

OBSERVATIONS

The good, the bad and the reason to celebrate



HERE AND THERE
BRENDA KATTEN



FORMER FRENCH defense minister General Pierre Koenig (right) visits chief of staff Yitzhak Rabin in Tel Aviv in 1967. (Moshe Milner/GPO)

Living in south Netanya, where one of its better known streets is named Pierre Koenig, I often wondered who this Pierre Koenig was. All was revealed following a recent visit to the Friends of Zion Museum in Jerusalem. The FOZ describes itself as a platform for fighting the boycott, sanctions and divestment movement against Israel and antisemitism throughout the world. A former chair of its international board was the late Shimon Peres. The tour begins with the former president of Israel paying tribute to the museum's major concept, namely, putting visitors in touch with non-Jewish individuals whose contributions to the Jewish people were outstanding. The majority supported the Zionist dream of a homeland for the Jews.

Here we learned that in 1942, Gen. Koenig, while commanding the First French Brigade in Egypt together with his unit of 3,700 men, fought alongside the British against the Germans and the Italians and held ground against five Axis divisions for 16 days until ordered to evacuate on June 11. After retreating, Koenig watched the unknown Allied survivors stagger into the French command center, dragging their wounded.

Maj. Liebmann, of Tel Aviv, told Koenig that they were Jewish-Palestinian soldiers. Of the 400 men in the battalion, more than 300 had been killed or wounded. The general observed their blue-and-white flag with the Star of David being taken down and questioned why this was happening. Liebmann explained that British regulations did not allow them to fly their flag. Koenig immediately ordered that the flag be placed on his army vehicle right next to the flag of France. He then ordered all of his officers to stand at attention and salute – as well – the future flag of Israel.

In 1944, Koenig was named Gen. Charles de Gaulle's chief delegate to Gen. Dwight Eisenhower's Allied High Command. He was put in charge of the French forces in Britain and the French underground Army of the Interior. At the war's end, he became de Gaulle's viceroy in occupied Germany – a commander-in-chief of French forces in that country.

Following his retirement from the army in 1959, Koenig devoted his energy to French-Israeli understanding, becoming president of the French-Israeli Solidarity Committee and the French-Israeli Friendship Society and speaking out against the French embargo on arms deliveries to Israel.

WHILE THIS state-of-the-art museum puts visitors in contact with non-Jews whose personal contribution gave life in place of death to many Jews, it also highlights Theodor Herzl's vision for a Jewish homeland. Herzl thought that the coming into being of a Jewish state would simultaneously eliminate antisemitism. Watching this presentation I wondered how Herzl would view today's antisemitism.

The Israeli media have been filled with reports of antisemitic acts taking place throughout Europe. In France, the body of an 85-year-old Holocaust survivor was found burned after having been stabbed no fewer than 11 times – a crime reminiscent of one committed against Sarah Halimi, the 66-year-old Jewish teacher and physician who prosecutors say was murdered by her Muslim neighbor in April 2017.

What of the UK Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn's consistent support of those who would destroy Israel and his being the catalyst for the isolation of Labour MPs (both Jews and

non-Jews) who have the courage to confront the antisemitism pervading their party? I must confess my pleasant surprise when, finally, Anglo-Jewry's leadership took to the streets of Westminster bearing placards saying "Enough is enough."

Labour MP for Bristol West, Thangam Debonnaire, walked out of a local party meeting in which a motion criticizing the Westminster demonstration was narrowly defeated, and where a separate motion criticizing Debonnaire's participation was "noted" but not voted on. Endeavoring to speak, but finding herself consistently heckled, she chose to leave.

In an unprecedented backlash, the UK's major newspapers carried editorials and front-page articles condemning Corbyn's lack of response to antisemitism within his party. *The Guardian*, usually anti-Israel, notably joined the barrage of complaints against Corbyn, citing his lack of outright indignation at a mural featuring antisemitic tropes that sparked Anglo-Jewish reaction.

For all Corbyn's attempts to deny the undeniable, in the aftermath of the Westminster Demonstration, his participation in a "Seder" hosted by Jewdas, a Jewish left-wing anti-Jewish-establishment group that describes Israel as a "steaming pile of sewage which needs to be properly disposed of," certainly disposed of his verbal attempt to not appear antisemitic. His excuse for participation was that he went in a personal capacity and not representing the Labour Party.

HERE IN Israel, these past weeks have included ceremonies marking the tragedy of our past and the wonder of the rebirth of the Jewish state. How right it is that we remember the loss of six million brethren barbarically murdered simply because they were Jews. How profound that on the day before Israel's Independence Day we observe Remembrance Day, when we recall the human cost of survival of the one Jewish state, namely, the too-young men and women who gave their lives so that Israel can be. It is heartbreaking to see a father say Kaddish at the graveside of his son at the Mount Herzl National Military Cemetery on Remembrance Day – it is the wrong way round.

This week we marked the 70th anniversary of Israel's rebirth. Could Herzl have imagined the manner in which this tiny state has evolved? A country whose hi-tech industry is on par with America's Silicon Valley; a place where we are ready to help those in need throughout the world, including those who wish to destroy us; a place whose medical personnel continue to treat the victims of the Syrian war who are in desperate need of medical attention.

The United Nations, through its Population Fund, has given its 2018 award to the Save a Child's Heart organization at Holon's Wolfson Medical Center. SACH has saved the lives of more than 4,500 children from Africa, South America, Asia and the Middle East, including the Palestinian Authority. Israeli hospitals continue to treat children from Hamas-led Gaza and the PA's West Bank, often without payment and even during times of war.

We are a happy country, rated 11th in the world. Here, music abounds with the internationally renowned Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Immigrants from the former Soviet Union provide virtually every city with a first-class orchestra.

While Herzl's vision of a Jewish state eliminating antisemitism has not been fulfilled, nevertheless, for Jews worldwide, the words of the American poet Robert Frost ring loud and clear, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

On this 70th birthday, we have every reason to celebrate. *Hag Yom Ha'atzma'ut sameah* – happy Independence Day! ■

The writer is public relations chair of ESRA, which promotes integration into Israeli society.