

# Change is brought about by ordinary people

In a conversation with Lea Piterman Ganor – the founder and director of Mashmout Center – we talked about the pilots of the Israeli Air Force who survived the Holocaust, a father who used to sing in the synagogue in Włodawa as a child, and overturning stereotypes by creating close relationships.

What was the idea behind Mashmout Center in Kiryat Motzkin?

It was my own initiative, which I presented to the mayor of the town a quarter of a century ago. I wanted to create an education center. In Hebrew, the word “mashmout” has its own significance, but it is also an acronym comprised of words meaning heritage, Holocaust, tradition, values, and rebirth of the State of Israel. The center is intended for teachers, students, pupils, soldiers, for the whole community, and its activities are not limited only to educating about what we lost in the Holocaust – the life of Jews in Poland before and after the war, the lives in the Warsaw Ghetto, and other ghettos all around Poland. It also teaches about Jewish heritage, humanism, rebirth of the State of Israel, and our future.

Were the beginnings hard?

At the beginning, the only employee of Mashmout Center was me, working in a tiny room. Over the years, the center grew with the support of Kiryat Motzkin's mayor, Mr. Haim Zuri, Haifa region authorities, and the Ministry of Education. After 25 years, the team consists of ten additional, continuously developing people; we also cooperate with volunteers. Our center is visited by around ten thousand students a year, who come to take part in our seminars and workshops.

You defended a doctoral dissertation on a very interesting topic: “Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and

the Holocaust: IDF Education Corps' approach to the conceptualisation of Holocaust memory among its soldiers (1987 – 2004)". How did you come up with the idea?

Memory about the Holocaust was implemented in the army, which also included Israeli pilots who were children during the Holocaust. They had never told anyone about their past before. In my habilitation – for which I received a scholarship after defending my doctorate – written at Herzl Institute at the University of Haifa, entitled "From Rebirth to the Skies: Memories and Meanings in the Life Stories of Holocaust-Survivor Aircrew Members" – I wrote, for example, that thirty percent of Israeli pilots are Holocaust survivors, which no one knew about. I had the honour to interview 35 pilots, who served in the Israeli Air Force in the 50s and 60s. It was the Holocaust that determined their choice of careers. I started writing my habilitation six years ago – it took me four years to complete. Last year, I published it in Hebrew and in English. I hope that it will also appear in Polish.

What countries do the Holocaust survivor pilots come from?

Some of the pilots were born in Poland, also in Warsaw. The rest came from various European countries. They came to Israel as children, then, joined the Israeli Air Force, and after the end of their army career, they became commercial pilots of the El Al airline. They started talking about their past at the end of the 70s and in the 80s.

How close are your current relations with Poland?

I really care about good relations between Israel and Poland. We developed a special exchange programme for young students, who we call young ambassadors, between Kiryat Motzkin and partner cities in Germany and Poland. In your country, the cities are Radzyń Podlaski and Włodawa – the town where my father was born. As a child, he used to sing in the beautiful Włodawa synagogue. He used to tell me that often even non-Jewish neighbours came to listen to him sing. It is one of the few things that he told me – he didn't talk about his life in Poland before the war, nor after it.

This happened very often – children of Holocaust Survivors often say that their parents didn't

share their memories with them...

The first time I heard about what happened during the war from my father was in 1997. And twenty years ago, I came to Poland with my father and a group of teachers. We also visited Włodawa and admired the beautifully renovated Great Synagogue. There is a nearby church that looks very similar to it. No wonder, however, as both the church and the synagogue were designed by the same architect (Italian Paweł Antoni Fontana – editor's note). This shows how close the relations were in Włodawa between the Catholic, Jewish and Orthodox communities. To commemorate these relations, the town organises a three-day festival (Festival of Three Cultures, visited by around 40 thousand people – editor's note). My father died four years after visiting Włodawa. Since then, I often go to Poland with teachers and each time we visit Włodawa, which became really beautiful over the past two decades. In 2005, at an exhibition organised in Włodawa, I found my grandfather's photograph taken in the synagogue. My family took an active part in the town's life.

Have you been to the festival?

In 2016, on Friday, which is traditionally the first day of the festival dedicated to the tradition of Jewish culture, I was there with Kiryat Motzkin's mayor in a synagogue packed with people who were non-Jews and I had to pinch myself, because I had the impression that my father is there with me, singing as a child... But, actually, it was a Polish woman, not Jewish, singing beautifully in Hebrew and Yiddish, and there were also children singing in Yiddish. It was as if the old cycle of life closed, and a new one opened.

Is there a cultural exchange programme with Włodawa in Mashmout Center?

Each year, young people from Włodawa and Radzyń Podlaski spend a week in Kiryat Motzkin. They take part in workshops, lectures, trips, talk about the past and the future – they meet with survivors, as well as our families. Israeli youth also visits Włodawa and Radzyń Podlaski, gets to know Polish culture. What is interesting is that it's hard to tell your and our youth apart – they look the same. They play the same games, use the same social media. It's beautiful that they are

building personal relations. We organise joint projects with teachers from Radzyń Podlaski and Włodawa – we belong to the same group on WhatsApp!

This wonderful process of getting to know each other will certainly pay off in the future...

I believe that change is always a bottom-up initiative, and it is brought about by ordinary people. Slowly but surely – this is how we build the future. It's a long process. I've been working on it for fifteen years. And now, nothing can destroy the bridges we've built. Young Poles visit us and take part in the workshops, which are aimed at changing their stereotypical way of thinking about Israeli people, about Jews. At the beginning, both them and Israeli youth write down what comprises their way of perceiving the other side. After a week, Poles and Israelis read their notes and see how their feelings changed over a mere few days. The young people keep in touch, also after coming back to their countries. And it all began with meetings with teachers and teaching about Polish and Israeli culture... You cannot think about the future without knowing what happened in the past.

Interview by: Anna Kilian

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