It was also meant to be an "old people's ghetto" (*Altersghetto*), to which thousands of older Jews from Austria and Germany would be sent. The children's living quarters were separated from those of the adults, and later some of the older children and teens moved into a "children's house" (*"hime"*) where they slept separately from their parents.

The head of the ghetto youth department was Egon (Gonda) Redlich, and Hirsch was his deputy. The children continued their academic studies, forbidden them by the Germans, in secret in their quarters, and they also played games and put on plays. Their Jewish counselors required them to bathe daily, even with just cold water. Hirsch was among those who conducted strict cleanliness examinations, and he also ran cleanliness competitions, in which he awarded prizes. When weather permitted, Hirsch managed to obtain permission to take the children out into the fresh air. He converted some of wide, grassy fortress walls of the Terezin Citadel into playing fields, and organized soccer tournaments. A high point of these efforts was the ghetto's Maccabia sports competition of May 1943, which was watched by thousands of spectators.

Prof. Dov Kulka, a historian who was 9 when he lived in the ghetto, remembers the first time he saw Hirsch at Theresienstadt. "On the roof of one of these fortresses was a sports field where track-and-field competitions were held," Kulka says.

"I sometimes used to wander around that field on my own, where there was no one around. You could see out into the distance the whole landscape out-

side the ghetto, and when I gazed at this landscape, I experienced for the first time the feeling that I was a prisoner, because I knew that I would never be able to go to those places now," he adds.

"On one of these rambles, I ended up at the playing field again. It was empty, and there was total silence. Then suddenly, at one end, I saw an athletic-looking figure throwing a discus and picking it up and throwing it again and picking it up, and so on, his entire being dedicated to this motion, like the famous Greek statue 'The Discus Thrower.' In this silence, I recognized him as Fredy Hirsch. Fredy had an attractive appearance. He didn't just project authority, he also projected empathy to everyone who talked with him. He was a charismatic personality."

Similar descriptions of Hirsch's impressive appearance – his athletic build and handsome face – are heard in the testimonies of nearly all the survivors who knew him. Journalist and writer Ruth Bondy, an Auschwitz survivor a journalist who died this past November at 94, writes in her 2002 book "Uprooted Roots" that in Prague, at Theresienstadt and even at Auschwitz, Hirsch always held himself upright. His hair was always perfectly combed and his boots were always polished. The whistle around his neck was his trademark. Survivor testimonies say that Hirsch's face was the first thing the frightened children saw when they arrived in the ghetto. He soothed and reassured them, and also secured medical care for them if they needed it.

Because of his good reputation and connections, Hirsch was able to release a few people from transports "to the east," and he took advantage of this

very often, mainly to get children and orphans off the lists of deportees. In late August 1943, a special transport arrived at the ghetto carrying 1,200 children from the Bialystok Ghetto (in Poland), which had just been liquidated. The children, who had already been starved and neglected and had witnessed the murder of their families, were kept in isolation. They were kept alive to be bartered later for German citizens, in return for their release and eventual emigration to Palestine. It was strictly forbidden to approach the Bialystok children while they were in the ghetto, but Hirsch ignored the ban and sneaked into their bunks.

Hunger and sickness were severe at the 'family camp': Within six months nearly a quarter of the prisoners had died. In the children's block, however, thanks to Hirsch's efforts, the mortality rate was almost zero.

He believed that his good connections with the Germans would protect him from punishment, but he was caught by a Czech guard, arrested and sent east in a transport to Birkenau. After the war, it was learned that all the Bialystok children too were gassed at Auschwitz.

During Theresienstadt's first year, its prisoners were sent east to extermination in Treblinka and other camps. The first transport from the ghetto to Auschwitz left in October 1942. Most of the deportees were sent straight to the gas chambers on arrival. The transports halted for the first six months of 1943, but this relative quiet came to an end in September, when 5,007 people were sent to Auschwitz. Among them was Fredy Hirsch. The tremendous overcrowding in the ghetto, the need to thin the population and improve the look of the place before a visit by an International Red Cross delegation, as well as the Germans' fear of an uprising, led to the renewal of the transports.

It is more than likely that Hirsch's attempt to make contact with the Bialystok children was no more than an excuse for the Nazis to send him in the September transport. In fact, someone like Hirsch could be of use to the Nazis in the new camp they planned to build at Birkenau.

Murals at Auschwitz

Three transports were sent from Theresienstadt to the family camp at Auschwitz – in September 1943, December 1943 and May 1944. The fate of the people on the September transport, including Hirsch, was different than those who had come with previous transports, and also from that of Jews deported from other European

countries. While generally, new arrivals to Auschwitz were immediately put through a selection, with 90 percent being sent directly to the gas chambers, everyone on the September transport was moved into an empty camp that had just been built. This camp, which was denoted as "BIIf," was referred to by all as the *Familienlager* ("family camp").

These new prisoners did not have their heads shaved and were not forced to wear striped prisoner's uniforms. Although the men and women lived in separate blocks, they could still meet, unlike in other parts of Auschwitz, where men and women were separated by barbed wire. What these prisoners didn't know – but which has become clear from survivors' testimonies – was that, on their Auschwitz inmate's cards, the abbreviation SB appeared next to their names. This stood for *Sonderbehandlung*, or "special treatment" – code meaning they were to be gassed in six months. And indeed, in early March 1944, with very few exceptions, everyone from the September transport still alive was sent to the gas chambers.

Why were the prisoners of the Czech family camp kept alive for six months in better conditions? Different theories were proposed over the years, but it wasn't until the late 1960s, when historian Dov Kulka discovered documents from the Reich Security Main Office at the Americans' Berlin Document Center, that the rationale could be clearly understood. The documents showed that there had been a possibility that a delegation from the International Red Cross that was supposed to visit Theresienstadt would continue from there to Birkenau. The family camp was a show facility built in anticipation of that possibility. It was part of the Nazis' deception plan designed to refute the rumors about the real meaning of the transports "to the east."

Block 31 at the family camp was the children's block, and its guiding force was Fredy Hirsch. Since generally, children were sent to their deaths upon arrival at Auschwitz, it was very unusual to see children at the camp. Hirsch managed to create something of a protective bubble for hundreds of children in the middle of the death camp. There is no written documentation about the children's block, only the testimonies of survivors, most of them from the December transport, since the September counselors were all killed.

According to that testimony, the children's block was set up at the initiative of Hirsch and Leo Janowitz, the secretary of Theresienstadt's Council of Elders. A few days after they arrived at Auschwitz, they suggested to the camp commandant that the children spend their days in a separate barrack from their parents. The excuse offered was that the children, most of whom spoke only Czech, disturbed the grown-ups' labor, and made it harder to maintain discipline in the camp.

Hirsch, who upon arrival at Birkenau was appointed to the powerful position of *kapo* of the family camp, asked to be released from this position shortly afterward and took over running the children's barracks. Now he was officially known as the *Blockältester* – the block elder. The September transport from Theresienstadt brought to Auschwitz 274 children 14 and under, with another 353 coming in December. The vast majority of them, with the exception of infants and sick children, were in the children's block.

As he had been at Theresienstadt, at Auschwitz Hirsch was strict about health and hygiene. Yehuda Bacon, a Jerusalem artist born in 1929 who survived Auschwitz, told Haaretz, "he not only saved me, but all the children, because he did cleanliness inspections." Hirsch would even force the kids to wash in the snow in the winter, or to walk to another block where there was a long pipe with a number of holes. "He made us bathe even with just a



Fredy Hirsch. "He had charm and a tip-top look. He knew how to talk to the SS."

Beit Terezin Archive

few drops of water so we would stay clean, with one cloth for 20 children," Bacon says.

Conditions in the familienlager were as terrible as in the rest of Auschwitz. Hunger and sickness were severe, and within six months nearly a quarter of the prisoners, most of them elderly, had died from weakness and disease. In the children's block, however, thanks to Hirsch's efforts, the mortality rate was almost zero.

This was apparently due to a combination of the education and discipline that Hirsch insisted on and the benefits he was able to obtain for the children thanks to his relatively good relations with the Germans. The children received better food: Their soup was thicker and warmer than that given to other prisoners, and they sometimes received such special supplements as white bread, noodles cooked in milk, or a piece of cake – thanks to Hirsch. Prisoners from Theresienstadt were allowed to receive packages from relatives outside the camp, and when packages came for people who had already died, Hirsch would distribute their contents to the children.

Bacon explains that Hirsch was able to get extra food for the children because "he spoke German as well as the Nazis, he had charm and a tip-top look. He knew how to talk to the SS. He was dressed like a soldier."

The younger children in the family camp slept in barracks with their mothers, and the older children slept with the fathers or the counselors. Each morning, the counselors would bring those between 8 and 14 to the children's block. For some of the older ones, Hirsch invented various jobs, and got the Germans to agree to let them remain in the block.

Hirsch also arranged for the children's twice-daily SS roll calls to be held indoors, in the children's building, which was heated in winter. For Auschwitz prisoners, standing outside for roll call in the harsh winters, often for hours, was one of the worst tortures of camp life. In her interview for Gat's movie, Ruth Bondy says that, "the children were very disciplined, not because of the SS, but because of how much they looked up to Fredy."

It was also due to Hirsch's influence, apparently, that the children and counselors were not abused by the SS. Bondy confirms Yehuda Bacon's comments when she explains in her interview that Hirsch's neat and handsome appearance and his perfect German elicited different treatment from the SS men. "I don't remember them ever shouting at him or punishing him," she says in the film.

The children's block, which was next to the hospital block in Birkenau, was under the direct supervision of the notorious Dr. Josef Mengele. Michael Honey, an Auschwitz survivor who died in 2011, says in testimony that is held at the Jewish Museum in Prague, that Hirsch would speak with Mengele respectfully, but with confidence and boldness. When more children arrived from Theresienstadt and the children's block became overcrowded, Honey adds, Hirsch was able to get Mengele to allocate another block for children.

Honey also emphasizes a resemblance between the two men in their appearance, dress and manner of speech, which derived from their shared cul-

ture. "I saw that Fredy made an impression on Mengele," he says. "That Mengele was intrigued by how Jews could act like soldiers."

Kulka, one of the few children from the September transport who survived, because he was in the hospital block when the others were killed, describes the educational efforts that Hirsch oversaw in the children's block. "He was the one who put together the team of teachers and counselors and tried to maintain an educational agenda as much as possible in the conditions of the camp," Kulka says. He explains that the daily routine was composed of classes and scout activities. "The first lesson I remember was a history lesson about the Persian wars of ancient Greece." The counselors would recite entire books from memory. Hirsch gave physical education classes.

According to survivor testimonies, the walls of the children's block were decorated with cheerful drawings of a meadow, flowers and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, drawn by Dina Gottliebova (later Dina Babbitt), one of the prisoners. Another artist, Marianne Hermann, known as Mausi, adorned other walls with drawings of Indians, Eskimos, pine trees and monkeys.

The children spent a lot of their

"People loved him," Gat says. "Their eyes sparkled when they talked about him. Not one had any problem talking about his sexuality. People miss him, and they accept him as he was."

time producing plays. Many of the survivors recall the play "Snow White" in German, which even some of the SS officers came to watch. Hirsch forbade the counselors from talking to the children about death, the gas chambers or the crematorium. That was possible up until March 1944, when those who had arrived on the September transport were murdered, but after that, there was not way to shield the children from the fact that death awaited them.

Suicide or accident?

At the beginning of March 1944, when the six-month quarantine of the prisoners from the September transport came to an end, a rumor, passed along by the underground at Auschwitz, spread among the prisoners that the Nazis planned to kill thousands of Czech Jews in the family camp. The Nazis tried until the last month to camouflage the plan: Prisoners were told they would be transferred to a labor camp, and were given postcards that were to be dated March 25 – that is, several weeks after the planned liquidation – and addressed to relatives in the outside world, telling them that all was well with them. Two days before planned operation, on March 5, Hirsch appointed a new head and deputy head for the children's barracks.

On March 7, all the prisoners from



Hirsch practicing gymnastics in Prague. Both he and his brother were charismatic athletes and leaders, and both were active in the Jewish scouting movement.

Beit Terezin Archive

the September transport, other than those in the hospital block, were transferred to another, nearby detention camp. Hirsch was among them. Before this, he bade farewell to the counselors and asked that they send regards to his friends in Palestine. The next day, a rumor reached the family camp that Hirsch wasn't feeling well. What happened on that day, and the circumstances of his death, remain unclear.

In Claude Lanzmann's 1985 documentary "Shoah," Auschwitz survivor Rudolf Vrba, one of the few people who managed to escape from the camp, says it was he who told Hirsch about the imminent liquidation. He also says Hirsch was asked by the underground to lead a prisoner uprising.

According to Vrba's testimony, which is questioned by a few other survivors, Hirsch asked for an hour to think things over. He knew that a revolt without weapons and adequate preparation would spell certain death for all the children under his protection. Vrba said that Hirsch then committed suicide by swallowing Luminal (phenobarbital) pills. This is the narrative that appears in nearly every published account of the children's house that mentions Hirsch.

But there is another theory, based on testimony from Auschwitz survivor Ota Kraus, who was a counselor at the children's house. Kraus, who died in Israel in 2000, said that Hirsch did not kill himself, but rather died from an overdose of Luminal given him by Jewish doctors in the camp, whose intention was to make him sleep. Kraus said Ludwig Sand, who was a pharmacist in Auschwitz and the one who actually gave Hirsch the drugs, told him this at a conference in Prague in 1989. I heard this same account from Dita Kraus, Ota's wife, in interviews I conducted with her in 2014 and again very recently.

Like other survivors who knew

Hirsch personally, Kraus is certain he did not commit suicide. The version told me by Dita also came up in an interview I did with Yaacov Tsur, another family camp survivor, as part of the research for my book "Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Total Domination." Tsur, who died in 2014 on Kibbutz Na'an, had closely studied the matter of Hirsch's death.

According to Ota Kraus, Hirsch had simply requested a tranquilizer to calm himself, but the doctors, whom Mengele promised would be allowed to live, sought to prevent the uprising and gave him a dose intended to put him to sleep. They felt certain that an uprising would mean certain death for all the prisoners of the family camp, including the medical staff. Mengele did in fact take back from the detention camp to the family camp a group of 22 doctors and nurses, in addition to twins he would exploit for his research and a few other prisoners. Several survivors have testified that Hirsch's name was also on the list of prisoners who were to be permitted to return to the camp.

On the night of March 8, 1944, exactly six months after their arrival at Auschwitz, 3,792 surviving prisoners from the September transport were murdered in the gas chambers. According to survivor testimonies, before their death, the sounds of "Hatikvah," the Czech national anthem and "The Internationale" could be heard from the anterooms to the gas chambers.

What we know of their last hours comes not only from survivor testimonies, but also from the diary of Zalman Gradowski, a Sonderkommando, one of the prisoners forced to dispose of the bodies of the dead in the Auschwitz crematorium. Gradowski died at Auschwitz during the Sonderkommando uprising of October 1944, and his diary was dug up there after the war.

The children remember

In June 1944, a delegation from the International Red Cross visited Theresienstadt. As the Nazis hoped, the delegation was impressed by the ghetto's appearance, which had been carefully worked on before its arrival. The visit was termed a success, and no follow-up request was made to also visit the Birkenau "labor camp." As soon as the anticipated second tour was canceled, the family camp became unnecessary. The six-month quarantine of the December transport prisoners was due to end just then (after which the plan was to murder them), but because of the heavy bombardments of German cities, and their need for more laborers, the Germans decided to conduct a selection of the prisoners from the family camp. Around 3,500 men and women who were deemed fit for work were transferred to labor camps around Germany. Mengele also conducted another selection and had 90 youths who'd remained in Auschwitz transferred to the men's camp.

All those who remained in the family camp after the selection – some 6,500 children, women, the sick and elderly, and others deemed unfit for work – were sent to the gas chambers in July 1944. One could say that by deciding not to lead an uprising, Hirsch saved all those who passed the selection done among the family camp prisoners from later transports.

It could be that we will never know for sure the real circumstance of Hirsch's death. If he did commit suicide, was he betraying and abandoning the children? Or could the way he ended his life be considered an act of

resistance?

And why has Hirsch remained an "unknown hero"? Gat believes that Czechoslovakia's communist regime quashed his story, "because he was a Jew and because he was a homosexual. It didn't fit into their story. Today I don't think that homophobia can account for it. That may be part of the explanation, but it's not the main reason."

One can speculate further. Perhaps Hirsch's relative anonymity has to do with the way he died, as described in all the research to date. Who knows, maybe if he had chosen to lead an uprising at Auschwitz, even if this had led to the certain death of practically all the adult prisoners and the children, he would have been remembered as a hero – like Mordechai Anielewicz, who led the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In the first decades after the war, the dominant narrative of Israel's Holocaust commemoration highlighted armed resistance, not spiritual or intellectual resistance.

But Hirsch remains deeply etched in the memories of the survivors who knew him, some of whom are sure that he saved their lives. "People loved him," Gat says. "Their eyes sparkled when they talked about him. Not one had any problem talking about his sexuality. People miss him, and they accept him as he was."

On the wall of the former school building in Terezin, Czech Republic, there is a monument; Hirsch's face is carved in stone alongside the text "In memoriam Fredy Hirsch – gratefully, children of Terezin, Birkenau BIIb."

When the memorial was dedicated in 1996, Zuzana Rosinkova, who had been in the children's block under Hirsch, said: "We Jews don't have saints, but we do have *tzaddikim*, righteous people, people of *tzedeq*, of justice. Perhaps the word could also be translated as 'decency.'"

As she continued, "Fredy Hirsch was a human being, a fallible person, not a saint, but he was a person who was a *tzaddik*. So let's hope that when the last of us who knew him is gone, a new generation will stop here for a moment before this memorial plaque and say: He must have been a good, brave and beautiful person."

Dr. Michal Aharony is a scholar of Holocaust studies and political philosophy. She is the deputy editor of the journal Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust, published by the University of Haifa, and she teaches at Ben-Gurion University (www.michalaharony.net).

GAZA

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we were standing, is student Hasan Farhat. He's 20 and he returned home to Gaza in 2011, after spending six years with his parents in Australia, while his father completed a doctorate in linguistics. Farhat was happy to return. He likes life in Gaza, even under siege, and prefers it to life in Australia.

We speak via Skype. Farhat didn't take part in the demonstration last Friday, although he supports them. He has two younger sisters at home, and they were worried about him and asked him not to go to the demonstration, fearing he'd be hurt.

"I believe that demonstrations are the last nonviolent means. The situation

here is constantly deteriorating, and people know that the violent struggle has no chance. We only want to make our voices heard. We want them to know that there are human beings living here, just like everywhere else, with dreams, just like everywhere else."

Farhat, who is active on the social networks, says 62 percent of the young people and 45 percent of the adults in Gaza are unemployed, and his fellow students are very worried about will happen when they finish their studies and receive their degrees. "As long as we're studying, there's at least somewhere to go," he says. "And so many students are prevented from continuing to study abroad. So many people in the world can enjoy freedom."

Farhat says the idea of a nonviolent march toward the border was thought up as early as 2011 by Ahmed Abu Rteima, a Palestinian journalist and writer, au-

thor of the Arabic-language book "Organized Chaos," and now a spokesperson for the "Great March of Return." At the time people thought the idea was crazy, because they were afraid Israel would fire at the marchers.

"This demonstration doesn't belong to any organization. People here are tired of politics. People in Gaza have nothing more to lose. There are people in Gaza who prefer getting killed quickly at the border to dying slowly in Gaza," he says. "I remember that when I was in Australia we were once asked if we would prefer to die slowly in a cage full of ants or to die quickly in a cage of lions. Almost everyone said in a cage of lions. To die quickly."

On Sunday, he says, there was a wedding near the fence. People sang songs and even danced. "But we, those born in the '90s, we're a lost generation," he says. Still, he's glad he returned to Gaza.

heart, formed scales and calluses to armor and wall off my conscience. Living in Israel has made me into a version of Pharaoh.

It has made me into a person who can find a way to live with a government that relates not only to African asylum seekers but also to millions and millions and millions of Palestinians, as property.

I have become Pharaoh. We all have. We have property that speaks. But which we can silence. We have learned that we can move people at will, jail them without trial, punish them for no reason, wake them, roust them, tear them from their families, deny them the rights we take for granted. Call them a danger. All of them. A danger and a cancer.

Living in Israel has hardened my heart. It has made me into a person who cannot believe that Israel will do the right thing. That Israel will make any effort at all to even begin treat the

true cancer in our body – the occupation.

And yet, this horrible week, tense, brutal, tragic, something struck us with the speed of a miracle.

Israel, we were abruptly told, need not be Pharaoh after all.

The story of the Exodus from Egypt is, of course, preposterous. And yet, despite everything, despite every instinct of judgment, the Jews got up and did the right thing.

The best people I know live here. Despite everything. And they're working for people to treat each other as humans. Despite everything.

Caroline Glick is not going to like this. Because that iron wall that runs and ruins Israel just got a huge chink in it, emitting light.

Someday, maybe for all the wrong reasons, the occupation will end. We will no longer be Pharaoh. And for the first time in anyone's memory, we Jews will finally be free.

PHARAOH

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for exactly the measures he had announced in the afternoon, Netanyahu sent off a pair of weak, disingenuous, flustered and bitter Facebook posts saying he was "suspending implementation for the time being" of the deal he'd already signed.

After the river of blood that was Passover on Friday, one of the country's most moderate and measured of voices shocked Israel by posting that he felt ashamed to be an Israeli.

I don't share Army Radio anchor Kobi Meidan's feeling. But he – and Caroline Glick – made me realize what Passover has meant to me for many years: I'm disgusted with having become Pharaoh.

Living in Israel has hardened my

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