MADAME AMBASSADOR

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH A CANDID ISRAELI DIPLOMAT

TOVA HERZL

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These pages are the product of a career that introduced me to thousands of people from many walks of life, took me to fascinating locations, and brought me face-to-face with endless situations. Those encounters—professional and personal; anticipated or surprising; lasting or transient; gratifying, harsh, exciting, frustrating, and challenging—were pieces in the enthralling mosaic that was my life for twenty-one intense years. All, for better and worse, touched me and enriched me, and so became a part of me, and of this book.

Writing decades after the fact, I turned to human and written sources to trigger memories and check facts. Any remaining mistakes are to be regretted, and are mine.

Prologue

How Is This Book Different from All Other Books?

This book was born of memories triggered by a messy desk.

In February 2004, a few weeks after retiring, I bought the largest photo album I could find. Navy blue with gold trim, it promised a place for five hundred photographs. I would select that number from thousands of pictures that had accumulated during my twenty-one-year career in the Israeli Foreign Service and had been randomly stashed in plastic shopping bags, used envelopes, and boxes that once held shoes. The tidy volume would be a nostalgic record of my life as a diplomat.

I emptied the odd assortment of packages of their contents, picked a picture from the piles scattered on my desk, then another and another, looked at each for a few seconds, and tried to recall where I was, when, why, and with whom.

I was suddenly engulfed by intense spurts of memory, one chasing the next. It was like those descriptions of the last living moment, when an entire life rolls in fast motion before the dying person (but how can anyone know? who reported?). The flashbacks bunched neatly around topics: there were so many receptions; making friends was so hard; what a pleasure to be rid of bodyguards!

I realized that those clusters of recollections mirrored the most common questions people had asked me over the years. What is it like to live with a bodyguard? Can you make real friends? Must you learn a new language every time? Did you choose your posts? What if you don't agree with your government? May you express your thoughts and feelings? Why do you park illegally? What do you actually do all day, other than going to parties? Are they fun?

In that moment, another insight emerged, and it linked my private recollections to those frequently asked questions. Although there are many autobiographies and biographies of diplomats, and countless volumes on international relations, I had never seen a book that answers those questions, that describes the nitty-gritty of diplomatic life.

The moment was brief, an unexpected flash of thought that planted an idea. I should write the book that looks at the reality behind the occupation's severe yet glamorous image. The book would be written from my angle—that of a single, religiously observant Israeli woman who was ambassador to the Baltic countries and to South Africa and served twice in Washington, D.C.—but it would be indicative of the profession's common practice. It would be personal yet general, informative, and entertaining. The written record of my experience would demystify diplomacy.

Within a day or two, I had made a list of topics. Together, they would form a vivid mosaic of diplomatic life and work. It took me two months to write the first draft of about half. The photographs that triggered the words were returned to their familiar old shoeboxes, used envelopes, and plastic shopping bags. The empty pages of the album made way for other pages, filled with fresh memories.

Then Passover approached, with its obsessive spring cleaning. My mother broke her hip. I sold an apartment, bought another, renovated it, had a hysterectomy. I was involved in editing

a memorial book about my niece. There was this delay and that, one excuse and another. I did almost nothing about the book, except daydream.

Six or seven years passed. The idea of writing this book did not go away. I understood that I had to do it. So I sat down, and I did it.

Hindsight gave me perspective to better assess the profession, and myself therein. I learned about writing, and about me. The process was enjoyable. I hope you will enjoy the result.

Chapter 1

My Career

Four Postings, Three Capitals, Two Ambassadorships, and a Little Politics

On the last afternoon of 2003, an airplane left the South African summer. It landed in Israel eight hours later, into a winter night. At midnight, the calendar year would end, heralding a dramatic change in one passenger's status. I would welcome 2004 as a pensioner. Twenty-one years as an Israeli diplomat would come to an end.

That intense chapter of my life began in early 1982, when an advertisement in an Israeli newspaper caught my eye. The government sought candidates for the Israeli diplomatic service. The age limit was thirty-two (I was almost thirty), and a university degree was required, in anything.

This is not as unreasonable as it seemed to me then—the profession proved very broad. Looking back, I believe that my philosophy and literature major brought as much, or as little, as degrees in political science or law, and one of my fellow cadets had studied agriculture. Good English was a prerequisite; other languages were an advantage.

I had applied a few years earlier and had passed the written exams but did not pass the orals. I did not give much thought to the failure, or consider trying again. But the notice appeared as I was realizing that life as a tour guide was not for me. "Good morning, everyone! My name is Tova, and in Hebrew that means 'good'! Our driver today is Na'im, and his name means 'pleasant'! We will have a good and pleasant day! And now, let's go!" I had been doing it for two years. Enough was enough.

Again, I sent an application, and this time I survived the assorted orals, such as group dynamics and a decisive interview with a panel of somber, middle-aged men. One asked me, "When you are posted abroad and the local government will summon you to complain about Israeli policy, what will you do, cry?" Within a few years, at least one woman would sit on every such panel; open male chauvinism would become unacceptable.

The selection process lasted almost a year. In January 1983, fifteen cadets reported for duty in the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem. We were chosen from about four hundred applicants (the number of ambassadors-in-waiting eager to join the profession has since ballooned into thousands). I was nervous at finding myself invited to join this elite group. How soon would they realize that having been rejected before, I am not as smart as I should be, as they must think I am, as undoubtedly they all are? The only woman in our group, the sole religiously observant Jew, I would certainly be noticed. Attention isn't always good. During the early months of insecurity, I made a conscious effort to be as unobtrusive as possible.

The war in Lebanon, which began in June 1982, was the background for our training. Major fighting was over by the time we joined the ministry, but Israeli actions remained an issue at home and abroad. Ariel Sharon was ousted as Defense Minister; there were mass demonstrations. Some of my new colleagues identified with the protests but did not participate and continued to be a public voice for the very acts they abhorred. This was my first exposure to balancing public persona and private person, to walking the line between integrity and hypocrisy.

Our training lasted two years. It began with four months in a classroom. We heard theory

on subjects as varied as international trade, nuclear disarmament, writing a press release, the legal status of Jerusalem, how to set a dining table, and how to use each utensil. We then had rounds of practical work in ministry departments, lasting about four months each. The rotation was designed to give us a taste of the situations we would face and of the tools that exist to handle them.

I circulated between Information, World Jewry, United Nations, and North America, with a few weeks to help Press (when they were understaffed in the face of unanticipated pressure) and suffered a bout of hepatitis in the middle. I wrote papers for Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's trip to Canada, watched as international Jewish organizations exerted pressure on Israel to speed the immigration of Ethiopian Jewry, and read communications with our offices in New York about the UN General Assembly and its numerous debates and resolutions on Israel.

During those rounds, and throughout my career, I met some wonderful people. I also understood that not all of my senior colleagues (everyone was more senior than me then) were the shining stars I had assumed. Some started in administrative positions and wended their way into diplomatic work. That is fine, if it is based on merit. Others began as cadets but did not grow. In the Israeli civil service, once a worker receives tenure, that's it. She may not get plum jobs or will experience fewer promotions, but she cannot be ejected. The Israeli Foreign Ministry has nothing like the American "up or out," where those who are not promoted within a set period must leave. For us, job security and mediocrity may march hand in hand, from one diplomatic post to another, until retirement.

I knew that I would be good enough.

In late 1984, we neared the end of our training. Two or three of my intake had decided to leave. Where the office would send the rest of us was cause for speculation and concern. Cadets do not apply for posts; they are placed as needed. Most often, such fresh flesh is sent to posts defined as "hardship," reflecting any combination of harsh living conditions, a hostile environment, and high crime. Often small missions, they are staffed only by an ambassador and a deputy, the junior who does everything that the boss does not, including administration.

Which Asian, African, or Latin American post would start my career? Would it be hard, or very hard? Far, or very far? Given the difficulties of working in such a small unit, who would be my boss? Nice, or not so nice?

Was I in for a surprise!

Before moving to its prize-winning building in 2002, next to the Bank of Israel and across the road from the Supreme Court, the Foreign Ministry was housed in a group of small structures near the entrance to Jerusalem. The earliest had been British military barracks; more like them were added later. It was not elegant, but it encouraged informal exchanges. Workers met randomly along the paths, stopped to chat between the lawns and flower beds.

Seeing me one November morning, the head of the Ministry's workers' union grinned and asked me, "Are you happy?" I was impressed that he recognized me among hundreds of employees and was surprised that he should inquire about my mood. It transpired that, although no one had thought to notify me, the appointments committee—he was a member—had met the day before and decided to send me to Washington.

Washington? A cadet?? Me???

My selection was designed to solve a personnel problem in the embassy. Two diplomats from Israel worked in the Congressional Department. Although one was more senior, there was no official hierarchy between them. If one is defined as the boss, no Washingtonian of

consequence will interact with the deputy. Also, as people and issues in Congress are interconnected, there is no obvious line of division between the two diplomats. One congressional committee sets policy on something; another allocates money. Legislators belong to a few committees. Any possible demarcation, such as Republicans and Democrats, House and Senate, or internal and external issues, will encounter similar difficulties. The vagueness is a prescription for rivalry.

The junior congressional liaison officer at the time was near the Senior in age and rank. They vied openly for access and information. Competition has advantages; theirs was considered disruptive. Both were scheduled to return to Israel in 1985—the Senior near the beginning of the year and the Junior a few months later. The Israeli Foreign Ministry was determined to prevent a recurrence of their problematic relations. It decided to upgrade the Senior of the two diplomats who dealt with Congress and downgrade the Junior. Being fluent in English, among the oldest cadets in my class, and with more work and life experience than most, I was selected.

I landed in Washington on Sunday, September 1, 1985. Monday was Labor Day; the embassy was closed. In the afternoon, the new Senior fetched me from the motel that was my temporary home and drove me to his house in the suburbs. Over tea, he told me what I could do and to whom I could talk.

That would be everything and everyone—except the staff of the leadership of both houses of Congress, of the committees that affected Israel most, and certain people in the pro-Israel community. At the time, I did not understand that his formula to avoid a repetition of the previous personnel situation would leave me doing little of any importance or interest to anyone in Israel.

On Tuesday I entered the embassy building, so familiar from television, and met the diplomat whom I would replace. He had been in Washington five years and had developed a deep understanding of the inner workings of Congress. He understood the balance of power between assorted players in political Washington, and he knew how best to operate among them. During each meeting in our fortnight overlap, he effortlessly provided appropriate briefings. To the head of the Africa subcommittee he expounded on that continent's interactions with the Middle East. If the issue was economic, he had all the figures at his fingertips. When human rights or sanctions were discussed, the legalities flowed off his tongue.

With each meeting, I felt increasingly inadequate. What will they think of me? How will I fill his huge shoes? Just as well—as I began to see—that my senior colleague had effectively barred me from doing anything meaningful. I may have seemed confident, but it took a year of bluffing for me to understand that my predecessor is who he is and I am me. I must do the best I can, not try to imitate. I found my way, my niche. We never discussed it, but Senior can't have been happy as I crossed some of the lines he had drawn for me. His feelings probably mirrored mine upon realizing what those lines meant.

Looking back, I know that I was not ready for the external and internal maneuvering that that post demanded, that I lacked the necessary personal and professional sophistication. The saying about being thrown into the deep end of the pool, to swim or to sink, applied to me then. I swam, but just barely.

Three months after arriving in Washington, I flew to Boston to spend Thanksgiving weekend with the family of Israel's Consul General. At four on Sunday morning, his wife woke me. My sister was on the phone from Jerusalem to say that my father had suddenly become

seriously ill. The doctor advised summoning the family. I took the first available flight to Israel, with few clothes and no passport—I discovered that it can be done in an emergency. Against medical odds, he survived, but he deteriorated steadily.

I did not want to live so far away, and I left Washington after an unusually short three-year term. My father was often in the hospital after I returned, sometimes for months at a stretch, and then he died. It was good that I had returned.

Five years in Jerusalem were professionally unusual. Most of the Ministry's work is specialized. Someone deals with a geographical region; another handles an aspect of cultural cooperation, say, film. I spent most of that time on The Big Picture, observing the making of policy and decisions.

After three months in the North America division, I moved to the Bureau of Foreign Minister Moshe Arens, a rare politician who is as impressive at close quarters as from a distance. As assistant to his policy adviser, I spent long hours in the office, mostly taking notes at meetings and sorting endless papers.

A taxi driver who took me home at eleven a few consecutive nights asked, "Do you always work this shift?" Yes, and it began at 8 a.m., including on Fridays—the government had not yet shortened its workweek from six days to five. I paid bills when threatened that services would be cut, hardly met friends, never saw a film. But as was to emerge a decade later, I impressed then Deputy Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

After eighteen months of hard labor, I spent a year at the National Defense College. It is run by the Israeli army, in conjunction with Haifa University. Two-thirds of the students are officers, most of them colonels. Others are civilians from government agencies, including two or three diplomats. Many countries run similar programs, designed to enrich mid-level players who are preparing for the top.

From that year, I took a master's degree. I also came to the realization that some military people, at least in Israel, see national and international developments as ordered and inevitable. The prime minister instructs the minister of defense, who tells the chief of staff, all the unquestioning way down to the simple soldier. Stints in Washington and in the Foreign Minister's office had deepened my understanding that what happens inside countries and between them is neither vertical nor horizontal but squiggly, a disorderly outcome of the play of power and personalities and interests at a particular time. Given the army's prominence in Israel and the role many of its retirees go on to play as civilians, that narrow view is disturbing.

I graduated and returned to the ministry. After a few months in the Department of Arms Control, I was loaned to the Office of the President, Chaim Herzog, as press secretary. His director general was a micromanager, including of all contacts with journalists. For a year and a half, my skills and my time were underused. Still, I again had a bird's-eye view of Israel's foreign relations, this time with a focus on formal aspects, such as presentation of credentials and state visits. From Aura, the President's perfect hostess of a wife, I learned about setting tables, seating guests, and arranging flowers, vital to my career in the making.

Herzog's term ended in May 1993. After five years at home, it was time to go abroad again. But where? I didn't want a boss; I wanted a challenge.

A changing world was in my favor. Africa, alienated since most of its countries severed relations with Israel following the Yom Kippur War in 1973, started opening up to us. The Iron Curtain came down, revealing formerly communist capitals eager for contact. The Soviet Union, hostile to Israel, had split into fifteen friendly states. The Ministry was short of personnel for its

new missions. At a loss, it sought Russian speakers outside. I had been in the Ministry only a decade and spoke no regional language. But I was forty years old and felt that my experience was good enough to run a small mission. I spotted an opportunity and applied.

Ignorant about the region, I could have put down anything. Something—perhaps it sounded more familiar—made me ask for Riga, which proved to be the most comfortable of the post-Soviet capitals. The Ministry's appointments committee, headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin (then secretly negotiating the Oslo Accords with the Palestine Liberation Organization), entrusted me with the position.

During three years from 1993, I was Israel's first ambassador to the three Baltic republics (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia), learning of their complicated interactions with their neighbors and their past and their minorities, especially as these related to Jews. The office wished me to stay longer. Living alone, inhibited by language—it was time to go home.

I returned, and I ran the ministry division responsible for Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the Baltic countries. I knew a lot about the Baltics but little of the others. My situation was not unique. Some foreign services designate one or two specializations to every member of their professional staff, say, Latin America and International Organizations. The diplomat's career at headquarters and abroad concentrates on them. Israel has no such practice. Many appointments are circumstantial (my friend, and predecessor in that office, died shortly before I returned), with common sense as the main tool to make it work.

Two years in that job ended unpleasantly when a colleague and I became pawns in a power struggle. Netanyahu, Deputy Foreign Minister when I was on the Foreign Minister's staff, had risen to Prime Minister. Foreign Minister David Levy resigned, the second time he did so. Netanyahu took over his portfolio. He instructed the Foreign Ministry about whom he wanted for which position in Washington. His list included me as senior congressional liaison.

Someone had already been appointed. Although Israel's foreign ministers often determine appointments in Washington, overturning an earlier decision is unusual. The leaders of my ministry did not refuse to follow his unusual instructions. Instead, they asked me if I wanted to be consul general in Sydney. It was a slight job, but a little relaxation never hurt. Without stopping to ask why this offer when a dozen candidates had applied in time, I agreed. Within days, I discovered that appointing me to Sydney was a ploy to circumvent the prime minister's instructions. I could prove it all in court, but this public airing is much more satisfying!

It was awful. For months, the office assured a furious Netanyahu that his orders were being followed. The other woman was told not to worry, and I was told to prepare, but discreetly (no one explained how). The issue was reported in the Israeli press. I avoided the ministry cafeteria and tried to tell the truth to anyone who would listen. The gossips refused to consider why I agreed to Sydney while scheming with the prime minister for Washington, or why I did not apply for that position outright.

Finally, the original appointee realized that she would not be allowed to go, and she withdrew. Having agreed to go abroad that year, I could not refuse another, more important, posting.

That is how I found myself back in Washington in 1998, a decade after leaving. I was more senior that second time, but many issues and players in Congress had remained the same. Slipping into the old-new position was easy. That comfort was weighed down by the knowledge—mine and others'—of how I got there. Too often, I felt the need to explain. Years later, people still comment on my alleged closeness to Netanyahu. Since retiring, it no longer arouses in me

that apologetic discomfort.

Two years into my second posting in Washington, David Levy, third time Foreign Minister, resigned once again. Some dozen diplomatic positions in Israel go to nonprofessionals, selected personally by ministers. Levy's political appointments were asked to follow him out. Among them was the ambassador to South Africa.

I could not resist the chance to return to the country where, as the child of Hebrew teachers, I had spent much of my youth. As with my first ambassadorial posting (and unlike my stints in Washington that were part of a larger agenda), the choice was mine.

I arrived in Pretoria in early 2001 and was again responsible for other countries. The three Baltic states were comparable in size and in importance to Israel. In Riga, I had tried to do everything, from Independence Day receptions to exhibitions, in triplicate. South Africa cannot be compared to the others: first Lesotho and Swaziland, to which were later added Namibia and Zimbabwe (and Botswana, but too late to complete my accreditation process). South Africa, with the continent's biggest economy, international political clout, and a large Jewish community, demanded almost all of my time and effort. The other countries were all but neglected.

The hostility I encountered in South Africa was unrelenting. I faced difficult personnel issues inside the Embassy. In 2002, my oldest niece was killed by a suicide bomber in Jerusalem. I was a wreck, as close as possible to a nervous breakdown without actually having one.

During my third year there, the Israeli government announced one of its periodic early retirement plans, with financial inducements to make it worthwhile. The minimum age was fifty, with twenty years of employment. I was fifty-one and had worked for twenty-one years. I hardly hesitated. True, I gave up the chance to join the ministry's management or to head a major embassy. But I was also saved a battle for a place at the top, which becomes fiercer as the space narrows.

On Wednesday, December 31, 2003, when I flew from Johannesburg to Ben Gurion International Airport, I was unsure if I could be inactive and if it would be enjoyable. The answer to both is yes, despite sometimes longing to use those skills that served me so well and so intensely when I worked.

There are many secrets to a good diplomatic career. Some will be shown in this book. For me, one is sufficient to make for a good retirement—to love oneself more than one loves the job.

Chapter 2
Preparations
A Tale of Two Refrigerators

An Israeli diplomat posted to the embassy in Pretoria made good use of the container that the Israeli government provided for her move. In addition to pillows and beds, toys and pots, she and her husband packed a very large metallic fridge.

When the ideal home did not materialize (it should appeal to the family's taste, must be within the budget dictated by Jerusalem, and meet security needs), they agreed to a small compromise. In their state-of-the-art kitchen, with all manner of revolving drawers and clever shelves, the niche for the refrigerator was of standard size. Throughout the family's years in South Africa, it seemed that a small, shiny spaceship had landed on the dark, parquet floor of their elegant, wood-paneled living room.

By coincidence, at about that time, I was deprived of a refrigerator. Before leaving for my second posting in Washington, I sought tenants for my furnished apartment in Jerusalem. A suitable candidate already had a fridge. I did not inquire why someone whose other belongings could fit into a small car owned just one large item, but I signed a contract and gave my refrigerator to a relative.

When that tenant left, my apartment in Jerusalem again became available for rent. It had beds and sofas, tables and chairs, a stove, and a television set. But no fridge. The new renter, whom my mother found in my absence, either owned one and no other furniture, or liked the apartment enough to buy one, only to move with it to another location when I returned. That furnished apartment's new owners would then have had to make room for the tenant's refrigerator by removing their own, thus perpetuating a cycle of fridgeless furnished rental flats in Jerusalem.

Renting out a home and packing are just two practical projects before going abroad. Add canceling subscriptions, buying local souvenirs to take to the foreign country, signing powers of attorney, and emotional aspects, such as worrying about the unknown and partings. Over all those towers the professional readiness. Hear my confession: I prepared properly only for my last post, as Ambassador to South Africa.

In August 2000, when I was appointed to Pretoria, I was working in the Israeli Embassy in Washington. Until leaving in November, I had one foot in North America and the other in South Africa. My split attention was not unique. Many people go abroad each year, return home, or move between postings abroad. For months, a large part of the diplomatic service is on the move.

Still following American legislation and the upcoming elections, I began to prepare. I read South African newspapers online (an improvement over the former practice of asking someone to do a favor and send old ones) and had lunch with the South African Ambassador, who recommended books to read. Another lunch was eaten with a *Washington Post* correspondent who had worked in South Africa. I met officials in the State Department and in the White House, including those who had sped the newly multiracial South Africa along the path to nuclear disarmament (a field in which, according to some sources but denied by those I trust—mine—Israel had cooperated with South Africa). I saw staff of relevant congressional offices and

attended hearings on Africa in congressional committees.

Back in Jerusalem, I read Foreign Ministry files on South Africa, concentrating on political issues and skimming administration: personnel and property and money. I tried to see everyone mentioned in any document, and they recommended others: My notebook records seventy meetings. These included officials in my ministry and in other agencies, such as trade and defense, the diamond exchange, the coal board, banks, expatriates, journalists, politicians, academics, the South African Ambassador in Israel, and my predecessors in the post. I rented videos made in or about South Africa and continued to read, especially fiction—to me, a well-written story is more telling than almost anything else.

The busy interlude in Israel lasted seven weeks, but this was unknowable at the outset. The outgoing Israeli Ambassador to South Africa was a political appointee. He wanted to extend his stay there, claiming that ministry rules permit him to stay in the official residence for the duration of any remaining vacation days.

Years earlier, the same minister—they come and go and come—had made him consul general in Los Angeles. I heard that he had stayed on.

Forewarned, I stood firm against "The relations are so bad! There is so much repair work for you to do! Will you be petty and let his vacation get in the way?" Yes, I will. He was pressured to return on the first flight of 2001. I was on the next flight out, as well prepared as one can be.

This is what I did before my first posting in 1985: close to nothing.

Eight months passed between my appointment to Washington and my departure. To receive the airline ticket that would fly me to my job, I had to produce a long list of signatures, showing that I did not owe books to the ministry library, had had a security briefing, and so on.

Among the required stamps was one from the North America department, where I was working at the time. No one there asked me about my preparations; no one made suggestions. From my daily dealings, American issues were somewhat familiar to me. But that is not the same as understanding the workings of Washington—what I would be expected to do or how to start once I got there.

Left to my own devices, I collected booklets on history and such from the American Cultural Center in Jerusalem and met local representatives of American Jewish organizations, but I did not know what to ask in order to benefit from their knowledge. Fortunately, my predecessor in Washington prepared a fine document about current issues on the agenda and the personalities who mattered. I would have been lost without it.

Upon my return to Washington in 1998, I knew what preparing for a new job entails, and also what Washington and Congress were about. But the drawn-out unpleasantness around my appointment, described in the previous chapter, limited my ability to prepare thoroughly.

I was appointed as Ambassador in Riga in April 1993 and was to leave in the summer. Readying well was impossible. Relations were new, there was little substance, and written information was scant.

I learned on the job and wanted my successor to benefit from my experience. In addition to comprehensive papers about our relations with Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, which I also sent to Israel, I prepared two documents that would primarily serve him. One was pages and pages of practical information: how much to tip the elevator operator for Christmas, which hall is good for receptions (not the one I used in Estonia for Israel's Independence Day; I discovered a better one shortly before leaving), contact details of an efficient waitress for dinners hosted

at home (she is expensive, but worth it).

No less important was a catalog of hundreds of contacts. After each name and title came a series of symbols: $ meant that I had invested time and effort in the person, * indicated my sense that the contact had the potential to become a local star, + meant a friend, and so on. This was followed by several sentences on each individual, including cross-references between people.

One day, he called me from Riga to ask if I perhaps remembered something. Later, he wondered if I recalled something else. Then he wanted information about another matter. I squirmed to recall hours spent on those meticulous documents, bit my tongue, and answered.

En route to Tallinn to present credentials, he phoned to ask if I happened to remember if the President of Estonia had visited Israel. I did not answer (twice—on a state visit and for Prime Minister Rabin's funeral) and instead asked, "Have you read the files that I left for you?" He did not call with such questions again.

In writing that, I transgressed a wise rule: better not talk about predecessors and successors. If I was less effective or impressive than the person before me, maybe no one would tell me, and how many of us are insightful enough about ourselves? If I was better, it would be clear soon enough. When favorably compared, it is best to smile and say, "Well, I am me and she is she; each person brings something else to the job."

Such politeness was difficult regarding the former ambassador whose Pretoria vacation I ruined by insisting that he evacuate the official residence before I flew to South Africa. The first time someone said, about ten minutes into an introductory meeting, that I was a major improvement, it sounded like bad manners. The second time, it seemed to be a coincidence. However, this sentiment was voiced by journalists, parliamentarians, business people—anyone and everyone—well into my first year there. Hearing it was not flattering. It was embarrassing and awkward.

My writing when I left South Africa was comparable to The Riga Project. Then also retiring, I decided to expand beyond my time there and look back at twenty-one years in the Foreign Ministry. I wrote papers summarizing my ideas on a dozen topics, from Israel's interaction with the United Nations, via Jewish communities, to choosing personnel. My booklet included suggestions and addressed mistakes, the system's and mine. I wrote and proofread, changed and corrected.

Most of my swan song's recipients told me that they put my musings aside, to be read at leisure. I can guess that in most cases, these carefully considered papers collected real or virtual dust, until they were shredded or deleted. Their fate raises questions about systematic access to transient memory and about efficient ways to use, not lose, accumulated experience and institutional knowledge. Just saying.

Leaving involves more than writing. Informal farewells are hosted by friends, colleagues, and local organizations. International protocol dictates some of what happens when an ambassador leaves (more in the chapter on credentials), and there are local practices. In the Baltics, they included a meeting with each of the three presidents. Two decorated me with a big ribbon, to be worn on formal occasions. It came with a lapel pin for daily business wear.

Not all ambassadors who left Latvia received the Order of the Three Stars. In Lithuania, all resident ambassadors were decorated, and I was the first nonresident ambassador to become a member of the Order of Gediminas. It is flattering to think that these honors recognized my skills and my work, but it is more likely that Holocaust history in both countries contributed to

such recognition of Israel's first ambassador.

The farewell parties I hosted in Riga and in Pretoria were especially meaningful for me. In Riga, I rented an art gallery. My attempts at art were hung on the walls, and ego-boosting posters around town advertised a three-day exhibition. In Pretoria, after years of using an unsuitable, overpriced rental, the big good-bye was held on the grounds of a newly inaugurated office building. Other than signing my little-read final report, I did not work there. But I fought long and hard to turn the idea of a proper chancery into a reality and consider it a tangible memorial to my efforts.

The personal aspects of ending a posting are like running a film backward. Opened a bank account? Close it. Bought a car? Sell it. Unpacked a container? Pack one, including locally purchased goods that seem worthwhile, say, if they are cheaper than at home.

After assorted good-byes, the departing diplomat travels to the airport, accompanied by friends, maybe local officials or embassy staff. Pockets are emptied of the last bits of change. The door closes, the plane takes off. Three or four years ago, maybe five or six, a flight brought me into the unknown. A long effort was required to feel comfortable. Now, another zigzag, I uproot myself from the recently familiar and return home.

Until my container arrives from abroad, I make do with a suitcase or two of clothes, borrowed blankets, and paper plates. When the shipment finally arrives, clears customs, and I unpack, I discover that there is a limit to how many (so pretty!) sheets anyone can use, or toothpaste (on sale!) for sensitive gums. There is no need for that extra dinner set (a real bargain!), or the huge new radio-tape (what was I was thinking when I bought it?).

But I really do need that new fridge.

Chapter 3
Language
Of Frogs, Peace, and Sandwiches

In a step toward normalization of relations, a Hungarian delegation came to Israel in the early 1980s. It was the first such visit since that country severed its diplomatic relations with Israel in 1967 following the Six-Day War. As a cadet in the Foreign Ministry who listed Hungarian among my spoken languages, I was asked to escort the delegation.

Like many Israelis, I am the child of immigrants. Although they learned Hebrew fast, speaking to each other and to their firstborn—me—in Hungarian, the language of their country of birth, was natural. Hungarian was my first language. Hebrew followed only when I began to play with children.

I barely read and write Hungarian, but I am fluent in a homey sort of way. I know enough to answer relatives that yes, it is delicious, and no, thank you, I won't have any more, but please, you must tell me exactly how you made it. Terms such as gross national product and nuclear proliferation were not part of my childhood vocabulary. Still, on hearing them in Hungarian, I can often isolate the components, put them back together, and understand. Overall, I manage. Until the group's drive back to the airport, I assumed that I was up to the task.

Making a film for Hungarian television was the official reason for the visit, but the group's composition indicated a broader agenda. Professor Rabbi Sandor Scheiber was the most prominent of the visitors. For thirty-five years, until his death in 1985, he headed the Rabbinical Academy in Budapest, the only such institution in the Eastern bloc, which also served other countries under Moscow's umbrella. In his wisdom, he bridged the gap between atheistic totalitarianism and religion, and he crafted a unique place for himself and for Judaism in the eyes of his government, the general public, and Hungarian Jewry.

It is possible that the Hungarian government was involved in planning every detail of the visit, yet there was an ongoing pretense that the visit was entirely unofficial. Initially, the guests were markedly nervous to find themselves shepherded by an official, albeit a very junior one. They were more relaxed after a week in Israel.

In the van shortly before saying good-bye, one of them whispered to me (was it out of politeness, or to avoid the ears of whoever among them reported to their secret services?) that it was an understandable mistake, my Hungarian and I were wonderful, no criticism was intended, certainly no offense. But I should know that *béka* is frog and *béke* is peace. For days, as I spoke of Israel's frog treaty with Egypt and expressed hope for frog with more neighboring states, there was no reaction whatsoever from any of the timid visitors.

Escorting that pioneering delegation was my only official professional use of Hungarian. But the tongue was to prove otherwise useful. Diplomats posted abroad prudently assume that official eavesdroppers from their host countries listen to their phone calls. When my interlocutor in the ministry in Jerusalem was also from a Hungarian-speaking family, as was an important contact when I was ambassador to South Africa, we mixed Hebrew and Hungarian. Unless one uninvited local listener understood both languages, two translators had to disentangle the tongues, each interpret different bits, and then someone had to combine them

into a comprehensible whole.

I have vivid memories of another Magyar episode. A few months after I arrived in Latvia, the Israeli Foreign Ministry invited its ambassadors in the former Soviet bloc to a meeting in Budapest. It gave me a short respite from the helplessness of working in Riga, where I needed translation for almost everything and where either cook or cleaner had to know enough English to communicate with me, or my official home could not function. Years later, I still remember my relief as the doors of the plane that brought me to Hungary opened onto a familiar language. For a few days, it was empowering to use words rather than rely on mime, go anywhere alone, do anything without help. I felt like a full person.

Educated alternately in Israel and in South Africa, I am equally comfortable in Hebrew and English. South Africa, my last post, has eleven official languages, but English is dominant, and I worked twice in America. Language was an issue for me only as ambassador to the three Baltic countries.

There were four months between my appointment to Riga in April 1993 and setting out in August. Latvia, freshly independent after decades of Soviet rule, was making deliberate efforts to strengthen the standing of Latvian while weakening the prominence of Russian. The same applied in the neighboring countries, where I was nonresident ambassador. Estonians to the north were entrenching Estonian. In Lithuania to the south, Lithuanian was elevated. Everyone in all three states knew Russian, an omnipresent relic of the former regime.

Learning local languages signals goodwill. Learning three was impossible. Should I attempt Russian after all, and ease my daily life? Many Jews, an important constituency for Israeli diplomats, had moved from Russia and Ukraine to those three countries during Soviet times. Russian was the main language spoken by them and their descendants. Moreover, it is spoken by hundreds of thousands of immigrants in Israel, and knowing it may prove useful to me later. But four months would not be enough to attain proficiency in Russian, and I would need translators for work. There was much for me to consider.

I chose political correctness. As ambassador, my main target groups were the new elites of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. They believed that Russian and its speakers had been forced upon them in order to destroy their cultural heritage and eliminate their national identity. Had I spoken Russian before, from home or from earlier study, using it would be fine. However, taking classes that would merely enable me to make broken small talk in the resented language would be offensive. Soon after I arrived, my decision was validated. The three Baltic presidents met. Only one, the Estonian, knew English, yet they chose to speak it via translators.

This is why one of my earliest acts as ambassador was to change the Russian greeting that answered those who phoned the Israeli embassy in Riga. It became “Embassy of Israel, shalom.” Visa applications were at first available only in Russian. That also changed. When the question of language came up, I explained my decision to avoid Russian and waited for the inevitable acknowledgment of my political astuteness.

That self-righteousness did not last long. About a year into my stay, a friendly Latvian official suggested, “Everyone speaks Russian. It will help you so much; why don’t you learn a little?” He was as patriotic and proud of his tongue as anyone, but attitudes had changed. As Latvia became more confident of its countryhood, so neighboring Russia and its language seemed less threatening. I took his advice, and about fifty lessons. Most of the Russian that I managed to learn faded after leaving. But still I try, and succeed just a little, to understand that melodious Slavic language as it is often spoken around me in Israel by immigrants from what

was the Soviet Union.

To connect a little with my surroundings, I learned a smattering of Latvian. Some, including me, feel that uttering a few mispronounced words in a language of which they are otherwise ignorant is condescending. Others appreciate the effort, as did my Latvian interlocutors. What remains is *Es esmu Izraēlas vēstniece*—I am Israel's ambassador.

This explains my admiration—no, let me be honest, my envy—for the American ambassador. Local television showed Larry Napper speaking to the press in fluent Latvian immediately after presenting credentials. His government appoints people early and prepares them thoroughly, including teaching them any and every language.

Is it worth the effort? An American friend who represented the International Monetary Fund in Riga used to quip that having reached fifty, she would never again attempt to learn a language spoken by fewer than ten million people. About a fifth of that number speaks Latvian. Not everyone has a good ear for languages, and learning one well enough to use professionally becomes harder with every passing year.

When I remember that Hebrew is spoken by fewer than her cutoff, I tell myself that it is the tongue in which the creation of the world is reported in the Bible. Surely that puts Hebrew in a class of its own? As undoubtedly everyone feels about his or her own language. . . .

To my surprise, I made good use of my limited Yiddish, the German- (and Hebrew-) based erstwhile vernacular of European Jewry. Yiddish and its speakers were decimated by the Holocaust, by the rise of Hebrew in Israel, and by emigration to America and elsewhere. A few pockets of Yiddish speakers remain, especially among ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel and the United States.

Of Yiddish it is said that it is not spoken, it speaks itself—*Yiddish redtmen nisht, Yiddish redtsech*. I would not dare open my mouth in any other language of which I spoke so little, and so badly. In Yiddish, which I heard my parents speak to friends decades earlier, I ignored mistakes and improvised. It led me; I followed.

To the head of the Lithuanian Jewish community, I spoke Yiddish when we had no translator. Despite the paucity of my language, especially compared to the wealth of his, we managed to discuss serious topics such as Nazi war criminals, confiscated Jewish property, and the politics of his country. From an embassy driver who grew up speaking it, I learned previously unfamiliar words such as wheels, flag, and government.

When I visited Lithuania and Estonia, if the people I met did not speak English, they provided translation. In Latvia, I was expected to bring the extra mouth and ears; one or two of the Latvian women who worked in the embassy translated well enough. I had almost reached the office of Riga's Lutheran Bishop before realizing that I was alone, a linguistic cripple. It was too late to drive back to the embassy and bring an intermediary. Admitting my negligence would seem disrespectful to my host. I took a deep breath and spent an hour distorting my limited Yiddish into what I thought might pass for German, saying *Jude* rather than *Yid* (Jew), *habe* instead of *hob* (have). Did he recognize my ignorance? Think me a speaker of a little-known dialect? Perhaps worry that his German was not up to my ambassadorial standards?

All the episodes above address language as a technical tool for conversation. But it is more than that. It is an interpreter and multiplier of knowledge and is required in order to listen, to capture an idea here, a snippet of gossip there, to understand subtexts.

During three years in Riga, I could never be sure that translators conveyed the spirit of my words or that they understood my interlocutors' subtleties. I constantly wondered if their

presence affected discussions and often worried about how much or how little I knew about what was really happening around me. Without direct access to my surroundings, could I judge what was important? Assess consequences for the relationship between countries? Attribute appropriate relevance to a particular development, or suitably evaluate a statement?

Probably, but it was inconvenient. The Baltic News Service, in English, was delivered daily. Its reports were minimal, often one paragraph on each story. There were one or two slim weekly magazines. Someone from the embassy skimmed local newspapers and summarized them for me. Given how small our staff, following local radio and television was impossible. Coverage of the press in the other two countries was not adequately resolved during my tenure.

Relying on limited secondhand news was frustrating. I never knew if and what I was missing while operating in what may or may not have been a vacuum. Not being sure how much passed me by—half, quarter, none—was for me a major source of discomfort and insecurity.

However, of nine embassies that Israel opened in the newly independent countries of the former Soviet Union, only in one, Riga, the ambassador spoke no Russian. At the same time, Riga was the only Israeli Embassy headed by a professional diplomat. Forgive my immodesty: I believe that a comparison of how we functioned at that time will show that, although it obviously helps, as an asset language does not outweigh professional experience and other skills.

This would be incomplete without mentioning what may not seem like a separate tongue. Words of professional lingo sound familiar, yet translation may nevertheless be needed.

I picked up a sandwich that was left from an earlier breakfast meeting in the office of a Jewish organization in Washington. Someone saw me and quipped, “I didn’t know they changed PL four eighty!” *PL* is short for public law; *480* is the law’s number. The subject is direct American food aid; the law is part of America’s foreign assistance program. Israel’s assistance comes in other forms, such as money and weapons. A strong foundation of prior knowledge was required to understand his comment about an Israeli who ate a deserted American bagel.

At social encounters when I lived in Washington, say during a Sabbath meal, I pitied the random doctor sitting among workers in the town’s local trade, politics. Discussing current issues, we used terminology as elaborate and mysterious as any language: hearing, markup, nonbinding resolution (not to be confused with concurrent resolution or with continuing resolution). Abbreviations, too: GAO, UNDP, FMS, IAEA, DEA, MNNA, NPT, and dozens more, all used like real words.

Places are a challenge. The capital of Lithuania is Vilnius. In Hebrew and in Yiddish it is Vilna. That is as easy as recognizing that Kaunas is Kovna. But who can guess without knowing that the Lithuanian town Klaipeda is known to Jews by its German name, Memel? Litta is the Hebrew and Yiddish name for Lithuania. In Yiddish and in German, Latvian is Lettish. Wait; then isn’t Lettish the language of Litta, making Lithuania- Latvia? South Africa is changing place names to reflect its new politics and to honor its new heroes. Mercifully for this tired mind, during my time there most of the original names were still in use.

Bullshit is slang in one place, rude in another, acceptable in a third. In Hebrew I am a *Yehudia*; in English, I am Jewish, a Jewess. The Russian equivalent, *Zhid*, is derogatory; *Yevrei* is the respectful term. Translated from Russian into English, the designation is “Hebrew.” Does that make me a Hebress? Certain people in the United States are African Americans. By that

logic, in Africa they would be African Africans, or Africans. Instead, in South Africa they are blacks, which is inexcusable in America.

My repeated use of Balts, or Baltics, to describe three northern countries where I was ambassador, is problematic. Having yearned and struggled to regain their independence, they want to be seen individually. I considered their national aspirations when I chose not to learn Russian, yet for my convenience, I did not hesitate to lump them together, and I continue to do so.

Language has many levels. Balancing precision, tone, and content is a challenge. It is easy to err in communication and remarkable that much of the time people manage to express themselves as intended, and so avoid unnecessary misunderstandings, and maintain *béke.* Or is it *béka*?

Chapter 4
Terms of Employment
Ah, All That Luxury!

I swim in the indoor pool at the Jerusalem YMCA, a block from my apartment. When no one else is in the water, I sometimes tell the lifeguard that "this is just like at home." We both smile at this: in Israel, private pools signify wealth, I am obviously not wealthy, and he feels that he must humor a paying customer who thinks that her repetitive jokes are amusing. Only, it's true. Before retiring and joining that gym, a private pool was at my disposal in Pretoria.

Oh, the enviable luxurious life of diplomats, right? Fabulous mansions in exclusive neighborhoods, obedient staff to fulfill every whim, fancy cars with elegant drivers waiting to take them to fascinating encounters with glamorous celebrities, and fantastic salaries to top it all.

Well, not exactly, and let me first address the pool. They are common in middle-class homes in South Africa. Simply because they are uncommon in Israel, embassy staff should not be reviled for enjoying them. By that logic, as most Israelis live in apartments, maybe diplomats must also live like that abroad? Even in Pretoria, where suitable apartment buildings are all but nonexistent? Don't want our envoys becoming too used to gardens, do we? But yes, the material life of diplomats, especially in senior positions, would require deep pockets to maintain privately. It takes time and patience to get there.

On the first Sunday of September 1985, I was welcomed to Washington by the hottest and dampest air I had ever breathed. Of the little I knew of the city, this was certain: the family-oriented suburbs, from where most of my colleagues commuted, were not for me. Georgetown, the city's historical heart, had a synagogue, meaning a community. That sounded promising.

Monday was a public holiday. Gabi, a friend from Jerusalem who was then living in Washington, drove me around town, including past the prayer house. I knew—I wanted to live in Georgetown, with its tree-lined streets of red brick houses. There was one problem. The government rent allowance is determined by family size (I am single) and rank (I was second secretary, the lowest). My allowance would permit a decent apartment in a new building on the city's outskirts. But Georgetown? Among the city's most prestigious and costly neighborhoods? On $700 a month?

My temporary home was a motel on Connecticut Avenue, near the Israeli Embassy. My room had no kitchen, not even a refrigerator. Breakfast was coffee and doughnuts in the lobby. I picked up dinner at the supermarket on my way home. All too often, it was cookies or potato crisps with flavored cream cheese, maybe a fruit; leftovers would not survive the heat or the summer bugs. I did not know that I could bargain with the ministry for a higher rent allowance, or switch to a more convenient hotel for the duration of the search.

After six weeks and countless comfort calories, I moved into a one-bedroom apartment in Georgetown. 2511 Q Street was arguably the cheapest apartment building in Georgetown at the time. As there was no parking, my secondhand Chevy Cavalier rested in an open lot behind the building. Lacking air conditioning, I bought a window unit for the living room, and I slept on a mattress on the floor when my bedroom became too hot. But the neighborhood was lovely.

My salary in my first posting was low. I worked long hours and often went to the office on Sunday. Little time remained to shop, cook, and clean, but I could not afford more than a few hours of help every two weeks. Although most of the rent I received for my apartment in Jerusalem covered the mortgage I was paying, a little remained each month. Without that extra money from home, I would have had to borrow in order to make ends meet.

In 1993, five years after I returned from America, I joined the big leagues: I would be Israel's first ambassador in Riga. The advance staff had done a fine job. The office they chose is still in use as I write, twenty years later. They also located the residence that was home to me, and to a few successors, until it was decided to move.

Like much private property, the five-story building at 15 Ganibu Dambis was nationalized during communist rule. It was converted into a hospital. After Latvian independence, the building reverted to its owners. Unfamiliar with a capitalist market, they handed it to a company that would renovate, rent, and deal with the tenants.

Half the building was turned into offices. Half became apartments, which housed foreigners. Across from me on the third floor were the offices of a now-defunct international accounting firm. The French ambassador lived downstairs while she awaited the renovation of her permanent residence. Opposite her was the Swedish representative of the World Bank, whose family lived in Stockholm. Like others, he frequently flew home for weekends. I often remained alone in the building, grateful for the Latvian policeman who sat outside my door. However, I was to learn of the building's innards only months after arriving.

I flew to Riga in August. My home was supposed to be ready within weeks. Until then, I would stay at the Ridzene Hotel, popular among the first generation of diplomats. My small room—from curtains via upholstery to bathroom tiles and toilet bowl—was Sovietly decorated in shades of dark brown. We made some effort to upgrade, but for so short a stay, it wasn't worth continuing the debate with the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem (Embassy: The room is small; permission to move. Ministry: How small?).

August became September. The apartment was not ready. October came, then November. The long northern days shrank; the darkness of my room echoed in my soul. Still no apartment.

In December, after four months in that depressing room, the embassy was given keys to the flat. We were still waiting for the furniture that I had chosen during a trip back to Jerusalem. Some governments have standard decor for ambassadorial residences. The first tenant is at most consulted on color: Do you want it in shades of blue or burgundy? Israel was later to adopt this practice, but it had not yet done so yet.

Before becoming an ambassador, I had seen the inside of the residence in Washington just twice. One ambassador received guests in his study after heart surgery; his successor invited staff to a Hanukkah party in a living room filled with folding chairs. I did not feel qualified to decorate an official residence, asked that a decorator advise me, and was told by the ministry to trust myself (but an art historian helped me choose Israeli art). I asked a friend, the wife of a veteran diplomat, to help me choose pieces and colors, match carpets to upholstery, and add chandeliers to the overall look.

Until the container with the furniture would come, I borrowed a mattress here and located a folding table there, bought simple dishes at a local store, cooked a little. It was home. I was home.

Within days, paint on the doors and the window frames softened, bubbled, and cracked. It emerged that color had been applied to wooden surfaces before they were dry. This time, the

contractor paid for a small suite at the Ridzene.

Moving back to the hotel was one of the sorriest moments of my career. I cried about it at lunch to Karina, the parliamentary speaker's adviser. She invited me to visit her family at their house on the outskirts of Riga that weekend. At the time, many in Latvia lived in rundown homes, some with communal bathrooms or kitchens. Many of my local contacts were embarrassed to reciprocate invitations. The resulting imbalance in hospitality was a barrier to friendship. I was grateful to Karina for that welcoming warmth, and she has remained a close friend.

Finally, half a year after I arrived, the flat was ready. The front door opened onto a long corridor, a reminder of the Soviet-era hospital. Entertainment space was to the right. It comprised a very large living room where a hundred people could stand comfortably. Metal constructions with plants on glass shelves created the illusion of more intimate spaces. A dining room, seating twenty, could be entered from the living room or from the long corridor. Wards on the opposite side of the corridor became three rooms: master bedroom, guest room, study. At the end of the corridor was a kitchen. Some residences have two: one for work, one private. When a party is prepared in the official kitchen, the diplomatic family continues to eat from the other.

A dual kitchen also helps separate personal and official expenses. A monthly entertainment budget of $200 in my first job in Washington does not merit discussion. In my subsequent posts, it was about $1,000. Israeli diplomats must hand in quarterly reports; otherwise, the money will be deducted at year's end. When we feed someone at a restaurant, the bill must be attached to the report. But as everyone knows, home provides the warmest hospitality, and no receipts are required. I could report fictional dinners for twenty, at $40 a head, costing $800 each, and pocket the cash. Over the years, a tidy sum accumulates. It can be said (or at least it could be said, when I was working) that Israeli diplomats who use their entertainment allowance to entertain effectively do so at their own expense.

Compare that to the British system. Teams from London visit each diplomatic mission every four years or so to examine all aspects of its activity. One supervisor will review political work, another may look at the personnel situation, someone will examine the upkeep of embassy facilities. A financial specialist will price ingredients for an elaborate menu, adding generous sums for flowers, drinks, waiters, even allow for leftovers. The result is a lavish yet precise calculation for each guest at breakfast, lunch, tea, or dinner. British reports to headquarters must include guest lists. The Crown's diplomats cannot debit taxpayers for imaginary guests who were fed at nonexistent meals.

To be fair, the Israeli system was exceptionally wise on two sets of outlays. Governments routinely cover major household costs for ambassadorial residences, such as electricity bills. There are also small expenses, such as replacing lightbulbs. Some governments demand receipts for those, generating vast paperwork. Israel gives its ambassadors a lump sum each month. It may be a little more than real costs, but the efficient arrangement is convenient for everyone.

The car was the other easy math. The home country provides a vehicle and hires a driver. He took me where work demanded, helped the household staff with shopping, and ran my private errands, such as collecting dry cleaning. Some foreign services charge diplomats for private use of the official car, creating lots of bookkeeping. Also, it is not easy to separate private and public drives. Is my haircut public or private? I must always look presentable, so it's

for work, but I am starting a vacation tomorrow, meaning that it is private, but the salon is on the way back from a meeting, which was obviously work. So?

Keeping it simple, Israeli diplomats whose job comes with a car are charged a monthly rate for private use of the official vehicle. Everybody pays the same, even those who don't like to drive (like me), who are not permitted to drive the ultraheavy, bombproof vehicle in South Africa (me), who have no spouses or children to be taken and fetched (me again), and whose Sabbath observance limits their weekend travel (likewise). A flat rate is a flat rate, and I paid without a word, almost enough to buy the Riga Volvo. In return, I could use the car any time, go anywhere. I just had to ask for permission to take it out of the country, but that was a technicality, maybe for insurance purposes.

One year, my mother came to Riga. She, Artis (my basketball-playing driver), and I drove to Estonia, placed the car and ourselves on the ferry from Tallinn to Helsinki, and continued via the southern lakes of Finland to Saint Petersburg. The following year, a friend from Israel planned to come in June, so we would travel together to the endless summer days of north Norway. Artis had gone to work for a European embassy that paid him double, and he was replaced by Mikelis, a promising artist.

Again, I asked for permission. This time, Israel said no. Someone found a regulation whereby private use of the car is permitted only in the country of service. This meant that Israel's ambassador to Italy was free to travel between Sicily and the Dolomites, and his counterpart in the United States could drive from Seattle to Florida. My country of service was Latvia, with Estonia and Lithuania as a vacation bonus. It was absurd to pay so much money for such limited private use of the car. I demanded that they reimburse me.

After much back and forth, permission to drive to Norway came in August, after the midnight sun was long over. It arrived with a thousand-kilometer limit. After checking that the Ministry of Defense imposes no such limits on its emissaries (who don't represent a different country, even though their benefits sometimes make it seem so), I ignored it and drove off.

This was one of my many bureaucratic fights with the head office. I picked them only when I knew that I was right, and won almost all. I failed in one major battle, for pay. During my first year in Riga, the dollar (as we were then paid, in cash) dropped in relation to Latvia's currency, the Lat. There was also inflation; our buying power was cut further. We presented these facts to the relevant officials in Jerusalem. They explained that Israeli diplomatic salaries are linked to UN personnel. True, we do not earn as much, but when their salaries go up, ours do too.

Our pay continued to erode; it was almost halved. I overcame my embarrassment at prying into another's income and asked a friend at the local UN office about their recent raises. His answer taught me two things. As UN staff is employed by member countries and therefore by their taxpayers, salary policy is a matter of international public record, and there is no need to hesitate about asking. Also, since I had raised it with my office and received their answer, UN staff in Riga had had three raises.

Furious, I wrote home. They wrote back and explained that the UN is no longer the criterion; in recent months it was replaced by the American Foreign Service. I will never know the truth, or understand why our system allows small fortunes to be saved in some postings while other countries are avoided for their paltry pay.

In 1988, two years after returning from Riga, I was sent to Washington again. That second time, I knew to ask for a residential hotel while seeking a home, which again would be within walking distance of the Georgetown synagogue. I had a living room, a bedroom, and a proper

kitchen. My temporary situation was comfortable.

Apartments were scarce; the dot.com bubble, then at its height, included Northern Virginia, on the outskirts of Washington. I found a suitable home fairly fast, but the ministry reneged on an oral agreement about my monthly rent allowance. Only when I knew that the promise would be kept did I continue my search, running out of the embassy at short notice or canceling meetings, only to view another disappointment.

After thirty days, I asked the hotel's management for permission to tape a mezuzah to the door. By Jewish law, after that time a home is considered permanent, and it requires that the box with its biblical text be affixed to the doorpost. Before winter, I traveled to the warehouse that stored my container, unsealed it, and withdrew warm clothes. After three months, a friend knew of an apartment in her building, ending my long, unnerving search.

With such trouble finding housing, why doesn't the government own property?

Because there is no home that fits all. I would not like to take over homes of colleagues with children, who needed a school and wanted a garden. A successor who has no interest in an orthodox community might not care for my humble apartment in Georgetown. Also, the Israeli government does not want to deal with maintenance or worry about fluctuating property values. It does that for homes of heads of mission, rarely for a deputy ambassador, or in special circumstances, say, if security considerations force the staff to live in one complex.

That second time in Washington I lived on on the ninth floor of The Plaza, 800 25th Street, NW, in Foggy Bottom, near the Watergate. The apartment had two bedrooms, one of which was huge. I placed a cheap rug on the corner of the wall-to-wall carpet and turned that demarcated area into an art studio. A very big en suite bathroom included a massive marble tub, cause of snide comments from all who visited. Senior but not an ambassador, I had one-third of a housekeeper. I would tell Aurora how many guests were expected and ask her how much money she needed. The food, the staff before, during, and after was not my concern, and I knew that everything would be perfect.

In early 2001 I moved from Washington to Pretoria. Laying the table with mismatched silver or not cooking enough rice were negligible problems compared to everything else I faced in South Africa. Still, one would expect that the ambassador wouldn't have to rush home before hosting every lunch to check that bread rolls had been taken out of the freezer, or to remind about salt and pepper shakers. Such supervision was an unexpected burden; my sorry excuse for repeated glitches was "my wife doesn't help."

The embassy kept two homes in South Africa—the chapter on life with a bodyguard will explain why. One was in Pretoria, the seat of government. The other was in Cape Town, where Parliament sits.

A big house in a garden suburb of Cape Town had a pool and a tennis court. Everything was rundown and needed costly renovation. Jerusalem wanted to get rid of that second home, but during my first year in South Africa, they agreed to replace it with an apartment in Sea Point, a suburb on the Atlantic Ocean coast. Maintaining the flat cost no more than putting an ambassador and a bodyguard in hotels for long stretches; living and entertaining in the comfort of one's own home was a joy, with sea air and ocean views a bonus. As it is still in use when this is written, I do not give the location: for security reasons, Israeli diplomatic addresses are divulged selectively; even personal mail is delivered to the office.

Finally, the house at 496 Walter Lanham Street, Bailey's Muckleneuk, Pretoria. Downstairs were a large living room, a dining room that could seat twenty or more, a small study, and a big

kitchen. A curved, wooden stairwell led to the second floor, with four bathrooms and six bedrooms. One housed my computer; I painted in another. Some bedrooms opened onto a wraparound balcony that overlooked a sloping garden, with a large lawn for receptions, and scattered flower beds. Decades earlier, a predecessor had replaced the tennis court with a swimming pool, where noisy birds came to drink and where I swam alone most mornings. Aging trees surrounded it all.

The house had not been painted for some twenty years. An ambassadorial dog had left his teeth marks on the elegant, curved stairwell. Potted plants leaked water and mud onto the parquet floor. Wires, many of them unconnected to anything, crisscrossed every wall. They were consolidated by Golan, the head of embassy security, an architecture student who happily collaborated in the aesthetic improvement. He supervised painting the complex's tall, external wall, the last in our residential neighborhood to display its original, naked concrete.

There is more: I will only mention that the servants were often caught in the rain when running the few uncovered yards between my kitchen and their rooms. Their rooms contained sagging mattresses and one naked light bulb. It was shameful.

Given all else on my agenda, in hindsight it was a mistake to invest my time and energy on renovations to the house. But then, it seemed the right thing to do. At the reception for Israel's Independence Day four months after I arrived, I overheard guests asking each other if they were sure this was the same house as last year, as it looked completely different. That moment almost justified the effort. However, a rotting infrastructure was not worth repairing. Soon after I left, what had been the official Israeli residence in Pretoria for decades was sold to developers and torn down.

I am often asked if I don't miss the perks that come with the job.

Half the answer is that they are not perks but merely tools for work, like a desk or a computer. Without a big home and staff, entertaining would be impossible. Almost a week of work—shopping, cooking, polishing the silver, setting the table, cleaning thoroughly after—goes into hosting a large official dinner. Driving, parking, and keeping a car in good working order all take time. Performing those tasks would have undercut my purpose for being there. The other half of the answer is that the constant presence of strangers, albeit employed to help me, was an imposition.

My Jerusalem apartment is about 800 square feet and has two bedrooms. One is used as a study and doubles as a guest room. When that is not enough, mattresses are laid on the living room carpet. More than forty people have been here at once. A big crowd eats bought food served on paper plates. Someone cleans every week. A small enclosed balcony has good light, and it is perfect for art. I don't have a car but can afford a taxi. A dozen bus lines run nearby, and I can walk almost everywhere, including to a sometimes private pool just a block away from home.

Chapter 5
Credentials
Can I Start Working Already?

What turns a mortal from one country into an ambassador to another is the simple act of handing a piece of paper known as credentials to the head of a foreign state. Here is the text of my first such document:

EZER WEIZMAN
PRESIDENT OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

TO

HIS EXCELLENCY MR. GUNTIS ULMANIS
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA

MY GREAT AND GOOD FRIEND (they had never met),

HOLDING IN ESTEEM THE RELATIONS OF FRIENDSHIP AND MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING EXISTING BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA AND THE STATE OF ISRAEL AND BEING DESIROUS TO STRENGTHEN AND DEVELOP THESE FRIENDLY RELATIONS, I, IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE POWERS VESTED IN ME BY LAW, HAVE DECIDED TO APPOINT MS. TOVA HERZL TO RESIDE NEAR YOUR EXCELLENCY AS AMBASSADOR EXTRAORDINARY AND PLENIPOTENTIARY.

THE CHARACTER AND ABILITIES OF MS. HERZL LEAD ME TO BELIEVE THAT SHE WILL FULFIL THE MISSION WITH WHICH SHE IS CHARGED IN SUCH A MANNER AS TO MERIT YOUR EXCELLENCY'S TRUST AND APROBATION AND PROVE HIMSELF (oops!) WORTHY OF THE CONFIDENCE I PLACE IN HER.

I, THEREFORE, REQUEST YOUR EXCELLENCY TO RECEIVE OUR AMBASSADOR FAVORABLY AND TO GIVE CREDENCE TO ALL THAT SHE SHALL HAVE THE HONOR TO COMMUNICATE TO YOUR EXCELLENCY AND TO THE GOVERNMENT OF LATVIA ON THE PART OF THE GOVERNMENT OF ISRAEL.

MAY I EXPRESS TO YOUR EXCELLENCY MY SENTIMENTS OF HIGH ESTEEM AND SEND YOU MY BEST WISHES FOR YOUR PERSONAL WELL-BEING AND THE WELL-BEING AND PROSPERITY OF YOUR COUNTRY.

YOUR GOOD FRIEND
(SIGNED) EZER WEIZMAN

COUNTERSIGNED:

SHIMON PERES
MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

GIVEN AND SIGNED IN JERUSALEM
ON 8 AV 5753 (Jewish calendar): 26 JULY 1993

INSCRIBED IN THE FIRST BOOK OF PROTOCOL UNDER NO. 1078

TRANSLATION FROM THE HEBREW

An ambassador-designate doesn't knock on a palace door and ask if the president is home; may one please say hello and present the paper? Each country has set procedures. Diagrams of the actual ceremony may be attached for precision, describing who stands where and when.

Such rigidity is useful. Imagine moving to a senior job in another country. Even a simple introduction can be unnerving. Must you offer your hand? Wait for the other to move first? Curtsey? Bring a gift? Diplomacy has developed systems to help avoid mistakes.

The appointment of an ambassador begins with formalities at home. In Israel, the first stage is an open call to ministry staff to apply for posts that will open. The Foreign Ministry's appointments' committee convenes and chooses one of the qualified candidates. A dozen or so external appointees who are chosen by politicians skip this step, but everything else is the same, starting with Israeli cabinet approval—we represent the entire government, not just the Foreign Ministry.

The process then shifts to the other country. The embassy that the new ambassador will head writes to that country's Foreign Ministry (by any name, such as Department of State, or Secretariat for International Cooperation, or Ministry of External Relations) and asks for the host government's agreement to the appointment.

Usually, the answer is a quick "yes." A delay is usually just a delay, but it can also mean "try again." A South African diplomat who went public about leaving his marriage in favor of his newly acknowledged homosexuality was appointed to a Muslim country, where he would serve with his partner. The South African request to accept him elicited no response, and the appointment died.

Appointed, approved, agreed, the ambassador flies to the new job. Official representatives of the country where she will work meet her at the airport. The main greeters are from the protocol department of the local Foreign Ministry, who are the formal facade of the country's interactions. In a way, protocol is like an underappreciated housekeeper, who is taken for granted when all runs well, but when food is late, dust is visible, or a dignitary's status is compromised . . . Someone from the Middle East department usually greets the Israeli ambassador, and my own staff will probably be there when I arrive, to meet the new boss.

For short and medium flights, Israeli diplomats travel coach, but Israel makes an exception for the first ambassadorial arrival. As even in business class I cannot sleep, this does not help me. Wearing wrinkled clothes and a tired face, all I want upon landing is to be invisible, shower, and sleep. Instead, the welcoming party and I head to a VIP lounge to await my suitcases. We chitchat about nothing in particular, drink something, and say *ouch* to the South African official who poured boiling airport tea on her stockinged legs. I finally go home (or to a hotel, as in Riga

or in countries where I had no residence). I rest; I am refreshed. Can I start working already? No.

I must now give a copy of my credentials to the local Foreign Ministry. The practice was probably designed to ensure that the document's bearer is truly the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, not an impostor. "Plenipotentiary" means having all the powers, including the power to declare war. In the past, envoys had to guess the intentions of decision makers back home, act accordingly, and woe unto them if they erred (but I have found no explanation for "Extraordinary").

Credentials are complemented by a letter recalling the predecessor. While ambassadors no longer decide to declare war, they still express policy. Only one ambassador at a time can be a credible voice for the home country. This explains a difference in how diplomats exchange positions. Most do it in the foreign country of service, with the outgoing diplomat introducing the newcomer to local contacts. However, ambassadors must meet back home, or in a third country, to avoid a confusing double presence. If the departing ambassador wants to remain where she has been working, say, for vacation or to teach, she must leave the country and return with a different title on her passport.

Credentials are always written in the new ambassador's tongue. Some countries write everything in their own language and attach a translation. Even countries such as Israel that communicate in an international language, usually English, make an exception for this formal and symbolic document. My credentials were in Hebrew, on thick, white paper, with my president's insignia and carrying his signature. The English translation quoted above, in capital letters, was printed on blank paper, and attached.

In South Africa, Protocol received the copy of my credentials. In Latvia, I gave it to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Did presenting the copy mean I could start working? Partially. I could meet desk officers at the Foreign Ministries and talk to fellow ambassadors. Jewish organizations were in order, but privately—media coverage was not yet acceptable. No meetings with ministers or parliamentarians were allowed. The forced hiatus allowed me to delve into embassy files, get to know my staff, open a bank account, familiarize myself with local newspapers. That done, how long must I wait? As long as necessary.

When I flew to Latvia on August 18, 1993, the meeting with President Ulmanis had already been set for August 23. On that day in 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. As a result, Latvia lost its brief independence, which it was to regain shortly before I arrived. The agreement is integral to the outbreak of World War II, which included the decimation of Latvian Jewry. The historical date was the handle for my comments on presenting credentials. Comments are read from a typed text—local officials may ask to receive the comments ahead of the ceremony to allow the host to respond suitably, and in any case they get them after, for the record.

On January 3, 2001, I arrived in South Africa, dateless. It was summer, which explains a fortnight wait to give Protocol a copy of my credentials. At that meeting, I was surprised to hear that the president would receive me late in February.

The wait would mean long weeks of relative inactivity. Moreover, I could not attend the opening of Parliament in early February, and I would miss the surrounding events, which are highlights of the diplomatic and political calendar. It would be my loss, but South Africa would not gain by the presence of junior diplomats while a half dozen ambassadors waited impatiently to start working. I mentioned this to Protocol. A whispered call from a corner phone to the

presidency immediately produced an earlier date: January 24.

Credentials ceremonies have one element in common: not surprisingly, it is the actual act of presenting credentials. A wise chief of protocol will always carry a large, white envelope, with cardboard inside to give it substance just in case the new ambassador forgets to bring the original. It almost happened to me in Swaziland. My deputy rushed back to the car. Luckily my Letter of Credence was there, not back at the hotel.

Ceremonies can be functional, such as in Namibia's capital, Windhoek. As a rule, the first visit of nonresident ambassadors is built around presenting credentials. Five or six new ambassadors waited in a hall in the presidential offices. The president arrived, exchanged pleasantries, collected the envelopes, a resident ambassador spoke on behalf of the group, we drank a toast, and that was that.

Otherwise, a ceremony can include speeches, tours of the palace, snacks, and guards of honor. It may be preceded by a rehearsal, as happened in Swaziland, with police sirens to get me there. In South Africa, as in Israel, the president allocates a morning every few weeks to receive four or five new ambassadors. A carefully scripted routine lasts thirty to forty minutes, giving the host a short break and allowing flags to be replaced.

The ceremony may include a personal meeting with the head of state. I found this to be unsettling. The niceties are easy: I am so happy, it is all lovely, everyone is so kind. Substance is harder, especially if the leader is not only head of state with representational functions but head of government too, with executive powers. This may be a unique chance to talk with the country's senior decision maker. Being fresh, I cannot be certain of what to say and how to get it right.

When I met President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, he asked how his country could help to bring peace to the Middle East. Part of the answer is that it should stop being so one-sided. After just three weeks in the country, I could not know how to avoid being rudely dismissive of his global ambitions, or seem unnecessarily encouraging. Maybe waiting until late February would have been preferable, after all?

Transportation to the ceremony is provided by the hosts. On the way there, the limousine displays only the local flag. Driving back, it carries two, representing the ambassador's newly formalized status as an envoy from one country to another. Ambassadors to some European courts are transported in gilded, horse-drawn carriages. I would have loved an appointment to one of those capitals, just for that.

The ambassador does not go alone to present credentials. Locals determine how many staff members may come—as few as the two most senior. Being single and childless, the presence of a spouse and offspring was not an issue for me. But from my experience as press secretary to Israel's president, I know that close family may observe from the side, near the press, together with additional staff.

Other observers are rare; I remember one. Zubin Mehta, the renowned Indian conductor of classical music, served for years as an unofficial emissary from India to Israel. President Herzog invited him, and he was moved to tears when the first official ambassador from his native land was accredited in his adopted one.

Hosting a cocktail party after the ceremony is optional, but one obligation remains. Although it may well have been reported in the press, I must write a formal letter to fellow ambassadors to that country, resident and nonresident alike, and inform them that I presented credentials to the head of state, whom I name, and replaced my predecessor. I express my hope

that the relations between our countries and our missions will continue to be good. My colleagues write back, reciprocating the hope.

This diplomatic correspondence is unique, in that it is between people with names. Most diplomatic exchanges are numbered notes, from one entity to another: The Embassy of the State of Israel presents its compliments to the Ministry of ABC or the Embassy of XYZ, and has the honor to request/inform/suggest, etc.

I use my name again on the day that I leave. I write to all my colleagues (including to those who attended my farewell parties or even hosted them) and announce my impending departure. I may add a few personal words. As the writer has gone, recipients of the letter do not write back.

My post began with credentials and their official rigidity. Although somewhat cynical by nature and a little jaded by life, my heart always beat a little faster to hear the familiar notes of my anthem escorting me on a fresh route, and it mattered little if the band did not quite get it right. Seeing two flags flying on an official car in acknowledgment of my new role made me proud. Then, it is over. I am no longer an ambassador from one country to another.

People mark birthdays, graduations, marriages, and funerals with set rituals. I heard a sociologist explain why a stigma always remains with a criminal: Whereas the trial is drawn out and public, paying a fine or completing a prison sentence is private, quick, and barely noticed beyond the official structures and the individuals involved.

Countries, too, have rituals. With such an elaborate fuss to make me into an ambassador, surely upon leaving there should be a little more ceremony? Maybe that imbalance explains why the stigma, eh, title, lingers always?

Chapter 6
Immunity
The Untouchables, Almost

One summer day during my first posting in Washington, M and I chanced on each other near the Israeli Embassy. An Israeli government employee, he was in America's capital for a prestigious yearlong university program. We had met a decade earlier in Jerusalem. Here he was again! Here we were! Another chance! Some months later, he returned from a solo walk in the snow and uttered ominously, "We have to talk." He would be taking a break from me, from us, to see a woman from his past, with whom he had recently reconnected. They were to meet in Europe.

This was before e-mail, the Israeli postal service was then notoriously slow, international phone calls were expensive. I asked how the logistics for the upcoming rendezvous were arranged so fast, and I discovered that my diplomatic privileges had played a crucial role.

To show how, a few words are needed on diplomatic immunity. It developed over centuries and has been codified into a treaty, the Vienna Convention. Its premise is that obeying the rules of the host country may limit diplomats' ability to function. They must therefore be exempt from following them. Designed for matters of principle, the arrangement was not meant for parking on curbs and other traffic offenses, yet these are arguably the best-known uses of diplomatic immunity. How did it happen, the leap from serious substance to petty misdemeanors? Simple. It is impossible to draw clear lines.

Say a diplomat is brought before a court for speeding. The judge will want to know why. You were going to the opera? For that you were driving 120? In fact, the diplomat had to complete a top-secret report and then rushed to meet a dissident, cleverly disguising the subversive encounter as a date. None of this information can be shared with a local judge. Not everything diplomats do is sensitive or dramatic, but subjecting them to local jurisdiction is risky. Practically, this means that almost everything envoys do is untouchable. Cars maddeningly parked on pavements are part of the price paid internationally for professional diplomatic freedom.

The only punishment a country can impose on an offending diplomat is declaring him persona non grata—an unwanted person. In a word: expulsion, not a proportionate response to a bounced check. It is used rarely, say for crossing from legitimate information gathering into spying, and it is often reciprocal—if our secret service person goes, so does yours. This was quite common during the Cold War.

Another possibility is for the diplomat's own country to lift immunity, at its own initiative or at the request of the other country. An embarrassed government can allow a diplomat who killed someone while driving drunk, or abused household help, to stand trial where it happened and bear any consequences.

Recalling the transgressor is another option. A local secretary in my embassy complained that a diplomat at the embassy had been harassing her. Her husband threatened to go to the police. Prevented by the rules of immunity from approaching the suspect directly, the police would ask the local Foreign Ministry to contact the Israeli Embassy with a request to question him. The embassy would convey this request to the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem. Several

departments back home, among them personnel, the legal department, and the regional desk, would consult on how to respond.

Getting to this stage would take weeks, even months. Meanwhile, the issue will burden diplomatic contacts between Israel and the other country. It may reach the press. Rumors will spread. Staff will take sides. The diplomat's authority will weaken, both outside the embassy and inside it. The secretary needs the job, but she must see her alleged harasser daily. Her angry husband is unlikely to remain patient.

Do we plead immunity to protect a diplomat's alleged acts, which are in no way connected with Israel's interests? Do we make it easy for locals to question him? If we do, how do we ensure that questions do not cross into how the embassy functions, what its priorities are? For example, should they be permitted to ask about the urgent need to work overtime one night rather than another? Do we bring a lawyer from Israel to vet questions? If evidence is clear, should the locals be allowed to try him? If they find him guilty, do we permit them to punish him?

We did none of the above. After an inquiry by a senior Israel-based official, the diplomat in question returned home. Back in Jerusalem, he had to face consequences determined by Israeli law. In his case, sanctions remained in the civil service and did not extend into the general court system.

Not only our conduct is subject to Israeli law. Our salaries are, too. Exempt from their regulations, we do not pay taxes to the countries where we work. When our pay arrives, it has already been docked of all Israeli duties. As personal privileges go, immunity applies mostly to minor traffic offenses and to duty-free liquor, tobacco, and some other purchases. That is all.

Individual diplomatic immunity would be meaningless if the objects that surround envoys were accessible to prying eyes. Diplomatic property is therefore as immune as the people who live and work in it. Within days of arriving in Pretoria, I signed a document authorizing the South Africans to enter my house in case of fire. Without advance permission, they would have to wait for my approval. Until it came, or if I could not be located, they would have to watch the house burn, and they could do nothing.

Such immunity of diplomatic property explains the powerful images of locals pounding on fences of embassies during periods of unrest. Once inside, they are beyond the reach of local police, as though they are in another country. Arguably, the best-known example is the Hungarian Cardinal József Mindszenty, who lived for years in the American Embassy in Budapest. What could Hungary do? Break diplomatic relations with the United States?

The story of Jonathan Pollard comes to many Israeli and Jewish minds. He was an American naval intelligence analyst who spied for Israel and was later caught, tried, and sentenced to life in prison. When he understood that American authorities were after him, he drove to the Israeli Embassy in Washington. He followed a diplomatic car through the first entrance into the embassy compound. The second gate, which leads into the underground parking lot, closed after each vehicle and opened again only after careful identification. Pollard was denied entry. He was effectively turned into the hands of FBI agents, who had followed him as he fled and waited for him outside the embassy.

I had been in Washington less than three months on that Thursday in November 1985, out at meetings. I cannot be sure if I heard of the episode when I returned to the office or only when the story reached the media. I don't know who knew what at the time or who decided to turn him back. I have no idea how long it took. Minutes? Seconds? But I clearly recall meeting

socially with colleagues the following weekend, and we were all very nervous. Among us was the embassy's head of security, as freshly arrived as I, who did not know if he would be able to stay in his post. He did; the sorry affair reached the top of Israel's leadership, far above his rank and responsibility.

Everything to do with Jonathan Pollard elicits controversy. I will not discuss whether he was saint or sinner, mercenary, maverick or martyr, but I will touch on one point often raised by his supporters. They insist that he should not have been turned away, that Israel should have sheltered him in the embassy.

True, the Americans would not have broken into the embassy to get Pollard. That would be against international law. But there is no law obligating them to provide Israel with financial assistance, military equipment, or political support. As with the besotted Israeli diplomat who was sent packing rather than enjoy diplomatic protection, sometimes common sense defeats the dry rules of immunity.

To recap: Diplomats are beyond questioning, cars can park anywhere, and embassy property may be entered only by permission. All these would be of little use in protecting the secrets of countries if diplomatic mail could be scrutinized. Preventing that brings this chapter closer to my romantic misadventure.

Electronic communication notwithstanding, paper and other tangibles travel between Israel and its diplomatic missions abroad. Anything sensitive—empty passports, a secure lock—is transported under the watchful eyes of trustworthy people. Known as couriers, they guard the diplomatic pouch, which can be as small as an envelope or as large as a container. In the past, being a courier was a career track, like consul or trade attaché. With modern transportation and communications, the role has shrunk. The duties can be performed by any reliable national.

When I was the ambassador in Riga, unclassified mail, such as newspapers or information briefs, came and went weekly in the Latvian airline. For everything else, there was a protected postal system. A package of sensitive material was sent in an Israeli plane to an Israeli embassy in a nearby capital. Every few weeks, a courier from our embassy in Riga traveled to that embassy for a day or two to drop our classified mail and collect whatever Israel (our ministry or another) had sent to us.

Helsinki was our first postal connection. When we all had had our fill of Finnish shopping (oh, the glorious glass!), we explained to Jerusalem that we have dealings with Israel's military attaché in Denmark, and switched to Copenhagen. A year later we moved our professional focus—and our diplomatic pouch delivery point—to Israel's economic attaché in Sweden. Then we discovered that flying to Britain was somewhat cheaper than getting to London, and switched again. All the Israeli diplomats in Riga, as well the diplomatic spouses who worked for the embassy, say as cipher clerks, took turns carrying the pouch. Once or twice a year, we were each treated to a short break from what was then a rather gloomy place to live.

Lest this create the impression that highly qualified diplomats regularly desert their duties in order to accompany bags of post from one country to another, that is the exception. Where there are direct Israeli flights, operated by trustworthy Israeli airline personnel, couriers are unnecessary. Israeli flights did not reach Washington, but there were many to New York, a few hours' drive away.

Sacks of mail traveled by secure embassy car from Washington to New York, where they were put on an Israeli plane. Mail from Israel took the same efficient route back. The system

was faster than regular post, and it did not cost more. There was no reason to limit its use to classified mail; it took everything.

All the sacks, containing both classified and unclassified mail, were opened in the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem. Some mail was private: in Washington, I had put an Israeli stamp on an envelope, and the ministry dropped my letter into a regular mailbox in Jerusalem. The rest was distributed among departments in the ministry as well as to other government agencies, such as the ministry that employed M.

Every week, just in time to make it into the diplomatic bag from Washington, M gave me an envelope, addressed to a contact in his ministry. A day or two later, his envelope reached her desk for distribution. She undoubtedly hand delivered what was important, including M's letters to his once and future lady friend. She in turn gave her reply to M's contact in his ministry, who added it to the envelope that she addressed to me. It was included in that ministry's package that went to the postal department in the Foreign Ministry, which sent the sack to New York, where staff from Washington picked it up.

And so her letter came to me, to give to M. An exchange that could take three or four weeks via the public postal service was completed in one week.

M may not have needed the favor I did. As an Israeli official on study leave in Washington, he might have had direct access to the diplomatic pouch. For that, he would have had to come to the embassy every time, to deliver and to collect. He might have had to drop his mail a day early for security and bureaucracy, maybe pick it up a day late. That would burden a busy student who had no car. It would slow their communication, possibly beyond repair.

He found a more efficient way.

Chapter 7
Neutrality
Feelings, Facades, and Fine Lines

In 1986 or 1987, seeming irrational to all but me, I asked to leave Israel's biggest and most important embassy and move to a tiny diplomatic mission.

I was posted in Washington when the semisecret relations between Israel and Hungary were heading toward normalization, and I longed to be in Budapest when the Israeli interest section would become a full embassy. I felt that helping raise our blue-and-white flag would somehow compensate for the humiliation my parents had suffered as Jews in Hungary decades earlier. I pulled any strings I could find, to no avail. When homosexuals were still considered a risk and barred from diplomatic careers, our security services would not allow single diplomats to serve in the still communist totalitarian countries, lest they be seduced. They seemed to think that married people are exempt from temptation, or that a spouse eliminates the possibility of blackmail.

But say I had found myself working among the Hungarians; would my family's past, culminating in the Holocaust, be an advantage? A disadvantage? Irrelevant? Should diplomats be posted where they have a private agenda? Are there any ties that should bar postings?

Yes, but only one: dual citizenship. As the previous chapter shows, diplomatic immunity effectively puts diplomats beyond the legal systems of the countries where they work. Working as a diplomat where one is also a citizen would be absurd: Citizens are entitled to local benefits, but if they are also diplomats, the authorities may not touch them if they lied in order to benefit.

Many Israelis are immigrants or children of such. Diplomats among them may have to choose between professional options and foreign citizenship. Thus, an Israeli diplomat who is an American citizen cannot work in our embassy in Washington or in any of our consulates general in the United States, which together account for about one-tenth of Israeli diplomatic missions abroad. American experience is important for a diplomat. The price for obtaining it is giving up the coveted dark blue passport.

The diplomat who was born in South Africa and had immigrated to Israel as a child was appointed to serve in the Israeli Embassy in Pretoria. South African citizenship laws had recently changed. For months, our government debated whether or not he could be considered a dual citizen. Frustrated at the delay, he withdrew his candidature. But had he gone back to where he still has family, I do not think it would have been a problem, as in any case, it is impossible for any human being, diplomat or not, to be completely neutral about anything.

Even as a first-time tourist, I instinctively apply my values and experiences to everything around me: landscapes, people, sounds, flavors, means of transport—the trains are better than at home but the buses are worse, the streets are cleaner, the fruit is blander, people are elegant, and there are hardly any babies to be seen. Deleting who we are is not an option; the challenge for diplomats is to separate professional choices from personal preferences.

It helps that postings are usually limited in time—the norm in most Western foreign services is three to five years. This suppresses a syndrome known in Washington as clientitis, the disease of overidentification with the host country. To do my job well, I must understand

local motivation, take it into consideration, and explain it to those who sent me. This is not the same as making excuses for locals.

Thus, I could understand why South Africa routinely criticized Israel while ignoring big problems nearer home. Its black leadership identified with the Palestinians; it had a large Muslim minority to placate; public condemnations let off steam. Or, I saw the roots of Lithuanian reluctance to deal with the restitution of Jewish property. After all, hardly any of the people benefiting from it were adults when it was seized; most were not even born then. Insight into the sentiments and ideas that drive policy is vital. That is different from becoming an apologist for those positions, almost forgetting whom one represents. It is a fine line, easily crossed.

Being clean of an external agenda is not enough; it must also be seen. Ints Silins left Latvia's Baltic shores at age six and went on to become an American career diplomat. When the land of his birth regained its independence, his adopted country sent him to represent it there. The proud Latvians thought of him as one of their own. They expected his full support, even when their positions, say on the future of the large non-Latvian minority, were at odds with Washington. At the same time—this I was to hear later, when I served in Washington—his reports to the State Department were sometimes received with a dash of suspicion: Could the Americans be completely sure whose interests ruled his mind and his heart? Poor Ints, and I don't envy Jewish ambassadors from other countries to Israel.

To me, Washington felt a lot like home. Anyone who reads books or watches films and television knows about American issues and has opinions on them. I served there twice and became doubly familiar. I knew whom I would prefer as president and which charity I would support if I lived there. Year after year, during the debates on allocating foreign aid, I heard emotional discussions for and against funding foreign organizations that enable abortions. I would think to myself, "Oh no! Not again!" But I do not pay taxes that go, or not, to fund these programs, nor do I vote for the congresspeople who support or oppose them. I shouldn't care. If I do, I must never show it.

Baltic countries resonate loudly with Jews and Israelis. I live on a small street in Jerusalem named for Avraham Mapu. Born near Kaunas in 1808, this Lithuanian Jew wrote *The Love of Zion*, considered the first Hebrew novel. Half a block away is a small garden named after Sir Isaiah Berlin. The famous Oxford philosopher was born in Riga. Elite, Israel's big chocolate and candy producer, has its origins in Laima, which still sweetens Latvian lives. The list of such snippets of national nostalgia is endless. To it must be added the Holocaust, a strong presence in Israel's consciousness, and in mine.

When I was appointed to be ambassador in Riga, with responsibility for Lithuania, Dov Shilansky, head of a Lithuanian Holocaust survivors' organization and a former chairman of Israel's Parliament, wrote to complain to the Foreign Minister that Israel chose someone without Lithuanian roots. The minister wrote back that I am the child of survivors. Although true, his answer is problematic. Its subtext implies that such a personal background is a precondition for doing the job well; hence a diplomat who lacks it need not apply. The answer should have been that I am a professional who can be trusted to do her job.

My ties to South Africa were strongest. The child of Hebrew teachers, I spent nine formative years there, in two installments. In 2001, twenty-eight years after leaving as a young university graduate, I returned as Israel's ambassador. My biggest concern before setting out was that being a white person with a South African accent, the new black elite would associate

me with the previous regime. That didn't happen: They had officially forgiven their own whites for apartheid and moved on. If anything, my South African past proved an advantage. It allowed me to pronounce the hardest names properly and to understand local slang and humor.

Few contacts remained from my young days; our ties were loose. This was a win-win situation. I had no close connections and ran no risk of personal conflicts of interest. At the same time, people who knew me as an adolescent and to whom I was not Her Excellency The Ambassador enabled me to be myself without barriers of position. With those early acquaintances, I did not have to undergo careful trial and painful error to learn whom I could trust.

The perception of neutrality is relevant not only to positions abroad, but also regarding the home country. In a nutshell: "Who do you vote for?" Israel has many deep break lines. The future of the territories and interaction between religion and state are two. If my preferences are known and are unlike those of Israel's government of the day, it will be impossible to do my job. "This is what Israel thinks, but I think differently" may be honest, but it is not an efficient way to work. If asked, I never divulged and tried to smile mysteriously when my interlocutors tried to guess.

In practice, it was quite easy to guard my opinions. In the Baltics, then newly independent and very busy defining themselves in relation to the West, to Russia, and to each other, the niceties of Israeli politics mattered little. In South Africa, Israel was so vilified, and there was so much ignorance, that subtleties hardly mattered. In Washington, with frequent visits by senior Israelis—ministers, members of Knesset, army generals—the private opinions of a mere diplomat were of little interest.

I remember one exception. After the 1984 elections in Israel, neither of the two big parties could garner the parliamentary majority needed to form a coalition government. As a result, Likud, headed by Yitzhak Shamir, and Labor, led by Shimon Peres, formed a national unity government. In the middle of the four-year term, they switched the positions of prime minister and foreign minister between them.

The two leaders agreed on many vital matters, such as steps needed to stop inflation, which rose to hundreds of percentage points annually. But their political agendas differed. Peres reached an agreement with King Hussein of Jordan, whereby the Kingdom would take responsibility for the West Bank, which it had lost to Israel in the Six-Day War in 1967. Shamir did everything he could to undermine the scheme, including sending messengers to Washington.

It was a confusing time for Israel's representatives there. Interlocutors often asked who determines policy and what is Israel's position. As there was no answer—or rather, there were two—the obvious next question was about my own opinions, whom I supported in this odd diplomatic-domestic (diplomestic?) seesaw.

Had I realized my dream to be the second-in-command of the Israeli interest section in my parents' bittersweet homeland, Hungarians would be too busy coming out of Moscow's shadow to worry about political disagreements between leaders of a small country in the Middle East. Evasion would not have been necessary; I would have been saved that unforgettable awkwardness.

Chapter 8
Diplomacy and Dignity
She Is Such a Diplomat!

Starting my first ambassadorial posting in Latvia in 1993, I tried to meet as many potential contacts as quickly as possible. Part workaholic and part perfectionist, five meetings a day were standard, and I once madly paid eight calls.

There are two main reasons to knock early on influential doors (and the list grows and never ends, so some doors open late or never). An early "hello-nice-to-meet-you" will help should substance arise. Also, even ostensibly important people want to know that they are recognized as such. On being introduced at a reception to the chairwoman of a Latvian parliamentary committee, she said, “I hear that you are doing all the important rounds.” Translation: “You haven’t been to see me; this means that you don’t consider me important.”

My effort to make an early mark included Lithuania and Estonia, where I was nonresident ambassador. Countries where an ambassador does not reside are usually smaller or less important than the country of residence, and they demand less effort: In three years as ambassador to South Africa, I visited Lesotho three times for three days each, and I went to Swaziland twice.

In contrast, the three Baltic states were of comparable importance, both according to objective criteria such as size and influence and in relation to Israel. Estonia’s economy was most advanced whereas Lithuania had the biggest population and the most complicated Jewish past. I traveled from Latvia (which is in the middle, and has the largest Jewish community) to each of my other two countries every month, for two or three intense days of meetings, and I tried harder to arrange introductory calls quickly where Israel had a concrete agenda.

Such was the case with the Lithuanian Minister of Defense, Linas Linkevičius. Israel had signed an arms deal with Estonia. The defense establishment led such deals; the diplomatic role in them was minor. Still, if I did everything right, might Lithuania follow? (No. Some of what Ta’as, a government-owned munitions company, sold to newly independent Estonia was a scandal-inducing disappointment, at great cost to Israeli prestige and to future deals.)

During my first two or three visits to Lithuania’s capital, Vilnius, conflicting schedules prevented a meeting with said minister. He could see me early one morning in January 1994, before he left town. Eight might not seem early enough to comment upon, but in the Baltic winter, any time before nine feels like dawn to a foggy mind. Until then, one should have the day’s first coffee, not attempt a serious discussion. But at least we got our introductions out of the way.

I was back in Vilnius in spring, and I chanced to hear that the Canadians were hosting a reception in a trendy basement hall. Canada and Israel were the only two embassies in Riga that also covered Estonia and Lithuania (but the Canadians had a small office in each capital, where local staff did whatever did not require a diplomat, such as following the press). I was on good terms with my Canadian counterpart and asked to come to their event, glad for the rare chance to mingle spontaneously and informally with senior Lithuanians.

I was chatting with the Deputy Foreign Minister of Lithuania, Albinas Januška, when a chubby young stranger interrupted us, turned to me, and asked, “Is there anything new on

what we discussed?"

As you know, it is not unusual to be approached by someone and have no idea who the someone is. We make general exploratory small talk, and the person's identity is usually revealed within minutes. Did I do that? Of course not! I am an ambassador, discussing vital matters with the Deputy Foreign Minister! I stared at the intruder and asked him, this I quote precisely because that moment is imprinted on my mind, fresh and sharp:

"Excuse me, have we met?"

He said, "Yes, I believe we have. I am the Minister of Defense."

What could I say? That I am too busy to remember an important minister? Too important to remember a busy minister? That the meeting for which I nagged and begged meant so little that I didn't remember my interlocutor? That he was neither more nor less than one forgotten face in a blurred whirlwind of quick introductions, smiles, and handshakes?

Stammering, I apologized. He, a gentleman, humorously assured me, "Don't worry, I am the Minister of Defense, not of offense. I am not offended." I mumbled some more and removed myself as far as I could.

My schedule the following morning included two or three meetings in Parliament; I would not need my driver. I sent him to the city's best flower shop, with enough money to buy a fine arrangement and a handwritten note of apology, to be delivered to the minister's office. Giving flowers is part of Baltic culture. Even in winter, when they are not grown locally and are expensive, it is common to present a bunch, even a single stem. At my Independence Day receptions I received dozens; each staff member went home with an arrangement or two.

At dinner that evening, Justas Paleckis, the Lithuanian President's foreign policy adviser, met me with a wider smile than usual and wagged his fingers, saying, "You naughty woman!" After much teasing about my secret life, he explained. That afternoon, he had been in a meeting in the Defense Minister's office. All those present noted a fine bunch of flowers. Roses. Red roses. A very expensive arrangement of red roses, sent by a female ambassador to a male minister.

Driving to our hotel after dinner, I asked my driver about the floral choice. "I told the saleslady that my boss wants to send flowers in order to apologize. She asked if it is a man she is apologizing to. I said that it was and she said that red roses would be best."

Paleckis features in another undiplomatic episode. In that case, my deviation from the unwritten rules was deliberate. It was February 1995. The President of Estonia had visited Israel; his Lithuanian counterpart was to follow a week later. Between accompanying them to Israel, I had three or four working days in Riga and spent one of them driving 160 miles to Vilnius to meet the president. In addition to talking in detail about the visit's schedule, I focused on the Holocaust.

Some 95 percent of Jews in all three Baltic countries who did not get away before the Nazis came were murdered, many by local collaborators. During his visit, the President of Estonia hardly referred to these atrocities. Perhaps I did not emphasize the topic enough ahead of his trip or he simply didn't want to deal with it. Despite the omission, the Estonian visit passed without incident, possibly because there were relatively few Jews in Estonia during the war, and their expatriate community in Israel is small.

However, hundreds of thousands of Jews lived and died in Lithuania. Survivors in Israel were angry at their country of origin for the painful past, and furious with their own government for what they considered to be apathy toward this history.

In our meeting ahead of his visit, I suggested to the President of Lithuania that it would not be advisable to praise Lithuania's glorious Jewish past while ignoring how it ended. Presenting Lithuanians as victims, of both Nazis and communists, without admitting that they were also perpetrators—that would backfire. Without an unadulterated apology, which must be coupled with a commitment to address outstanding issues such as the prosecution of war criminals, his upcoming visit would cause more harm than good. I was polite but frank.

We were four in the room. President Brazauskas sat between Paleckis and a translator. I sat across the table. It was a private meeting. A few minutes after it ended, the phone in my car rang. A furious Paleckis was on the line. "How dare you speak to the head of another country like that!?!" Apparently instructed by the offended president to chastise me, his adviser went on and on, refusing to let me say anything by way of explanation.

But they listened. In his address to the Knesset, the visiting president acknowledged to Israel's Parliament the atrocities committed by Lithuanians. He apologized and promised to deal with concrete issues. Atmospherics aside, such as a widely reported embrace of a survivor who wore his yellow star as he waited for the visiting leader at Jerusalem's Holocaust Museum, Brazauskas laid down policy against which future Lithuanian actions could be judged.

Paleckis was to apologize to me repeatedly for his outburst. In addition to his senior government job, he taught diplomacy at a local university. He would sometimes tell his students about my meeting with his boss, to show how relations between two countries are sometimes better served when accepted lines are not guarded but crossed.

Weighing possible actions, as above, are among the balancing acts required of a diplomat. Others include deciding how much or how little distance to maintain from locals, and juggling between too much self-esteem and not enough dignity. I remember this mostly from South Africa—in Riga language was a barrier to socializing and in Washington, not being an ambassador, my decorative value was limited. Unless I was certain they were interested in me as a person, rather than in my title, I was careful about starting personal relationships (and as a result, I may have missed some interesting possibilities).

I also declined certain invitations, say, to the annual conference of a small-town branch of a Jewish organization. That would stretch my limited time and spread me too thin—if the ambassador goes to almost anything, her presence becomes meaningless. In this vein, it took time—and allegations of snobbery—to educate Jewish organizations to treat me with the respect that my position and my country deserve. One example:

The major Jewish fund-raising structure in South Africa (proceeds of its efforts are divided between Israeli causes and local communal needs) invites a prominent guest from abroad to launch its annual campaign. During my time in South Africa, these included the wife of Israel's Prime Minister and a renowned American historian. They are shepherded between towns to address gatherings and to meet privately with big donors. The main events are held in Cape Town and Johannesburg; the latter opens the national campaign.

Soon after taking up my position, the mail brought an invitation to this fancy gala. Many names were printed on it: the guest speaker, the organization's chairman, probably that year's campaign chairman, maybe the rabbi who would intone a prayer and the artist who would provide entertainment. I called the organizers and asked about me. Well of course! You will sit at the main table! You will bring greetings! What about the invitation? He was not sure what I meant.

I explained that if the presence of Israel's ambassador at an important communal event

where Israel is a major focus does not merit mention, I would rather stay at home and read a book. As it was not my personal standing that I was protecting, there was no need to print my name; “Ambassador of Israel” will do. They said: we modeled it on previous invitations; nobody told us; sorry; next year we will do it right; please come. I went.

At other times, it was my own standing that was at stake. In 2000, the ambassador called me into his office to tell me that Avrum Burg, chairman of Israel’s Parliament, was coming to Washington at short notice and wanted to see his counterpart, the Speaker of the House of Representatives. I asked about the meeting’s purpose but was not given any. When my contact in the office of Speaker Hastert asked the same question, I mumbled something, and they agreed. We were to discover the objective together as the meeting progressed.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) includes unelected parliaments and often conducts its long meetings in exotic locations. Congress firmly refused to join. American absence weakens the organization’s prestige, and Burg came to change that.

Maybe IPU’s leaders asked him to approach the Speaker, or perhaps it was his idea, designed to prove to fellow parliaments his influence in Washington. Regardless, he did it, and badly. Burg did not acknowledge the background to America’s stand. He simply suggested to the Speaker that Congress join IPU, as though staying away was an unexplained American whim. Lacking context, the inappropriate request was condescending, even rude.

When the Speaker’s adviser later asked me if I knew about the topic before the meeting, I had to decide who will be shown in a bad light. In order to protect an overconfident politician, I could feign ignorance on IPU, or admit to bad judgment. That would undermine my standing and hurt a vital working relationship. I told the truth.

This is not to say that an elected official, such as the chairman, requires permission from a bureaucrat, like me. We work for them, not they for us. But, the chairman of the Knesset cannot understand the fine points in the political life of every country.

Had he consulted, I would have advised against the request. Had he insisted, I may have suggested that he ask for a letter from the Speaker to IPU, stating Congress’s conditions for joining. I could have laid the groundwork to produce a joint statement. Had Burg shown that he was aware of American considerations and respected them, had he been less brash, he might not have left the meeting entirely empty-handed. If he had shown me and my professional knowledge a little respect, this diplomat could have helped him maintain his.

"Diplomat" in this book refers to a job. The profession is unique in that its name has wide borrowed usage, as a noun or as an adjective. "Diplomatic" implies an ingrained ability to say almost anything in the most dignified way. A diplomat expresses herself in the finest manner, can finesse anything. “She is diplomatic” implies that she does not offend. Nothing is ever awkward; there is never any embarrassment. Well . . .

Chapter 9
Name Calling

Excellencies and Rabbis! Brothers and Sisters!

The first time someone looked in my direction and said, "Excellency," I started turning back to look at the dignitary behind me. I quickly realized that the important person being thus addressed was I and moved my head back fast, as though its small motion had been an involuntary tic.

It was August 1993. The person so dignifying me was Foreign Minister Georgs Andrejevs of Latvia. This was before his contacts with the KGB were revealed, and he resigned. As a surgeon during Soviet times, a little reporting about colleagues was a condition for his continued professional travel abroad. It is tempting to judge him, but unless one can be sure of acting differently, better not.

I had arrived in Riga a day or two earlier to take up my first ambassadorial posting. Meeting the minister had a formal purpose: to give him a copy of my credentials before presenting the original to the president. Naturally, I addressed Andrejevs as Minister. Just as naturally, to him I was Excellency, or Your Excellency. Written, it is H.E.—Her Excellency or His Excellency.

Like other aspects of diplomacy, which may seem odd until their logic becomes clear, the designation could be considered silly, pompous, or amusing, but it has solid justification.

It is not the ambassador personally who deserves the title. Rather, the honorific signifies and dignifies what an ambassador represents. "Excellency" is not for me but for my country, for its people, and for the relationship between our nations.

Less official but no less important, it helps to deal with the unusual names. Simple and common in their home country, they are often mutilated abroad. Take my family name, Herzl. Its best-known bearer is Dr. Theodore Herzl, who founded political Zionism. A surprising number of interlocutors in all my postings knew about the remarkable political renaissance of the Jewish people and the visionary who led it, and they asked about a family connection (distant). Numerous streets and institutions throughout Israel are named for him. There is even a city, Herzliya, north of Tel Aviv.

Russian has no sound for *h*. The capital of Sweden is Stockgolm, and Cohen becomes Kagan. To Russian speakers in the Baltics, we, the great man and I, were usually Gerzl and sometimes Kherzl. Never mind suffixes that distinguish genders—in Latvian, I was Hercla.

When the Prime Minister of Lithuania came to visit Israel, I flew in ahead and waited for him in the VIP lounge at Ben Gurion airport. The cabinet minister who greeted him on behalf of the Israeli government was a learned professor of law, a worldly man. He asked the guest's name. I suggested Prime Minister. No, he insisted, I want to use his real name.

Adolfas was easy. Family name? Šleževičius. The little marks above the *s*, *z*, and *c* dictate their soft sound. The two *e*'s are pronounced differently. After several minutes of rigorous attempts, my fellow greeter agreed that prime minister was good enough, certainly better than Mister Unpronounceable.

The use of Excellency, Ambassador, or Minister eliminates mispronunciation. Namer and namee are saved embarrassment. No corrections are necessary; mutual dignity is maintained.

That ease cannot last long. After we've had lunch together, gossiped, and joked, honorifics are no longer appropriate. Until practice will defeat even the most challenging names, I will admit to using a stopgap. "My friend" or "my sister" is easier than, say, clicks in some African languages. The motivation for doing this is transparent, but it is preferable to "Thanks, I'd love another drink! Yes, the usual, and please remind me of your name."

Generally not given to formalities, Israelis often interact on a first-name basis. It is normal to hear cabinet ministers addressed as Dan or Dalia, or with a nickname, such as Tzipi and Bibi. Even the most junior staff do this in informal settings.

When I arrived in Riga, Udi, the embassy administrator, asked how I would like to be addressed. "Tova, of course; how else?" He asked that I reconsider. I gave it a cursory day or two, and stuck with it. After all, I am young and fun and informal! No need for distinctions! We will all be friends!

Too late I understood that when seeing myself in relation to others, I should also consider how they see themselves in relation to me. So-called Soviet equality did not extend to relations between management and staff. Our local employees were taken aback the first time we Israeli diplomats collected money to give them gifts for the holidays, rather than following the communist norm, in which staff gift managers.

Not surprising, then, that addressing their boss by her first name was out of the question. I was like a mother-in-law who demands to be called "mother" by her offspring's reluctant spouses. Except for one or two brave souls who crossed what I had mistakenly considered to be a trivial line, for three years I was "excuse me," "you," and "ehh." When I arrived in South Africa, I suggested that any local staff members who were not comfortable using my given name should preface it with Miss. That worked.

Clergy has its own complications. I developed close ties with several rabbis, yet I felt that I should address them with the respect that their position deserves. How to do that without creating a barrier of formality, or expecting an honorific in return? "Reb" is an unofficial designation for a rabbi, and it can be applied to any Jew. Just add the person's first name, Reb David, or even a foreign name, Reb Alan. It's both respectful and informal. It creates distance, but not too much.

It worked with Cyril Harris, South Africa's distinguished chief rabbi, and also with Mordechai Glazman in Riga. He, in turn, called me *Rebbetzin*, the female version, to acknowledge a little Jewish knowledge I have, and to reciprocate respect.

This in contrast to one of his counterparts, almost young enough to be my son, who called and said, "Tova? This is Rabbi K." It is fine that people pride themselves on their hard-earned titles. It is rude when they do not acknowledge the standing of others, especially if, like him, they represent something bigger than themselves.

With some of these rabbis, and others, I avoided stretching out my hand to be shaken—in some circles, touching people of the opposite gender is not acceptable. Otherwise, it is the common physical form of meeting, greeting, and departing.

Soon after arriving, I paid a courtesy call on my Polish colleague in Riga. Our rented offices were in the same building, his on the second floor, mine on the third. In 1992, the building was renamed the World Trade Center, and it became available to embassies and others. Earlier, it had housed the headquarters of the local Communist Party. A persistent rumor spoke of a secret floor that the elevator didn't reach and was allegedly connected with the structures that had pressured Dr. Georgs Andrejevs before he became the minister who first called me

Excellency.

The meeting in the Polish embassy ended. I stood up and offered my hand to my host, expecting him to shake it. To my surprise, he took the extended palm of my right hand into both of his and lifted the three-handed structure toward his lips. It remained there, elevated, ever so briefly. Except in a movie, I had never seen hand kissing. It felt unreal.

Air kissing is more common. Shaking hands or vaguely embracing, we each purse our lips at the air on both sides of our interlocutor's face, avoiding touch. I had been in South Africa about a year when a group of women ambassadors stood chatting at a reception in Cape Town. We were joined by Deputy Foreign Minister Aziz Pahad. He air kissed all my colleagues, came to me, and shook my hand.

I don't believe that the distinction was personal; I doubt that he noticed doing it. It was probably an instinctive expression of his government's attitude toward mine. In my coyest voice, I asked, "But Aziz (we were already on first-name terms), don't I also deserve a kiss?" That didn't limit subsequent South African criticism of Israel, but at least it put an end to such public displays of distaste.

Pronouncing names correctly is one matter; recalling them is another. I am probably not alone in being annoyed when people expect to be remembered after many contactless years, or demand that I guess their identity by the sound of their unfamiliar voice on the phone. In my first posting, I saw an amazing display of name recall, coupled with civility.

I accompanied an Israeli politician to a meeting with the second-most-senior person in the U.S. House of Representatives. The following day, that American politician saw me in one of the long corridors on Capitol Hill. A familiar face on every American television screen, he saw me, stretched out his hand, and said, "Hello, Tova; Tom Foley."

Remembering my name was evidence of a useful skill for a politician—an excellent memory. But it was the other part that impressed me. How much stammering would be saved if instead of enforced guessing games and embarrassing riddles, chance acquaintances simply reminded you of their names, maybe adding when and where you had met. To such grace I could then reply eagerly, "Of course I remember you!" And add Excellency, or Highness, possibly Reb. Maybe even a first name, but only if I could pronounce it correctly.

Chapter 10
Informal Connections

The Ties That Bind

In a casual conversation, a colleague told me that when he was ambassador in Nepal, he regularly went on treks. If Jerusalem questioned his long absences, he responded, "I represent Israel in the whole country, not just in the capital, Kathmandu." Although his dedication to exploring Himalayan monasteries on remote snowy peaks was unusual, he had a point.

There is more to a country than the official bureaus and pricey restaurants where decision makers mingle. I still regret not taking a day to visit the sand dunes near the Lithuanian village of Nida. If they were important enough for numerous Lithuanians to mention, they were important enough for me to make the effort. After all, we Israelis would consider it odd, even rude, if a diplomat waited to visit Masada until the end of a posting or skipped the Dead Sea entirely. I learned my lesson, and within weeks of arriving in South Africa, I freed a morning in Cape Town and took the ferry to Robben Island, the apartheid-era prison where Nelson Mandela spent eighteen of his twenty-seven prison years.

Excursions expand a foreigner's horizons pleasurably. The diplomat displays interest in locals and in their traditions and lifestyles, dilemmas and challenges. In turn, they open to the envoy and to the envoy's country. Everyone gains. But in countries that are too large for weekend excursions, or with demanding jobs, or both, as were my positions in Washington, who has the time? Not me! I kept most of my vacation days for home leave in Israel and hardly saw anything of America: New York, Boston, bits of Florida, and two or three short trips to the West Coast, mostly work related.

This is why I remain grateful to Senator Charles Grassley of Iowa for broadening my American vision. Every second August he invites ambassadors to America to visit his state. In 1999, the Israeli invitation was redirected to me.

Grassley is candid about his agenda—he wants to promote business between foreign countries and his state. For me, that week provided an opportunity to see that the United States produces more than laws. Unlike my contacts in the capital, most of the people we met were not connected to politics, although ultimately everything is political: policy does not grow in a void; legislation arises from needs. This exposure to the heartland was like removing the makeup and showing America's true face. It was an education.

My schooling included an erudite lecture about raising pigs, delivered during a post-lunch bus ride. Everyone else dozed. The only alert listener was this observant Jewess, who cannot sleep in anything that moves. Pork is big business in Iowa, found in most meals. It may be overt, as meat, or covert, as lard in flaky baked goods.

Keeping kosher, coupled with an irrational fear of most dogs, is why I asked to stay in hotels rather than in the homes of hospitable Iowans. I did not want to walk into a house and say, "Please put the dog away, it makes me nervous," followed by "No pasta for me. I know it has no pork or any meat, but maybe the pot did. Just a tomato, please."

Eating tomatoes and tinned tuna is not fun. Unless there is a good reason not to, like religious observance or health constraints, sharing local cuisine is a great way to connect. Stories are told of guests at exotic tables who receive an unusual body part, such as the sheep's

eye. I had a ready reason to avoid such delicacies and never had to chew a distasteful morsel. But on balance, I regret missing that aspect of life abroad. Fancy eateries, plain establishments, local food, and special drinks all offer interesting flavors, cultural insights, and topics of conversation.

I ate cooked food only in rare kosher restaurants or in those I knew to be purely vegetarian, including some Indian ones. When it came to local cuisine, which developed over centuries and showcased agriculture and history, custom, need, or status, I could look and smell, read recipes, and imagine. That was all.

There are other ways to connect. Music ranks high, and it is especially useful when language barriers limit direct verbal communication. People can sing or play instruments together, or they can sit and nod, smile or applaud, as others do it. Alas, although I politely accepted invitations to hear the National Something or Other, I have wooden ears. As background for doing something else, such as writing or cleaning, I welcome music. But as an activity in itself, little bores me as much as people making sounds with special machines or with their voices. Only sports bore me more.

Before my first posting in Washington, a veteran of that city warned me, only half in jest, that if I did not develop an appreciation for the wildly popular football (the American variety, not soccer as it is played in Israel) and did not display curiosity about baseball, I would have no basis on which to build personal relationships with professional contacts. That would hinder my career and halt my success.

Within a week of arriving in Washington in September 1985, a group of Senate staffers came to our embassy for a briefing by my senior colleague in the congressional department. He introduced me, the newcomer, and they invited me to join them at an Orioles baseball game in Baltimore the following Sunday. I was thrilled to accept, certain that my interest would instantly mark me as a Washington insider. The threat of impending failure didn't lessen my boredom, nor did it help me to understand the game's rules. After that experience, I never willingly went again, to any game, of any sport, anywhere.

One involuntary exception does not count. Lithuania is home to the tallest Europeans; no wonder that many excel in basketball. When their prime minister—not a short man—visited Israel, his program included viewing a game played by Maccabi Tel Aviv, a leading Israeli team. As Israel's Ambassador to his country, I accompanied him throughout his trip. His excitement was infectious, and I enjoyed it. Still, I would not choose to watch games in my free time.

Exercise is conducive to developing friendship. Moving together, sweating together, showering together—all these generate, well, togetherness. My laziness was not entirely to blame for its paucity. In my ambassadorial years, I would have had to go with a bodyguard. He would watch over me, while imposing on the privacy of my fellow gymnasts or swimmers. I swam in private pools, hired private trainers, and most often did nothing.

When working in Riga, I picked up one local interest that I still enjoy in my neighborhood gym—the sauna. Even if house, office, and car are all heated, that northern winter frigidity filters into the bones and shrivels the marrow, which is miraculously revived by a long sweat.

A sauna is found in many Baltic hotels and in some homes. My favorite was on the twenty-sixth floor of Hotel Olümpia in Tallinn, with giant windows overlooking the Bay of Helsinki. I loved going there in winter mornings, as snow fell and a pale sun struggled to rise. Alternating dry heat and a very cold pool, the tingling sensation as heat-encrusted skin meets icy water—what a way to start the working day! However, although it would have undoubtedly helped my

efforts to bond, I did not go native enough to sweat in mixed company, men and women, drinks in hand.

Fulfilling an ancient plan delayed from my time as the class artist in grade school, I took art classes in Riga. Ivars Heinrihsons taught me. He is one of Latvia's foremost painters and shares a studio with his wife, Helena. They introduced me to locals whom I wouldn't have met otherwise; paintbrushes swept away any formal gaps between us.

As my posting neared its end, I hesitatingly took Ivars's advice and had my farewell party in a gallery. It was a diplomatic reception cum amateur exhibition. The first generation of ambassadors to Riga was a novelty. We received much attention when we came and again when we left. Like all departing colleagues, I gave many serious interviews, but I also had entirely different coverage in the cultural press and TV.

Painting, mountain climbing, volunteering for a local charity (spouses do a lot of that), riding a Harley Davidson as did my British colleague in Riga—those are fun ways to connect with locals while also taking a break from work and its worries. As with my exhibition in Riga, they can trigger press mention in a nonprofessional capacity, uncovering the person beneath the official. Interest generates more interest and will open more personal and professional doors.

Opportunities can be found—or not—almost anywhere. I paid an introductory visit to the editorial offices of the *Sunday Independent* in Johannesburg. The editor invited the paper's culture editor, a Jewish woman who worked in the adjoining office, to join us. I told her that I had majored in English literature and read a lot, and I added that she is lucky to review books as part of her job. She asked if I would like to try to write a review. Grateful for both the intellectual challenge and the rare opportunity to have my name printed in South Africa in a context unrelated to the Middle East, I agreed.

She left me with her editor and returned a minute later with Ann Patchett's award-winning novel, *Bel Canto*. I read it that weekend. Thoughts on my first attempt at literary criticism were halted by a telephone call from the culture editor. She explained that she had decided against publishing my review, as other ambassadors would demand the same.

More likely, she saw the angle that pleased me from the opposite side—she worried that she would be seen as giving me an unusual platform to improve my image and that of my country. I did not ask how many of my colleagues had the right academic background for the task and offered to send back the book. She politely said that it wasn't necessary. If any readers of the *Sunday Independent* wondered why they never read a review of *Bel Canto*, now they know.

Connecting informally teaches a diplomat what cannot be learned from books or in official meetings. To get it right, interest in the lives and thoughts of others is required. Time, flexibility, and openness are vital. Also, willing partners.

Chapter 11
Bodyguards
Someone to Watch Over Me

Six years of my life were weighed down by the heavy eyes of strangers. From 1993 until 1996, as Israel's Ambassador to Riga, I was escorted by Latvian bodyguards. Three men in a unit alternated daily. From 2001 to 2003, Israelis shadowed me in South Africa. They came for a month or two and were then rotated, for alertness.

Before describing this forced intimacy with strangers, daily life with an amalgam of increased safety and reduced privacy, some words are needed to explain the difference in nationality between the guards. Before that—why have one at all?

If threats inhibit a diplomat from functioning freely, it reflects badly on the host country. Israeli diplomats, especially ambassadors, are more threatened than many. Regardless of political disagreements, most countries allocate resources to safeguard them, as did Latvia. In addition to the daily bodyguard (who also came on my regular two- or three-day trips to Estonia and Lithuania), a Latvian policeman sat outside my apartment in Riga, whether or not I was at home.

During my time there (throughout this book, I write of my work and times, not of what came before or after), South Africa was considered high risk for us. Israel was criticized by elements in government and press, vilified in church and academia. There were openly militant Muslims. Yet with one exception, the authorities did not provide me with security: After 9/11 they guarded me briefly, and provided the same care to the Ambassador of Palestine. Sometimes a rusting riot control vehicle appeared on the lawn outside my residence in Pretoria. No one was inside. We referred to it as environmental art; its main effect was to stop the grass under it from growing.

So we had to fend for ourselves. We hired local guards to patrol the residence grounds, day and night. We also imported a bodyguard from Israel to guard the trophy target—me. He lived in a small unit on the ground floor of my big house. An emergency door between our homes was opened soon after I arrived. It was to be used only in case of suspected danger, say, if the security alarm went off. The bodyguard from Israel had a day off each week and was replaced by someone from the embassy's small permanent security staff or from the Israeli airline. I was never alone.

N was the most memorable of the bodyguards from Israel. He was friendly and attractive. I, too, was charmed by that crinkly look from on high, dark brown eyes narrowing in a wide smile. He came to me from a stint in the Scandinavian winter, arriving at the end of the southern hemisphere summer, with its skimpy clothes revealing expanses of tanned skin. Alas, one day off per week does not ease meetings between boy and girls. Some would be deterred by this coupling of temptation and immobilization. Not so the resourceful N.

Sometimes, he told a girl where I would be. "We are going to a reception at such an embassy; meet me outside the gate." Or, "The ambassador is invited to a braai (South African barbecue) at the home of the head of the United Jewish Appeal at this address in Johannesburg. Call me when you arrive." She did, and out he went. Intelligence operations allocate huge resources to collect data on the whereabouts of potential targets, and he

distributed it casually to strangers. True, most twentyish women encountered in bars are not terrorist handmaidens, but all it takes is one.

I was new to this business; he was only my second or third. I assumed that he knew what he was doing. Also, he had gone to school with children of my close friends, and we had fewer degrees of separation than are usual in intimate Israel, adding an element of discomfort to my situation. Moreover, although I rarely hesitate to share my opinions with superiors and equals, I try to be careful with those situated lower on the professional rung. I said nothing.

Passover was approaching. I accepted an invitation to attend the communal seder at Jaffa, the Jewish Home for the Aged, near my house in Pretoria. A nice Jewish boy away from home on the most family focused of holidays should not sit alone. I asked that N be seated with me at the main table. The proceedings were conducted from there; all eyes were on us. N's phone rang. He stood up and went out. Watched by the gathering, he finished speaking and sat down, only to be interrupted again—not by an urgent security alert, but by another call from a female admirer. Still, I did not complain to the embassy's security department, and I did not say anything to N.

When his cell phone was stolen, he provided his acquaintances with my unlisted home number. I can still hear the voices of Margaret or Anna, my household helpers, announcing that he had a call. The sound of his name carried from the kitchen, via the hallway, into the small downstairs study, and through the newly created emergency door into his flat. Breathless and eager, he ran to the phone. Not through the front door of the house, which would have kept her waiting a minute longer, but along the same invasive route.

It happened only a few times, and none of his successors abused that door. Nevertheless, for the remainder of my three years in South Africa, I was haunted by the memory of that imposition on what little privacy remained to me; I was unsettled by knowing that I could never be guaranteed of being alone.

Not only women skewed his judgment. Anything that hindered gratification was pushed aside. We were in Cape Town, and he realized that he wanted a souvenir he had noticed when we walked in a market the day before. He did not ask that I join him for the few minutes it would take him to complete the purchase. Instead, he locked the driver and me in the car.

Once, he instructed me to shout from the window of my sixth-floor hotel room if anything should go wrong, as he really must try that sparkling pool below. Not wanting to cause trouble to the young man who would lay down his life for mine (would he?), not yet quite sure of what was professionally right or wrong (although my suspicions were growing), I remained silent in the face of constant surprises and humiliations.

I was about to finish paying at the checkout counter of Pick n Pay of Norwood, a suburb of Johannesburg. N left me to go back for something and then tried to jump the line to join me. I had appeared on television and addressed Jewish groups, so I was easily recognized, especially among Jewish customers who came for an outstanding selection of kosher products. I offered to wait for N, or better, join him at the back of the line. To which, using crass Hebrew, he expressed his opinion of the patiently waiting patrons, members of a community that prides itself on excellent Jewish education, including the Hebrew language.

A few weeks after N left, the director of embassy security came to my house. He was in the upstairs passage, doing something to the alarm system, and I asked if I could say something about N. I think that was the turning point that made us friends, but we barely knew each other then. Having been informed of my quirks by the fearless guard, he answered, "He shouldn't

jump the line in the supermarket; is there anything else?" I remember his swarthy face stunned into paleness when he heard some of the "else." A year later I heard that N would like another tour in South Africa. I made my objections known, and I never saw him again.

In August 2003, toward the end of my term in Pretoria, I found myself with K. He had similar skills to N, but he lacked the charm. By then I had understood the obvious. Security is a means, not an end. It should be almost invisible. Unless objectively unavoidable, the guard must never hinder.

Minimal English was the least of K's shortcomings. Despite repeated explanations that we were guests who must respect the host country, its rules, and its officials, he habitually pushed uniformed policemen out of our way because "you are a protected personage." He often woke late, thereby delaying me. If he arrived at my door on time, he regularly had to go back to his room to collect something, usually his cell phone. Once, guests were expected and it rained. At precisely that time, he showered. I banged on his door for long minutes. Until he was dry and dressed and went to open the gate to the complex—only he was authorized to do it—my wet guests had to wait outside.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development was upon us. Three Israeli ministers were coming to Johannesburg. I did not want to be a hostage to K's incompetence and asked embassy security to keep him away from me. The embassy's security department was burdened by the event, but they somehow juggled schedules and magically produced shifts. In only one or two of the meeting's ten days was I burdened by that unsuitable young man.

Latvian guards disturbed me less than their Israeli counterparts in South Africa. They went home after the working day, and I was not bothered by knowing that someone was constantly lurking in the background. There was also language, or lack of it. I didn't speak theirs, or they mine. A few shared words in Latvian, Russian, German, or English were usually enough to communicate essentials, no more. Cell phones were then new and rare. Other than music that I chose and a little talk between guard and driver in the front seat, the car was quiet. I could read, daydream, or nap. Unlike in smallish Israel, I did not know their cousin's neighbor's daughter. It was just work.

How was it, to live like that? Let me tell you about the time I forgot to pack underwear.

The embassy was in Pretoria, the seat of government. A few times each week, I drove an hour to Johannesburg, the country's biggest city and its national center of business, press, and Jewish activity. Parliament meets in Cape Town, a thousand miles away. This is because when the Union of South Africa was set up between four provinces and colonies in 1910, there was disagreement on where to locate the capital. Pretoria became the administrative capital, and Cape Town the legislative capital.

Parliament used to sit continuously for six months each year, forcing a mass seasonal migration of officials, diplomats, journalists, and assorted staff. Some moved with their families. Others left them behind and lived apart. Parliament now sits intermittently throughout the year, and there are nine provinces in postapartheid South Africa. Everyone agrees that the divided capital is no longer relevant, but it has remained as is.

Some governments, including Israel's, maintain a second home in Cape Town, in addition to the main residence in Pretoria. The arrangement may be cheaper and is certainly more comfortable than long stays in hotels. I kept basics in that Cape Town apartment: casual clothes, sleeping stuff, underwear. All I had to take with me on the monthly flight from Pretoria to Cape Town were clothes for work. Packing them was almost automatic.

In addition to those three—Pretoria, Johannesburg, and Cape Town—other cities in South Africa also merit some ambassadorial presence. I visited Durban, South Africa's third largest city, a few times. During one of those trips, I also went to neighboring Pietermaritzburg, the capital of the province. I once took a few days for meetings in Port Elizabeth and East London, adjacent cities on the Indian Ocean coast, about midway between Cape Town and Durban.

Toward the end of my term in South Africa, I decided to visit Bloemfontein and Kimberley. They are en route from Pretoria to Cape Town, a little nearer the former and an hour drive from each other.

Kimberley is famous for its diamond mines. As part of the division between provinces, the top court sat in Bloemfontein, which became South Africa's legislative capital. When those traveling between Parliament and government still drove or took the train, the city and its court were a vital stopping point for many. Its official standing shrank after apartheid, when the Constitutional Court was established in Johannesburg.

I attached this visit to South Africa's heartland to a trip to Cape Town and did it by car. Including the hassle of airports, driving would not take much longer than flying, and I would finally step on the barren landscape over which I flew often. As usual when leaving Cape Town, I repacked my work clothes and left the basics in the apartment. Driver, bodyguard, and I headed north.

After a few stops on our 550-mile journey, we reached Bloemfontein and settled in the hotel to rest ahead of a long working day. My 2003 diary reminds me that on Tuesday, September 16, I spoke to students and faculty at the local university, had tea with judges of the Court of Appeal, called on the premier of the province (the city's mayor must have been away), briefed editorial staff of a local newspaper, and spent the evening with the small Jewish community.

In the morning, I began to dress. There was no underwear. This was not a pleasant discovery. What would I do? Remain as is? Wash by hand and wear wet? Repeat on Wednesday morning, before the drive to Kimberly, and again on Thursday, feeling icky until we would reach Pretoria at midday?

Drivers may run personal errands, like shopping. In this case, I would have to explain to him in detail what I needed. Also, the driver must be available for any emergency. The bodyguard must be told if he leaves and where he goes. The undercover tale will become the stuff of legend among an international network of young men, who will share it with my colleagues in other countries. My own embassy staff will know. But maybe the discomfort outweighs future embarrassment?

After some minutes of panic, I came up with what I still consider the best possible solution. I phoned the sleeping guard and announced that we will start the day earlier than planned, as I want to drive around a little, to get an impression of the town before my meetings. He woke the driver and informed him of my odd reason to cut short his rest.

We breakfasted and set out, turning right here, slowing down there. Soon, a department store appeared, and it was open! Not overly elegant, at that moment it seemed to me like the height of luxury. "Look, Ackermans! I wonder if their stock here is the same as in the big cities! Let us stop and see!"

The guard followed me into the shop. He trailed me while I walked up and down the aisles, carefully studying the goods. I casually bought pink ankle socks that I used until the elastic weakened; picked up a shirt I never wore. And underwear. We returned to the hotel because "I

forgot some important papers." The guard checked my room for signs of tampering and allowed me to enter. He shut the door behind him and waited outside. A minute later I joined him, clean and comfortable.

Even without absent undergarments, a bodyguard is discomforting. Think of being questioned about every private plan, all guests, who each person is, where I met them, how long the expected visit.

Picture a man standing by me when I pray in the women's section of an Orthodox synagogue, and it mattered little if he was Jewish, as were the Israelis in South Africa, or not, as were the Latvians.

Imagine a young stranger standing outside the changing room as I stretch my arm to return discarded items to the saleslady, and understand why most of my clothes were bought in Israel.

Visualize sitting with a friend in a garden cafe, the guard milling clumsily nearby, ignoring an empty table in order to save his allowance while eying an empty seat at mine. Should I invite him to join? Allow him to interfere, as some did, in my conversations? Shut him up? Tell him to stop circling? Pay for him? Not?

A guard for the day, loaned from the airline, accompanied me to dinner at a private home in Johannesburg. The conversation was strong when he opened the dining room door and announced that he had a flight to send out early the following morning. Should I be considerate of him and leave? Ignore him? Explain to him why staying is important? Report him?

To be fair, those were exceptions, as were N and K. In Israel and presumably elsewhere, guards are carefully selected for their physical and mental abilities and are trained rigorously. Most are smart, respectful, and considerate. Their accompaniment had advantages.

A fellow human reveled with me at the sight of whales, dolphins, and penguins in Africa, and tall trees reaching the frozen Baltic Sea. One helped with my computer, another taught me to stretch after a brisk morning walk together. In South Africa, where a trip to the automatic money machine was often an invitation to robbers, my wallet was safe. Hampered by a weak sense of direction, I never struggled with a map. At a boring event, my young man was ready company until it was polite to leave. If I had a free evening in Tallinn or in Vilnius, I often invited my driver and guard to the cinema and ignored inquisitive looks from strangers.

From acquaintances, it was more than looks. A middle-aged woman who is constantly followed by a young man elicits curiosity, smiles, and double-edged comments, to which I responded in kind. When a female colleague said, "Lucky you; can I also get one?" I chuckled that "they are only for dangerous women, like me." If asked, "Do they enjoy doing it?" I dutifully said with an implied wink, "You know today's young people, they do anything for money." You get the idea.

Sometimes, I bump into one of my Israeli guards here in Jerusalem. One of my Latvian escorts guarded his president when she visited Israel. For a moment, I remember the times we spent together and feel a little nostalgic. Maybe they remember home-cooked food from my kitchen, or think of the sites we saw together. We share a past, not all bad.

Then I recall the heaviness in my gut whenever I returned to Latvia or to South Africa after an unhampered absence; remember my dread at knowing that a human shadow will soon set upon me. It felt like growing a second skin.

What a relief it was to retire and be free.

Chapter 12
The Diplomatic Corps
It's a Family, Sort Of

Upon discovering that we almost share a birthday, my Danish colleague in Riga and I decided to have a joint party to break the December gloom. It would be at my home, which was more conveniently situated than hers. Kirsten and I would each invite personal friends as well as our joint and separate work contacts. When we saw that our combined list included all but two or three of about twenty heads of diplomatic missions, we decided to invite them all.

Drawings of balloons decorated the invitations to the party to demonstrate that it would not be a standard diplomatic affair, not at all. It would be very informal, and everyone would have tons of fun. Both our names were typed at the bottom of the invitation; there was a place for us both to sign.

Arrangements were proceeding when I remembered the Cuban Ambassador. As Israel had no diplomatic relations with Cuba, he was not on any of my lists and he simply did not enter my mind. But Denmark had full relations with Cuba; there was no reason for my cohost not to invite him. Should I go along with her and risk angering the United States, whose envoy would be among the guests? For what? A silly party, with everyone choosing a plastic animal nose from a silver platter at the entrance? Maybe we should just cancel the whole thing?

I asked the Foreign Ministry in Israel what to do. The Cuban Ambassador received an invitation that differed by an iota from all others. Under the sketches of balloons and above the typed names, it had only one handwritten signature. He was invited to a party at my home, to celebrate my birthday, but it was clear that I did not invite him. He did not come.

If such deliberation around a trivial event seems excessive, let me mention a large American interest section in Havana. American diplomats work under the auspices of the Swiss Embassy in the six-story building that used to be the American Embassy in Cuba's capital. No one is fooled by that. Nor is anyone deluded by the presence of foreign trade offices and cultural centers in Taipei. China's demands explain why countries conduct diplomatic relations with Taiwan while pretending not to.

Why the charade? Imagine a big family with old resentments and unresolved grievances, a favorite second cousin, a miserly uncle, the inevitable black sheep, and open secrets around which everyone tiptoes. True, sometimes wounds open or old animosities erupt. Yet with flexibility and compromise, the extended family somehow manages to function much of the time. Some of what happens between countries and their representatives is comparable.

The diplomatic family in each capital is known as "The Diplomatic Corps." The *p* and *s* are silent. It is pronounced "core," not "corpse," as I once heard a director of protocol (Israeli, I regret to say) address a group of foreign diplomats who were awaiting a briefing in Jerusalem. The corps is a formal workers' organization, and it also provides informal opportunities to socialize and exchange information. Our leader is the dean of the diplomatic corps.

The dean mediates between local authorities and the corps. Should an issue arise in a capital and affect diplomats stationed there, say, growing crime in the neighborhoods where most of us live or a tax problem, we don't go separately to the government to demand a solution. Instead, we entrust our dean with conveying our needs. At the same time, local

authorities view the dean as a conduit to the entire diplomatic corps. Should the president host a dinner in honor of a high-level visitor and have place for one ambassador only, our dean will be invited to represent us.

Who is the dean? In Lithuania, as in some Catholic countries, this prominence is often given to the Pope's diplomatic representative, the Papal Nuncio. Otherwise, the corps's leader is the ambassador who has been stationed longest in that capital. In many professional foreign services, such as Israel's, tours abroad are limited to about five years. Elsewhere, ambassadorships may be a way for authorities to reward their nearest and dearest, and the perk may be indefinite. As a result, the longest serving ambassadors do not necessarily represent the most democratic states.

That explains how, when I arrived in South Africa in early 2001, the ten ambassadors ensconced in chronological comfort at the top of the diplomatic list were representatives of African and Arab nations. Number one, who belonged to both categories, was the ambassador of Libya.

The first time we were together at a reception, I introduced myself to my dean. Subsequently, he unintentionally chanced to turn his eyes away for just a second at the precise moment when I arrived, and happened, quite accidentally, not to notice me. He resorted to this conduct even at events of the corps, where, as host, he was expected to welcome each guest. But I could do my job without his hand shaking mine and paid no attention—until it mattered.

Each year, the South African Parliament opens ceremonially in Cape Town on a Friday morning in February. Among those watching from the galleries are ambassadors who travel especially from Pretoria, and usually remain in town a week or more to attend daily ministerial briefings and the annual budget speech.

On Saturday after Parliament opens, the Foreign Minister hosts the diplomatic corps to dinner at a wine estate near Cape Town. Due to my Sabbath, I arrived late at my first such dinner, but I managed to hear the end of the dean's speech, and colleagues kindly informed me of the rest. On behalf of the entire diplomatic corps, which includes me, my dean thanked the government of South Africa for its stand against Israeli atrocities. Representing us all, he spoke of Libya's ongoing support for the Palestinian struggle. This was an unusually blatant violation of the rules that enable the corps to function. Several ambassadors demanded that in the future he stick to unanimous niceties. He did, and I assumed that there would be no further problems.

A few months later, South Africa was to host the World Conference against Racism. Near the end of the book, I explain why the United States and Israel considered boycotting the meeting. To encourage universal participation, the South African Foreign Ministry asked the dean to invite the corps to a luncheon at the Pretoria Sheraton Hotel.

The Foreign Minister and a senior UN official probably made persuasive arguments to explain why everyone should attend, but the American and I were not there to hear them. Our dean, whose country ignored both of ours, did not invite us. Undermining our ability to carry out our responsibilities was unprofessional and inexcusable.

What could I do? Rant and rave? Scream and shout? I did the diplomatic equivalent. I wrote a note.

Diplomatic notes have set beginnings and endings: The Embassy of the State of Israel presents its compliments to (in this case) the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps and to the members of the Diplomatic Corps and has the honor to (here the

text begins to vary) refer to the absence of Her Excellency the Ambassador of Israel from the briefing by the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Diplomatic Corps on (date). The last sentence is something like: The Embassy of the State of Israel hereby renews to (same list) the assurances of its highest consideration.

Content is sandwiched between the two paragraphs. In this case, it contained four words: "She was not invited."

In diplomatese, that is blunt. I did not apologize for my absence and simply pointed to he who failed to do his duty. My note announced to the corps and to the local authorities that the dean's national agenda excludes countries and disrupts the corps's ability to function. After that, the corps decided that the longest serving European ambassador would inform the American and the Israeli of anything we needed to know.

If a dean is unable to fulfill his responsibilities, say, due to frequent absences or an excessively busy schedule, he customarily steps aside for the next in line. Boycotting a country equally limited the dean's abilities to fulfill his role. I could have tried to have him replaced, but in light of South African attitudes to Israel, such an effort was doomed to fail. Also, had his deputy taken over, my situation would have remained uncomfortable.

The deputy dean was the Ambassador of Palestine. Israel dealt with the Palestinian Authority, and I could mix with him socially and debate him publicly, but acknowledging him as deputy dean implied recognizing, as did South Africa, that he represents a country. His deanship would not ease my situation.

Like many voluntary organizations, the corps has fees. The parting gift from my colleagues in Riga was a silver ashtray with a Latvian coin embedded. I no longer smoke, and it sits on a glass shelf near my front door, an elegant receptacle for coins.

Being off the Libyan's list, no one asked me for fees. Near the end of my term in Pretoria, the Egyptian Ambassador, who had recently taken over as the corps's treasurer, asked why I did not contribute. Without mentioning the dean's lists, I told her that I had never been billed, and I immediately wrote a check for that year's dues. I did not invite the dean to my farewell party (he might have sent his deputy . . .); contrary to common practice, I did not receive a parting gift from my colleagues.

Soon after arriving in a new post, ambassadors must call on the dean (no, not that one) and visit ambassadors in whose countries we served previously, in any capacity. We choose whom else to see. Ideally everyone, as I did in Riga. That is difficult when the corps is big. Freshly arrived in Pretoria, I asked to visit women ambassadors and to meet a few of special interest, such as the Indian Ambassador, whose country's relations with both Israel and South Africa were then growing rapidly.

Informal interaction within the corps is important, especially when language is limiting and colleagues are the easy social option. One week, I ate with the Danish ambassador in Riga (he had replaced Kirsten, my birthday partner) four times: thrice at events hosted by colleagues, and once—we did not know how often we would meet, or we would have rescheduled—lunch, just us two.

Colleagues are excellent for sharing knowledge. We understand what the other needs and are happy to provide it. Unless discretion is vital, say, if our countries compete for a business deal, there is only good in telling. I share a recent rumor. My colleague will be better informed, use it in conversation, and report it back home. Another time, sharing will be reciprocated, and I will benefit.

This source of information is particularly helpful to fresh ambassadors who are trying to find their bearings and to nonresident ambassadors who have to understand fast when visiting countries where they don't live. Everyone remembers where he or she heard of the events of 9/11. I was in my office in Pretoria, hearing about Lesotho from the Dutch Ambassador. Like me, she was also a nonresident ambassador there, but she had already visited a few times and I had not.

My responsibilities in two postings in Washington were specialized and did not include interaction with other embassies. In my capacity as congressional liaison, I would see diplomats from other countries during meetings on foreign assistance. We nodded, maybe exchanged a little small talk or a bit of information, but that was all. Still, it being Washington, foreign diplomats were a constant presence.

An important staffer on the Committee on Foreign Affairs was a close friend during my first posting. He would often remark that he had been to dinner at the Saudis, or mention that he was on his way to an Algerian reception. For me, interacting with representatives of those countries was a dream beyond reach. Half in jest, I would ask that he take me along and I would pretend not to be Israeli. One day, he asked if I would join him for dinner at a Chinese diplomat's home.

The world's most populous country and my little one had no formal relations at the time, but we were flirting privately. Israel had appointed a consul general in Hong Kong. The territory would soon revert to China, which no doubt knew and approved. Diplomatically, China was not as distant from Israel as those remote Arab countries that entertained my friend, but the decision to accept the American's invitation was not mine to make. As with inviting the Cuban Ambassador to my birthday party in Riga some years later, I consulted Jerusalem. The response was that if the Chinese hosts agree that the staffer is escorted by a friend who happens to be an Israeli diplomat, I may go.

The Chinese Embassy employee who had conveyed the invitation said that it was all right for me to go. We then had to weigh what to do about what proved to be a meal of many courses, with all manner of vegetable, fish, bird, and animal—how to explain my religious observance? China experts whom my friend consulted thought that explaining my ritual limits would be difficult; I should rather claim an upset stomach. Young and tanned, I could not have looked healthier, but I made a point of holding my belly at regular intervals and responded to every offer to taste something with a grateful no, it is better not to risk it, not even rice; just a little more tea, please. Next time, I'd love to, for sure.

That was the least of the evening's awkwardness. Chatting in the living room before entering the dining room, one of the hosts (three embassy couples entertained the same number of foreigners) asked, "Ah, you work in Congress?" "No." "Ah, you work lobbyist?" "No." "Ah, you journalist?" No." "Ah, so where you work?" To my horror, it became clear that they had not been consulted or even forewarned about me. My friend was deep in another conversation. What could I do, invent a life story? I answered that I work in an embassy. "Ah, which embassy?" I told the truth. Stunned silence gave way to a private dialogue in what I assumed to be Mandarin.

The exchange was not loud enough to be heard by other hosts. The identical set of questions and answers was repeated once more in the living room and again at the dining room table. A quarter century later, I still blush mentally when the polite, "Ah, which embassy?" echoes melodiously in my memory.

I assumed that the junior employee of the Chinese Embassy who conveyed the invitation and unilaterally approved my presence would be fired. The China hand who recommended not explaining kosher laws again proved wise. To remove him, his superiors would have to tell Beijing what he had done and would have to admit to their lax supervision. I don't know if they kept me quiet among themselves, pretending that I never happened, or if they coordinated a cover-up. Regardless, the offender continued to walk the corridors of Capitol Hill.

In September 1988, I returned from Washington and worked briefly in the North America desk of the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem. Around that time, Phil Wilcox, whom I knew from Washington, became the American Consul General in Jerusalem. In November he invited me to an election party at his residence.

I went, and I told anyone who would listen that I was there in my private capacity. Given my juniority, my protestations were ridiculous. Yet I was right—as an official, I had no business being there. This calls for a short explanation of consuls, consulates, and Jerusalem's unique legal status.

Consular activities include issuing passports to the country's residents living abroad, helping ship bodies of dead expatriates, and giving visas to locals. When—this may be a little confusing—those functions are performed by an embassy, the consul in the embassy is responsible.

To add confusion, when a country is very big in size and population and it is difficult for an embassy to fulfill all the necessary functions from the capital, consulates perform local political functions, similar to what an embassy does nationally. Thus, the embassy speaks to the press and politicians on the national level, while at the same time the consulate general interacts with a region's opinion makers. This division of responsibility would make it seem that ambassadors are more senior than consuls, but the person who heads Israel's Consulate General in New York is obviously more senior than most Israeli diplomats, including, say, the Ambassador to Riga.

(There are also honorary consuls. When there are not enough interests to justify opening a resident embassy or investing in several consulates, local citizens may be entrusted by a foreign country to perform some functions on its behalf, such as issuing visas and hosting national day celebrations. In return for such gratis services, the honorary consuls enjoy status, consular license plates, and limited privileges, such as tax-free liquor. As opposed to diplomats, whose terms are limited by their governments and who may be recalled or fired, honorary consuls are usually lifelong appointments, often passed from parent to child. Newly independent Estonia wisely limited these honorary appointments to three years, and Israel keeps them to a minimum.)

As for Jerusalem, everyone recognizes that practically, it is Israel's capital. However, international-legal recognition is limited. This is why foreign embassies are situated in and around Tel Aviv. Their unfortunate diplomats spend frustrating hours on Highway One, driving between their offices and Jerusalem, where most government offices are, Defense in Tel Aviv being the notable exception.

The anomaly can be traced to the UN resolution of 1947 on establishing two separate states (one for Jews and one for Arabs) in what was then British Mandatory Palestine. The resolution, which has not been revoked and is officially still on the books, also called for Jerusalem to be internationalized.

Harking back to 1947, the Americans do not define their Jerusalem Consulate General as

being in Israel or in any other country. It is simply Jerusalem. Since the Palestinian issue gained prominence, the handful of foreign consulates in Jerusalem have also effectively become embassies to Palestine, and the diplomats who head them are as senior as many ambassadors.

For us, the main issue was, and remains, that the consulates' presence in Jerusalem announces that their countries do not regard the city as Israel's capital, or even that it is in Israel. Israel rejects this implication of the consulates' presence. We deal with these consulates on a municipal level, as if they are like the Israeli Consulate General in Mumbai, which has no reason to interact with the central Indian government in New Delhi. We also provide them with diplomatic courtesies such as tax exemptions. For that, they deal with the protocol department of the Foreign Ministry.

I did not work for protocol but for a political department. As a matter of principle, my interlocutors were in the American Embassy in Tel Aviv. Repeatedly insisting to other guests at the Wilcoxes that this official was partying privately was intended to show that my presence does not endorse America's position on Jerusalem.

All those step-missions, invitations-in-law, and pseudorelations may seem silly. To view them in a more serious light, it helps to remember that by their essence, diplomats are not private people. In their persons, they embody countries and represent policies.

Countries may trade without any diplomatic relations. They can deal officially, but furtively, through secret channels. Diplomacy is the public expression of international interaction. Its rites and facades do not replace substance. Rather, our visible ways of showcasing relations are like the public social rituals that we practice carefully in our private lives, including in our not constantly functional families.

Chapter 13
Entertaining

Let's Party, We Have To

The host of the first diplomatic dinner that I ever attended was—me. My first posting abroad, as a junior diplomat in Washington, did not expose me to fancy eating with formal seating, an activity that would become an integral part of my second posting as ambassador.

In early 1994, a few months after I arrived in Riga, Dan Shomron, head of an Israeli defense industry and former Army Chief of Staff, announced that he would visit Latvia. The prime minister, several cabinet ministers, chairmen of parliamentary committees, the chief of the armed forces, and other senior Latvians wanted to meet him. This called for a working dinner at my residence. There was much for me to learn, to do, and to improvise.

As Israel's first ambassador, I had set up house. The container that brought my private belongings had also carried pots and other utensils (I chose, my government paid) as well as official crockery and cutlery. Israel's state emblem, a seven-branched candelabra surrounded by olive branches, was engraved on silverware and displayed in gold on fine, white china. Another container brought furniture. Curtains and tablecloths would be made locally. Ahead of that first dinner, we ordered a white tablecloth and matching napkins from the best establishment in Riga. They shrank beyond use in the first wash, but they were elegant at that first supper, and the table looked just fine.

As for food, there were then no proper cooking schools or smart hotels from which one could seduce a chef. We hired a woman who had previously cooked simple meals in an institutional kitchen, I no longer recall if in a school or a hospital. I asked her to prepare a trial lunch of what should be a fancy dinner and invited the embassy's administrative officer to join me for the taste test. Her menu included smoked salmon deep-fried in batter and a blobby thing of chocolate dessert. We made suggestions. She made corrections. It was adequate.

I was later to ask the owner of Riga's first fancy restaurant to allow her to work in his kitchen when she was not needed at home. He was a Canadian Latvian who returned to his family's homeland with the patriotic mission of introducing fine food to roughened palates. His family had left Latvia in the 1940s. As with many émigrés and their children, including several in senior positions in all three Baltic countries when I worked there, there was always a nagging doubt. Did they leave because the Soviets were coming or because the Nazis were leaving? Same coin, different sides.

Be that as it may, upgrading an embassy's cuisine fitted his agenda. The cook was a quick learner, as was my housekeeper, whose duties included setting the table. Soon, they also picked up all I knew about buying and arranging flowers—at the time of my appointment to Riga, I was working for Israel's President and had spent a few Sunday mornings watching the weekly florist in action.

With food, table settings, and flowers under control, my responsibilities as hostess shrank to choosing guests and to the headache of seating them.

To seat that pioneering dinner, I consulted with Nitza in the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem. She had been doing it for Israeli foreign ministers for decades, and she would ensure that I offended none of the dignitaries who graced my table.

That dinner was without spouses, but most diplomatic socializing is in couples. Had Mrs. Shomron joined her husband, the guests would also have been accompanied. I could have invited fewer official Latvians to my table, or had a cocktail party, or hosted them at a restaurant. In any of those scenarios, conversation could not have been as focused on the topic at hand.

No arms sales came of that meal, and I never had such an impressive gathering at any of my tables again.

This is what went into arranging seating at subsequent dinners in Riga. A local should sit next to a foreigner, to connect and enrich. Male and female alternate, but not sit next to their spouses. Ideally, couples should also not sit opposite each other—there was no need to continue the home conversation. Jewish guests should be spread among gentiles. Each guest must be able to speak one language (Latvian, English, or Russian) to the neighbor on either side.

Rank must be considered. How does a junior minister compare to the chairperson of a parliamentary committee? Where to seat a newspaper editor? If a junior guest serves my professional interests better than a senior, may seating reflect that? The answer lies somewhere between protocol and common sense, and it is never perfect.

There is more. Traditionally, the top guest (either the most senior person or the guest of honor) sits opposite the host, and each has the other's wife on his right. This does not apply to growing numbers of ambassadors who are unattached, female, or both. I applied the underlying logic and placed the most important guest opposite me. If that top guest had a spouse, the spouse sat to the right of whoever followed in rank.

If all of those considerations were not enough, seating should ideally account for social skills. I hosted a ladies' lunch to bid farewell to a departing colleague and decided to avoid the hassle. To disguise my laziness, I said, "We are all friends, let us be informal and sit wherever." The talkative women sat together. The other half of the table produced little beyond an awkward silence.

So you understand why moving names around a sketch of a table—when picking the furniture for Riga, I chose an oval, it seemed friendlier and less hierarchical than a rectangle—was a challenge. Until I became confident of my ability to seat properly, I often consulted with my more experienced British colleague. Our offices were on the same floor of the office building. It was convenient to drop in with a guest list to ask for his help (if somewhat awkward when he had not been invited . . .).

Getting it right could take an hour. Finally, the puzzle was complete. All too often, that moment coincided with a telephoned declaration: "Sorry for such short notice, but my husband cannot come this evening." He could speak one language to the person on his right and another to the person seated to his left. The people adjoining the newly created vacuum did not share a tongue. Back I went to juggling bits of paper with names on them around a sketch of an oval.

Harder to handle than a last-minute cancellation was the proud announcement that the husband can come after all. To which I eagerly respond, "Wonderful!" What I mean is, "Where will he sit?" Shall I cancel the reporter I invited in his place? There are as many guests as dining room chairs; will we use a plastic kitchen chair? The starter is stuffed avocado halves, out of season and very expensive. Do I cut one half into quarters? Claim a sudden allergy and leave my plate empty? Yes, I know, there should always be extra. But.

A panicked guard in Pretoria called from the gate to ask if he should open it to my Australian colleague and his wife. They had been among my original invitees, but there was no

record of their acceptance; they were not on the guest list that my secretary had prepared for him. At that stage, it mattered little if the muddle originated in his office or in mine.

I left my guests holding their drinks in the living room, slipped into the kitchen to tell the staff to spread the first-course salad a little thinner, and moved to the dining room to rearrange seating. Luckily, I had place cards at home. I quickly wrote their two names (albeit in a less decorative script than others, which were prepared in the office by an artistic secretary) and rushed back into the living room to entertain my guests.

For some, seating arrangements are a mere recommendation. I hosted a dinner in Pretoria to introduce a delegation from Israel. A guest went into the dining room, did not like his place, and switched cards with someone better seated. To all those present, it seemed that I had no knowledge of protocol, or that I was deliberately offensive. There was nothing I could do except apologize privately to the demoted victim. Had I displayed seating in the entrance hall, to be seen by all upon arrival, this could not happen. There are special boards with slits on the sides for name cards, but I never got around to getting one.

A senior guest from home is an anchor for entertaining. During both my ambassadorial postings, I had few guests from Israel to attract local VIPs. This is why, especially in Riga, I hosted many dinners to introduce recently arrived colleagues or to bid farewell to departing ones. In those early years of independence, foreign embassies and ambassadors were a novelty, and the country's top leaders often accepted invitations to such events. Diplomats reading this would be hard-pressed to believe me, but once, in discussing a guest list with an honoree, I asked that he please omit the foreign minister, as he had already eaten at my table twice that month.

Given the attitude toward Israel in South Africa, I was not the prize guest whose presence would attract others and was not invited often. In a trade in which being seen is an indication of status—both of the diplomat and of the country she represents—this matters.

The French Ambassador to Pretoria sent me an invitation to what I understood to be a big cocktail party. I accepted, but at the last minute I could not go, thought that my absence would matter little, and did not bother to let him know. My French proved not as good as I thought—the event I skipped was an informal dinner, called simply in order to socialize. This isolated diplomat repaid his kindness with a hole at his table. Sorry.

This takes me to receptions, where people circulate around a room, mingling at will, and where a few chairs near the wall will give tired feet a break from standing. Receptions can be held for a visiting delegation or for the opening of a film festival—any excuse for a party. In Riga, in my second posting in Washington, and in the embassy's Cape Town apartment, I could have a hundred guests indoors. In Pretoria there was also a garden. When receptions were too big to be catered in my kitchen, an outside caterer was hired. If my home was too small, a hall was rented.

The regular big diplomatic event is held for national days. Yom Ha'atzmaut (Independence Day) for us; the Day of the Revolution, the Queen's Birthday, or something else for others. It is the highlight, or lowlight, of the diplomatic calendar. In a small mission, it impinges heavily on routine, virtually paralyzing the embassy's other activities for long weeks of preparation: choosing a venue, a menu, flowers, ordering invitations, sending them, taking replies.

Some brave diplomats avoid the trouble and instead make a gift to a local charity. This guarantees press coverage. The beneficiaries wave little flags, maybe attempt a song in a strange language as they smile to the cameras. Others put on a concert (which also requires

checking replies, seating the front rows, and dealing with last-minute cancellations).

Most stick to the standup routine of drinks, snacks, and handshakes. It is uncontroversial and does not raise the ire of those who consider themselves close to the embassy. In my case this included those local Jews who were not invited to intimate events such as dinners and reveled in their annual invitation by the ambassador.

Oh yes, an invitation. Budget and space provide the frame, but the details paint the picture. Must the self-appointed chairman of the local Friends of Tiny Israeli College be invited? Is there any harm if I don't? If I do, which floodgate does that open? What about the deputy rabbi? Do I consider my predecessor's list, imagining how it feels to be excluded after years of inclusion?

Should embassy staff be allowed to have personal guests? All staff, or just the Israeli diplomats among them? An Israeli member of my staff once invited a local who, long story, had caused discord within the embassy. As the invitation is from the ambassador, any perceived offense to the injured party was perpetrated by me. Do I vet their lists? What? Hardworking diplomats cannot invite a few private guests to the embassy's big event?

Do we send invitations to the country's top leadership, or is it rude to do so without checking in advance who will come, thus treating heads of state as though they are almost anybody? In the Baltics, I often found an embarrassment of riches. One year, the President of Lithuania, the Speaker of Parliament, and the Prime Minister all came to my annual reception. I asked them all to speak.

I had no such problems in South Africa. Usually, a few opposition figures or officials came. There was one exception. The Minister of Home Affairs, Chief Mangosuthu Buthulezi, once accepted. His party was in government, but it was a rival of the leading faction, ANC. He arrived late, creating a dilemma: Should I wait for him before addressing the guests, so that he may respond officially? What if he doesn't arrive at all? Greet as scheduled, and then, if he comes, have an unusual second round near the end? Writing this, I don't remember how I solved it.

One year during the second Palestinian uprising, the South Africans decided not to send anyone to our reception. That was an unusually blunt act of protest. One official came, but clarified to all—his superiors and us at the embassy—that his objective was to pacify the local Jewish community. In those circumstances, do I ask him to speak? Retaliate for their rebuff and play just one anthem, ours? But we are on their soil and do not want to harm relations more. Both anthems, after all? No anthems?

What about other music? Classical? Israeli? How loud? If loud enough to hear, does it overwhelm conversation? But you know that, from weddings.

Who should stand at the entrance during the first half hour (after that, a staffer takes over) to greet arriving guests? The ambassador, definitely. An ambassadorial spouse, if there is one. The deputy. How many other diplomats? Well, how many hands should a guest have to shake?

In my first year in Pretoria, single me decided that as the consul was also spouseless, it would be four hands: me, the deputy, the nonresident military attache in full regalia (he flew in several times each year from his desk job in Israel), and consul. My deputy thought that his wife should be in the receiving line. I explained why not, and he declared: "Just because you have personal problems and don't have a husband does not mean that we must all suffer." He then sat demonstratively throughout the parallel reception we held in Cape Town a few days later. Due to surgery for an ingrown toenail the previous day, my bandaged foot was shod in a plastic beach sandal. Two hours on my feet did not improve his standing in my eyes.

The allocation from Jerusalem was never enough. Fund-raising rules changed often, and we were never sure if we could ask Israeli companies to contribute, which ones, and how much. Lucky Americans, permitted to approach their conglomerates, including giant fast food brand names, which then operate stalls at receptions and appear on the invitations. Their names and logos may be printed on the back or on the envelope, but it is all there, open and official.

We make do with what we have, choose a hall, limit our guest list, and select a menu. Finger food, or plates? Ethnic, say falafel, as the British sometimes serve fish and chips in fake newspaper? How much food? I remember my envy at the simplicity of a Dutch reception in Pretoria. There was a fine bar and one dish: a very rare, very pink roast, bread rolls, and a choice of three sauces.

I would not risk such a break with the expectation for real food, but I once saved a lot on drinks. We had a breakfast reception instead of the lunch common in South Africa; fearing crime, many avoid travel after dark. Everyone complimented me on how creative and relaxing to start the day with a party, but no one emulated my initiative.

We had a real ice cream trolley at the party when I left South Africa, with cones and chocolate sprinkles and everything. What I really wanted was cotton candy, but such sticky originality seemed excessive. It is difficult to be original: When the flowers at a garden reception in Pretoria were not in our national blue and white, I heard Jewish guests grumbling. No national pride! Yellow?!? What is this, China???

Unlike the host, for whom the event is a long, expensive headache, for guests these receptions enable a quick discussion without the need to schedule a meeting. In my experience, Russian diplomats excel in this. Watching them drop a question here and a comment there, I knew that they had calculated who would be there and planned in advance how to use their time efficiently.

Even with such preconsidered mingling, in Pretoria, with some hundred missions, there are about two receptions each week. They are crammed between meetings, often at the height of traffic. It is useful to have staff to share this duty.

Whatever else was on my schedule in Pretoria, I tried not to miss national day receptions hosted by my colleagues from Egypt and Jordan (they had no embassies in Riga). Three years, two embassies—six invitations, most all received shortly before the due date.

It seems that before almost each event there was some tension in the Middle East, which threatened relations between Israel and those of its Arab neighbors with whom it has peace, or at least placed their public expressions in question. Until the last minute, Israeli ambassadors did not know if they would be invited to celebrate with these Arab colleagues.

I assume that every diplomat who hosts a reception reports in detail back to the capital, as I did, recounting which VIPs came. If participation was paltry, then clearly it was due to their rudeness, possibly to a snowstorm, maybe to the political situation or an emergency vote in Parliament. If senior leaders came, as often happened in the Baltics, or if I had an impressive list of guests as graced my early table to meet Dan Shomron, that surely proves that I, personally, am an excellent and well-connected ambassador.

As with a good UN vote or a fine editorial, I would gladly take credit for a positive outcome. When it was bad, there was always a perfectly rational explanation, and it never had anything whatsoever to do with me.

Chapter 14
Religious Observance
No, Thank You, Not for Me, Not Today

November 18 is Latvia's National Day. In the evening, the president hosts a reception in Riga Castle. Ministers and parliamentarians appear on the guest list, as do top journalists and artists, academics and business people. A foreign dignitary or two may grace the event. Ambassadors are also invited to congratulate Latvia on this auspicious occasion.

In 1994, November 18 was on Friday. The twenty-five-hour Jewish Sabbath begins shortly before sundown on Friday and ends shortly after sundown on Saturday. I consider myself more or less religiously observant and know that Shabbat is designed for rest, not to continue the week's obligations. Attending official functions circumvents the day's spirit, if not its letter. But as a freshly minted ambassador, I was determined to shine wherever possible. This included going to events on my Sabbath if they were within walking distance. That Friday, after lighting candles, my bodyguard and I embarked on the snowy, half-hour walk to the castle.

The President of Latvia was a generous host; there was plenty to eat. As for drinks, two categories were offered. Unlimited sparkling wine was one. While all fruit and vegetables—whole, cut, and squeezed—are kosher, there is one little-known exception. Product of the grape is kosher only if made by Jews. That meant that I could not drink the bubbly. Other drinks were also available. The entire selection, alcoholic or not, was to be bought at a cash bar. Payment is not the norm at formal state events. I have not seen it, before or since, in Latvia or in any other country.

Not everyone likes champagne; some drink no alcohol. There we were, Latvia's A-list, some a little drunk, some thirsty (salt is generously used in the Latvian kitchen, think herring), some both drunk and thirsty. Most finely dressed guests did not carry wallets, and why would they, with cars and drivers waiting outside? Now, me, I always carry cash; you never know what might happen. But never on Sabbath, when its use is forbidden. Amid humorous, tipsy complaining, a colleague scavenged a few coins from his pocket and treated grateful guests to delicious water.

On the cold, dark trudge back home, I decided that from that time, six working days would be enough. Even at events that all ambassadors are expected to attend, such as the host country's National Day celebrations, I had an acceptable explanation for my absence and apologized ahead in writing.

Naturally, I allowed myself a little flexibility. The British Embassy in Riga held a Friday evening reception when Prince Charles visited. I had had a schoolgirl crush on him and absolutely had to be there. A local rabbi also came. I wonder, what was his excuse?

What does a single person do for one-seventh of every week, without a computer, television, radio, or telephone? Sometimes, I invited guests for a meal. After wearing a public persona all week, I did not want to be on show yet again, dutifully explaining the piquant day and its exotic rituals. That would be too much like work. In order to avoid it, I tried to keep that day's table Jewish.

When the guests left, or when I did not invite and was not invited, I caught up with reading on the outskirts of work, such as news magazines, and I enjoyed my weekly disappearance into

a novel. At times (does this undermine my claim to be observant?) I left a television news channel on behind a closed door, its volume low but audible. Sticking my head in for a quick update was one reason. Frankly, I needed to hear human voices in what would otherwise be a day of engulfing silence.

Synagogue could be a break from the solitude and monotony of those long hours, while also providing a chance for communal prayer. I attended services with any regularity only during my two stints in Washington.

I felt comfortable in Kesher Israel, a landmark in historical Georgetown, on the corner of 28th and N Street. The congregation included employees of government and Congress, we had a senator or two, journalists, and some foreign diplomats. Our occupations filtered into conversation. Kiddush in the downstairs hall after services—whitefish, cake, a little drink—became a cocktail party of sorts, a chance to mingle and pick up a piece of information for a cable to the office on Monday.

It was almost a thirty-minute walk to the large synagogue in Riga's medieval old town, and it seemed longer in winter. I did not feel connected to the people who frequented it. They seemed like characters in a period film about Jewish life in centuries past. During my rare visits, escorted by a bodyguard and surrounded by chatter in languages of which I understood little, I felt more isolated than at home alone. In hindsight, I regret my attitude. I should have admired my coreligionists for their dedication to their Jewish heritage during decades of Soviet restrictions, made an effort to learn what it was like for them then. Too late, I see them as heroes.

I went to the synagogue in Pretoria regularly at first. Everyone spoke English, and it was an easy walk from my home; why not? I soon felt that crazy security arrangements to get me there inconvenienced too many people, and that some conversations after (and during . . .) services were best avoided.

For example, my stunned silence at a racial epithet attached to the South African President's name may have been misinterpreted as agreement. I should have said something immediately, but it always takes a minute to find the right words. By then, the person who used it in our conversation had gone. Would I confront him the following week? What if he denied it? Instead, I avoided him. Others subjected me to political monologues or to advice on what the embassy should do about this or that. Most probably, this was their way to show kindness to a stranger. Regardless, praying in the synagogue became increasingly aggravating, more trouble than it was worth. I all but stopped.

So no, I hardly went to synagogue, proof, if any is needed, that observance is individual. Some see aspects of my observance as fanaticism, yet I have cousins who would not drink a cup of coffee from my kitchen—to them, it is not kosher.

Similarly, some do's and don'ts of Sabbath observance are open to interpretation, like the tenet that anything connected with saving lives is exempt from the standard rules. True, a diplomat is not a fireman or a fighter pilot. But if that diplomat is Israeli, I believe that there are other kinds of fires, different sorts of fights.

Thus, I worked normally during the Sabbath I spent at the infamous World Conference against Racism in Durban in late 2001, but I tried to avoid taking the elevator, briefed orally rather than on the phone, and gave interviews to television crews but without putting on makeup, which falls into the forbidden category of "painting." There was no immediate danger to life, but if my actions shrank Israel's demonization by an iota, if they weakened threats to our

legitimacy by a thread, I felt justified.

Few of my professional contacts worked routinely on Saturdays. Overall, keeping Shabbat was less challenging than the other major public manifestation of observance: maintaining dietary laws, in a trade where sharing nourishment is a popular way of doing business. I ate with officials, politicians, journalists, or colleagues several times each week. It could be at an intimate meal for two or more in a restaurant or a home, or in a big gathering like a reception.

Preparing to leave for Riga, I met with Israel's Chief of Diplomatic Protocol to learn about formalities such as presenting credentials. As I stood up to leave his office, he added an afterthought: "When you are invited to dinner, tell them in advance that you don't eat pork." To him, that was a symbolic restriction that Israeli diplomats must uphold in public. I told him that I keep kosher and there is much more that I don't eat. He looked at me with pity and said, "No one will invite you." He was wrong.

His attitude to religious observance was not shared by Ali Yihye, Israel's first Muslim ambassador. En route from Riga to the fjords of northern Norway with a friend from Israel, we spent a few hours of a long Sunday afternoon at his residence in Helsinki, the capital of Finland. He had been a director at Ulpan Akiva, a prize-winning institution that taught Hebrew and Arabic among its activities to promote understanding between Jews and Arabs. Ali's wife was busy in the kitchen, and he must have sensed my concern. "You think that you cannot eat here and you don't want to offend me, so you worry about what you will do. But I believe that the home of an Israeli ambassador must be kosher." It was delicious.

I tried not to arrive at receptions hungry, and there was always something—a canapé or a cut vegetable—that I could eat. As for seated meals, I soon learned that one could be a kosher-keeping guest without inexplicably returning full plates, or feigning a stomachache. My secretary or I phoned in advance to describe my constraints and to say that I will eat smoked salmon, raw vegetables, fruit, as well as certain breads, cheeses, and ice creams.

Those easy options were also my list in nonkosher eateries (eaten, if you must know, with regular utensils, not disposables). I would explain my limited choices to my eating partners. Not in order to spread religion, but because—especially when I was paying—they should not have felt limited by my selections, which were often the cheapest on the menu, the least interesting, or both.

At least in my homes I ate cooked food. In South Africa and in America, there were good selections of kosher products. That was not the case in Riga. Kosher meat was a rarity. The rabbi in Lithuania, where I was nonresident ambassador, slaughtered chickens. I often returned from my trips to that neighboring country with dozens of frozen fowl in the trunk of the ambassadorial car. A ritual slaughterer flew from Israel to Latvia once or twice a year. I bought as much red meat as my freezer would hold.

The precious products were served only to the few who maintained similar dietary rules. Among them Harry, a Swedish diplomat living in Riga, and random guests who were grateful for a plate of cooked meat or chicken after days of canned tuna. Otherwise, all my entertaining was with fish. Trust me on this—there are many, many ways to prepare salmon.

As for receptions, my Riga apartment was big, but it still could not hold all events, such as Independence Day celebrations, and I entertained regularly in Tallinn and Vilnius, where home during my monthly visits was a hotel room. Unlike America and South Africa, kosher catering did not exist anywhere in the Baltics. We asked caterers for what is loosely known as "kosher style," meaning no meat or shellfish. There was nothing blatantly nonkosher, but everything

was cooked in utensils that had previously contained forbidden products.

I hosted these events, but I ate like in all others—raw vegetables and the odd canapé. A generous caterer at a reception in Estonia's capital kindly topped stuffed boiled eggs with tiny, pretty shrimp. Luckily, my deputy arrived early and noticed. It took a while to remove the little creatures, one at a time. It took longer to explain to him why his magnanimity was so rebuffed.

My personal dilemmas about what to serve at receptions, what to eat at other people's homes, and which events to attend on Shabbat beg an obvious question: What are the official guidelines?

I know of none, and it is difficult to imagine acceptable rules. Several Israeli diplomats are not Jewish, some envoys are traditional, others are not at all observant—the next chapter will deal with the complexity of relations between Israel, Judaism, tradition, and so on. The Israeli Foreign Ministry avoids the minefield of instructing its diplomats on religious observance and leaves to individual discretion if and how to observe the weekly day of rest and to respect dietary rules.

I believe that everyone should be free to chose what to ingest, yet a little sensitivity is in order. Years later, friends still recall the Israeli ambassador who, shortly after welcoming viewers at an opening of an Israeli film festival, loudly ordered a ham and cheese sandwich from the cafeteria.

I have seen religious Christians, well versed in the Bible, wince as Israeli counterparts order forbidden creatures at meetings in restaurants. All manner of seafood and pig are available in Israel now. Or abroad, at a private meal. Why at taxpayer expense? In public?

What about homes of nonobservant diplomats? I think that where there is no Jewish community and if kosher products are rare, "kosher style" is all right. If meat is served (from an animal that is kosher, such as cow, but was not slaughtered ritually), it should not be mixed with dairy. Where there is a sizable Jewish community, I believe that the ambassador's professional entertaining at the residence should be kosher; Israel's official plates should not hold food that offends many. I found it regrettable that at a farewell lunch at the residence of the Israeli ambassador in Washington, everyone ate nonkosher chicken while the guest of honor—me—was served salad.

Not wanting to criticize or impose, I never said anything to anyone. I wonder, would Ali Yihye?

Chapter 15
Being Jewish

So Many Questions, So Few Answers

Like most South African Jews, Ronnie Kasrils's family emigrated from Latvia and Lithuania, and he had a Zionist upbringing. Unlike most, he was active in the armed struggle against apartheid. Kasrils went on to become a minister in the country's first democratic government. In October 2001, during the second Palestinian uprising, he recruited dozens of fellow South African Jews to sign "Not in My Name," a petition dissociating themselves from Israel's actions.

As Israel's Ambassador to South Africa, I was not sure what to do. On one hand, the petition deepened the negative opinion of Israel, so responding to its accusations would be natural. On the other hand, an Israeli Embassy reaction would draw more attention to the petition and to its claims. I weighed my options. As winning was impossible, passivity seemed the least damaging way.

While official Israel kept a low profile, there was an organized Jewish outcry. It came from leaders of the local Orthodox Jewish establishment.

I bring this episode to highlight the odd Jewish overlap between nation and religion, the complex interaction between religious and secular issues, and the elaborate relations between Israel and the Jewish Diaspora. Each sentence, comment, and question below has been the subject of numerous lectures, countless articles, and endless words. I do not presume to answer, clarify, or even summarize. My aim is merely to skim the surface of identity and to touch upon its challenging implications as seen by this former Israeli diplomat.

Let me begin with the common statement that Israel is a Jewish state. It may seem self-explanatory, until one stops to think. Big state, cold state, crowded state—those are easy. But Jewish state? What does this mean for non-Jews who live in it? How do Jews who live elsewhere connect to it? Even before all that, what does it mean to be a Jew? Or, as the question has been boiled to its essence by the political cum religious discourse: Who is a Jew?

It used to be simple. Jews shared religious observance and identified as a group with common roots. One could say that Jews are like Armenians, in that the designation alludes to both nationality and religion (and like us, they suffered greatly and have a diaspora). Such duality is not the norm: A French person is likely to be Catholic, yet being Catholic doesn't make that person French, and one may be French and profess any faith, or none. In recent centuries, Jews have become less religious. If religion (Wait! Is religion practice or belief?) is eliminated from the definition, is enough left for a shared Jewish identity?

Imagine a secular New York Jewess who demonstrates outside the local Israeli consulate against what she considers Israeli human rights abuses. She attributes her principled stand to her Jewish heritage. Another New York Jew demonstrates nearby. He is ultra-Orthodox. To him, establishing a state by human means instead of waiting for divine intervention counters Jewish theology. Or he may protest because Israel allows the sale of pork, which his fellow demonstrator ate for breakfast. They share the pavement on which they stand. Do they share anything else?

Both think that their birth gives them special standing concerning Israel. Does it? Should it? Is their stake in a distant country, whose actions they do not support with taxes, the

consequences of which they do not bear, bigger than the stake a citizen in any country has in the acts of another? Must Israel listen to Diaspora Jews?

Taken to an extreme that is sometimes suggested, but is mercifully always taken off the table: As Israel is a Jewish state (whatever that means), maybe all Jews (ditto) should be allowed to vote in its elections?

Perhaps that hypothetical franchise would be given to those whom Israel's Law of Return allows to immigrate? For the Nazis, one Jewish grandparent or a Jewish spouse were a ticket to the gas chambers. Israel uses that simple criterion to open its gates. No faith is required, no observance, no waiting period or proof of earning ability. In recent decades, a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union who qualify came to live in Israel.

Although a few are openly Christian or Muslim, most of these new Israelis identify nationally as Jews. However, by *halacha*, Jewish law, and also by Israeli law, hundreds of thousands of them are not considered Jewish—a Jew is born to a Jewish mother, or converts. Who is a Jewish mother? Convert how? By standards of that ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionist whom we met picketing the Israeli consulate in New York? Modern Orthodox, like me? What about a less rigorous conversion, such as Conservative? Or Reform, the largest group in American Jewry?

Israel's religious authorities say no. A fallen soldier who was born to a non-Jewish mother, or whose conversion was not Orthodox, may not be buried in a Jewish cemetery. But the secular authorities, such as Israel's Ministry of Interior, consider him Jewish, provided the conversion occurred outside the country. Or something—rules alter periodically, sometimes following postelection coalition negotiations, and they are regularly challenged this way or that in Israeli courts.

At times, growing secularization and issues as mentioned above sound a call to adopt a new identity: Let us be Israelis. That will make our Jews-by-nation-but-not-by-religion more comfortable and will redefine the status of Israel's Arab citizens, about one-fifth of the population.

But Israel has a raison d'être. Jews came back here, to our historical homeland. We did not go elsewhere. Does that mean nothing? How will Israeliness affect our relations with Diaspora Jews? Should we just forget about them? And how will this affect those Israeli Jews whose religion is foremost in their sense of themselves and who hold little by secular concepts, like nationality?

As for Israel being the Jewish homeland, with few exceptions, Jews spent centuries in exile. Although we repeatedly prayed to return, there is a long gap in our physical connection to the land of the Bible. Through expulsions and migrations, our cuisine included Babylonian something and Roman whatever, which led to Hungarian goulash and Moroccan tagine.

Perhaps those dishes reflect the true identity of the dispersed? Which is the more dominant element in personal identity, the historical or the contemporary? Having chosen to remain where they are and not return, have Diaspora Jews opted out of a common future? Can they tell us what to do? Can we tell them? Do our common roots create mutual obligations?

How much space can I, as an Israeli diplomat, allocate to my personal principles and preferences?

Tom Dine was the executive director of the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee, Washington's pro-Israel lobby. His wife, Joan, did not convert, but Reform Jewry accepts patrilineal descent. When his daughter turned thirteen, Tom invited me to her bat mitzvah at a

Reform temple in Washington. Respecting Tom and his good works on behalf of Israel, I went, but was not at all happy to be at what to him was a Jewish landmark and to me was an expression of assimilation, which is a scourge of modern Jewish life.

Tom Lantos, a Hungarian Holocaust survivor turned congressman, was a vocal supporter of Israel and of Jewish causes, such as combating anti-Semitism. His dedication elicited praise from Israeli officials, including me. His wife, also a Hungarian survivor, became a Mormon. His daughters and grandchildren, saved from the fate of many European Jews, are equally erased from our shrunken people. Every time I walked into his office, I forced myself to ignore my personal sorrow at his family's loss to Jewry and concentrate on my professional duty.

The issues I touched in the last few paragraphs are part of an ongoing discourse inside Israel, in the Diaspora, and between them. If my words seemed to go around in circles, that is because the issues do just that before they hit a wall of religion or politics or common sense, which bounces them back again, around and around.

Other issues that challenge identity are lesser known.

Tribes in southern Africa not only have rituals that can be traced to Jewish practices but also their DNA shows ties to our people, especially the priests, *Cohanim* (plural of *Cohen*). As Israel's Ambassador in South Africa, must I pursue them, encourage them to join us, to immigrate? They did not approach me, and there was no need to ask Israel for instructions, as diplomats do when no obvious policy exists. Maybe I neglected millions of coreligionists? Or conationalists? Or whatever.

Kara'im, from the Hebrew root *k.r.a.*, meaning "read," broke with traditional Judaism centuries ago. They lean on biblical texts, not on later rabbinic interpretations that guide the rest of us, at least in theory. In the Middle East they had close ties with regular "rabbinic" Jews, marrying back and forth. An Israeli-operated Jewish spy ring in Egypt in the 1950s included Kara'ites. Moshe Marzouk, an Egyptian Kara'ite, was executed in the wake of the affair that was to bring down an Israeli government. An aside: Israel subsequently resolved never to recruit spies from among local Jews, as questions of dual loyalty may endanger entire communities. The senior Israelis who operated Jonathan Pollard of American naval intelligence seemed to forget that.

I was surprised to learn of a small and distinguished Kara'ite community in Lithuania. Their center is in a picturesque lakeside town, Trakai. Of some twenty Lithuanian ambassadors in the mid-1990s, four belonged to this group, among them the Ambassador to Estonia.

I asked to see her during one of my trips to Tallinn. As their prayers are in Hebrew and their ritual is based on ours, I expected extra warmth, maybe a discussion of our commonalities. However, she was adamant that we are not connected and that they are a Turkic tribe, as was their claim during the Holocaust. The Nazis agreed that ritually they are sort of Jewish, but not racially. That saved them. Could that lead to yet another definition: A Jew is, or is not, whoever wants?

My favorite guide to Jewish sites in Lithuania was Regina Kopelovitch. If anyone challenged my definitions, based as they were on Orthodoxy, it was Regina. Her father was Jewish; her mother was not. Regina knew that in terms of Jewish law, she was not considered Jewish. She had studied Hebrew and Yiddish and Jewish history during Soviet times and could have gone to jail for that. I could not help but wonder: What did that make her?

The last person executed in Lithuania, after a controversial trial, was Jewish. He is buried in the Vilnius Jewish cemetery, not far from the Vilna Ga'on, a famous eighteenth-century sage.

When I took guests to the rabbi's grave, I often thought of the other. Did his Jewishness give me any special responsibility to try to halt his sentence? Is it fair to view his trial and its outcome through a prism of assumed sentiment about Jews? Attribute it to anti-Semitism? How careful must I be in using that word?

For me, defining anti-Semitism is almost easier than understanding "Israel is a Jewish state."

Anti-Semitism always adapted to the prevalent discourse of its time. When the focus was religious, we were Christ killers. If it is economic, we control the world's resources. While plagues were common, we poisoned wells. When human rights are at the forefront, we are its worst abusers. I wonder: How will we be blamed when ecology, or aesthetics, will dominate?

I think that anti-Semitism can be measured by holding Jews (and their country, a convenient manifestation) to special standards. In one week, the South African Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued four condemnations of Israel. That same week, harsh revelations emerged about the situation in neighboring Zimbabwe, yet not one official word came out of Pretoria. Objective reasons, such as identification with the Palestinians or a shared history with Zimbabwe, explain some of the disparity, but they cannot account for all. When there is no proportion or rational explanation, then we must look to the possibility of anti-Semitism.

But! We should be careful. A Jew may be a criminal. Israel is not perfect. It is not honest or wise to shed responsibility and to attribute all criticism to hatred of Jews. Also, as we find generalizing about Jews to be abhorrent, so we should avoid doing it about others.

When I worked in the Baltics, people, mostly Jewish, often asked me, "How do you manage there, with all that anti-Semitism?" I would answer, "What do you mean?" My interlocutors responded, "Oh, you know." "No," I said, "I don't. Please explain." They continued, less confident: "Everyone knows, they are anti-Semites." We should judge—and be judged—on words and deeds. This brings me back to Ronnie Kasrils.

His ancestors fled the pogroms of nineteenth-century czarist Russia. The following century, more Jews from those parts found their way to South Africa. Some of the newcomers, with the Soviet Union fresh in their memories, reacted strongly to Kasrils's criticism of Israel. They noted that he had been Moscow's guest during some of its most repressive times. He did not speak up about millions in prisons and millions more unable to emigrate.

If such conduct did not merit the criticism that flowed so easily from him regarding Israel, he obviously held the Jewish state to different standards. Did that make him a Jewish anti-Semite?

Such questions were always present, facing me as an aware Jew, providing a background and setting challenges to my role as an Israeli diplomat.

At twenty, I had answers to everything. By forty, I knew that most serious questions do not have a straightforward answer. Sixtyish as I write, I am happy if I know what to ask. I wonder, what will happen at eighty?

Chapter 16
Holocaust
A6766

At fifteen, my mother survived a year at Auschwitz, where her parents were murdered. My name, Tova, is the Hebrew version of Gittel, her mother's Yiddish name. My mother regularly spoke about her experiences and her feelings. Aged twenty, my father was sent to a labor camp. There is no obvious way to handle the horror, the pain, the sorrow, the anger. He said not a word, not even the names of his six dead siblings.

Some children of survivors delve into the past, pick at the scab. Others, like me, literally switch off. We change radio stations and avoid films and books about the Holocaust. For my first forty years, I pretended that the Holocaust did not interest me or affect me. Black humor and indirect acknowledgment were as close as I allowed myself to get. For example, a secret code I often use is based on the concentration camp tattoo on my mother's arm, A6766. Typing it to access e-mail or draw money is a way to face the unfaceable, and to remember.

As part of remembrance, I try to avoid all things German. I cannot but use German buses and taxis that are common in Israel, and my day starts with a small, German-made pill for my thyroid, supplied by my medical insurance. But where there is a choice, I keep away. Choosing a washing machine produced elsewhere, even looking at a pencil to see where it was made, all these create small, private, silent memorials to the past.

Now is the time for the obvious question. Given my attitude to anything Holocaust related, what was I doing in the Baltic countries, with their terrible history? The honest answer is that when I applied to be Israel's Ambassador to Latvia, with responsibility for Lithuania and Estonia, I didn't consider that aspect.

At that time, nine new Israeli embassies opened in what had been the Soviet Union. An urgent need for personnel gave young diplomats a chance for promotion (but hardly anyone took advantage). Largely ignorant of the region, I could have applied for any another post, say in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. Possibly because it sounded familiar, I asked for Riga, without considering the region's history.

The Baltic countries were independent between the World Wars. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, signed before World War II, agreed to divide parts of Europe between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. In June 1940, the Baltic states came under Stalin's rule. Many whom the new regime considered "counterrevolutionary elements," including capitalists, were exiled to the eastern reaches of the USSR.

The following year, the pact disintegrated. Nazis entered all three countries. At the time, about 170,000 Jews lived in Lithuania, 90,000 in Latvia, and 4,500 in Estonia. By 1945, when the Allies were victorious and the Soviets returned, all but forty-five thousand Baltic Jews had been murdered. Survivors included soldiers and partisans, people who hid or were hidden, and "counterrevolutionaries" whose punitive exiles had saved their lives.

There were Baltic Jews who died by the hands of their neighbors in the few days between the departure of the Soviets and the arrival of the Germans. Most were murdered later. The Nazis were aided by locals: Historians agree that Ukrainians and Balts top the collaboration league. As Israel's first ambassador to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, I no longer had the option

of switching myself off when the Holocaust came up. Four decades of active evasion came to an end.

I was appointed in April 1993. Before setting out four months later, I discovered that many Lithuanian expatriates in Israel opposed Israel's diplomatic relations with their country of birth, and death. It can be argued that once Israel deals with Germany, there is no reason to boycott its collaborators. But the survivors' position was not political or diplomatic. Who has the right to dismiss their stance, even to debate it? Certainly not she who refrains from buying a German pencil.

I began to learn of difficult issues, with complicated practical implications. Take the restitution of Jewish property. If no Jews survive in a town, who inherits a building that was once a Jewish school? Does ownership devolve to Holocaust survivors at large? To Jews living in a neighboring town? To descendants of that region's Jewish inhabitants? How is that negotiated, and by whom? Regaining dilapidated buildings requires a massive effort. Are the properties and the underlying principle worth arousing negative sentiments among locals who have been using them for decades? Who decides?

Or this: Newly independent Lithuania granted retroactive rehabilitation to those who had been convicted under clause 58-1 of the Soviet Penal Code, "counterrevolutionary activities." The wide umbrella covered economic crimes and political activities. Many were punished for "killing fellow Soviet citizens," which often meant collaborating with the Nazis in murdering Jews. Those convicted under that clause, whether dead or still alive, had the stain of their crime symbolically removed. This blanket exoneration could not be shrugged off by Israel, but what exactly must its role be? Is world Jewry to handle it? Should the small Jewish community take the lead?

As the new relationships were taking root, we—the embassy in Riga and the Israeli Foreign Ministry—faced these and other complex dilemmas together. My opinion was, and remains, that the government of Israel and its embassies must pay serious heed to these issues. At the same time, we were not running a memorial association. Balance was vital; pleasing everyone was impossible.

Often, locals thought that I harped too much on history when there were current issues to promote—they saw no point in talking about something from the past that cannot be changed. At the same time, certain individuals and organizations, notably survivors, cried that it was wrong to advance routine diplomatic matters, especially while burdensome topics continue to weigh heavily and resolve slowly. In their way, both these opposing positions were right. I had to juggle between them as best as I could.

I used to say that "we must look together at all aspects of our common past in order to build strong bridges in the present to support a better future." That binational and multitensed statement may seem a cliché, but it was a succinct summary of my thoughts. The new diplomatic relationships with the three Baltic countries did not emerge in a vacuum.

On meeting a new contact, be it politician, journalist or artist, Jew or gentile, tied to these issues or not at all, too young to remember or old enough to know, I described my mission in those terms. I'd refer to centuries of rich Jewish life and then move to the Holocaust. I went on to discuss other topics only after demanding the attention of my interlocutors to that historical truth.

Expecting local acknowledgment of the past was a huge, frustrating challenge. To some degree, Germans and others had been facing their awfulness since the end of World War II.

They had confronted responsibility and apology and compensation. In the Baltic countries, decades of freshly ended Soviet occupation were still traumatic. Often, my interlocutors saw themselves as victims and did not recognize that, although they had suffered, they had also inflicted great suffering. Placing a historical mirror in front of them was an important part of my role, but there are no readily available instructions on how to do it. It took me time to feel that I was getting it right.

Like this: When discussing the past, locals often shrugged away collaboration. True, they said, some in our countries helped the Nazis to kill Jews. That was very bad. But you see, it happened for a reason. During the first Soviet occupation, Jews were prominent among the communists who undermined our independence. It was only natural that when we could, we took our revenge.

At first hearing this, I was horrified and indignant. Although that line of reasoning soon ceased to surprise me, I continued to express shock and anger when it was voiced in my presence, thinking that to be the most appropriate and effective reaction. I would announce that debating rationalization of mass murder of innocents is absurd. In implying that the argument was unworthy of being refuted, I intended to shame those who thought it and expressed it.

My approach changed about midway into my three-year posting. I had an otherwise unmemorable lunch with the newly appointed head of the Latvian Prime Minister's bureau. He had recently returned from Paris with a doctorate from the Sorbonne. Despite his exposure to the West and its values, he repeated that argument, which effectively justified participation in genocide.

Suddenly, I understood that like others who leaned on that reasoning, he had no idea that there was anything wrong with it. To them, the explanation for collaboration was logical. They were mystified by my dramatized reaction; surely admitting wrongdoing was enough? Distasteful as it was, I realized that I would have to deal with it directly.

A cursory look at history books pointed to logical flaws in that excuse for collaboration. For example, more Poles than Jews were active communists, but Poles were not methodically killed in revenge. Also, there were more Jewish capitalists who were punished by the Soviets, including by exile, than Jewish communists. This made Jews the victims of communism rather than its perpetrators. I subsequently answered the claim with these and other facts, and I was also proactive when writing and speaking.

With time, I heard the fallacious excuse less. Even if some believed it, they'd keep it to themselves, at least in my presence and in public forums. I consider this to be a modest contribution to the public discourse about the Holocaust in countries that had—probably still have, maybe always will have—much soul-searching to do.

The past and its ramifications were a constant issue for the embassy. We did not have personnel or time to handle everything, and we had to choose. For example, although it was hard to ignore the desecration of Jewish cemeteries, I did just that. Not because I didn't care, but because local authorities and Jewish organizations there and elsewhere reacted. Also, it seemed wrong to invest our meager resources in drawing more attention to a hooligan brandishing a can of spray paint, and thus encouraging others to follow suit.

In prioritizing how to use our limited resources, I am pleased with my actions in a long saga involving Latvian President Guntis Ulmanis and his spokeswoman, Anta Busa. The name is pronounced *busha.* In Hebrew that means "disgrace."

In early 1994, about half a year after I arrived in Riga, President Ulmanis decided to give all Latvian high school graduates a book written by Adolf Silde, a Latvian historian. The president may have been unaware that as the editor of a major progovernment newspaper when the Nazis ruled Latvia, Silde was a prominent Nazi apologist, who in 1942 noted the great joy Latvians felt at the solution of the Jewish problem. Although the book was apparently not anti-Semitic, giving its writer (and by extension, his ideas) such presidential approval was clearly problematic.

When the president's office was asked about his choice of gift, spokeswoman Busa said, "These Jews always make a big fuss about everything; then it goes away." Asked about Silde's role as a leading Nazi propagandist, she explained that "his youthful mistake should not be held against him." She responded on the record, without hiding behind a designation such as "sources."

Excusing Nazis while stereotyping Jews did not help Latvia's quest to join the institutions of the democratic West, such as NATO. Foreign diplomats, local politicians, and many journalists expressed outrage. In the ensuing outcry, Busa did not explain or apologize. Nor did her boss.

Latvia's Prime Minister was scheduled to visit Israel within weeks; the affair threatened to overshadow his visit. The president asked to meet with me privately. He was unwilling to take the obvious step, and kept repeating, "What do you think I should do?" I was not prepared to force his hand. Throwing the question back at him, I asked, "What do you think you should do?" After a week or two, Busa left her job. Latvia showed that it would not tolerate anti-Semitism. Controversy would not overshadow the prime minister's visit to Israel.

Within weeks, I heard that Busa had been there all along, lying low. As the sham was little known and the point that had been made by her removal remained intact, I felt that I could live with the cover-up. Gradually, she reappeared, and resumed her full duties. Latvia's leader ignored criticism from the political, journalistic, and diplomatic circles that had expressed displeasure when the affair began. The pressure on him peaked, then lessened, and disappeared.

But I did not forget. Even after Busa left the presidency, I held the president responsible for turning a blind eye to anti-Semitism, in fact, for protecting it. Other than severing relations or officially downgrading them, there was not much any official Israeli could do, but there was one thing we could avoid doing. The presidents of neighboring Lithuania and Estonia paid visits to Israel, as did all three prime ministers. Of the six top leaders in those three countries, only the president of the country where I lived was excluded. Everyone who mattered knew why.

In mid-1996, I was preparing to leave Riga. The sorry affair should not burden my successor. Protocol decreed that I pay a farewell visit to the president. The press release about our meeting (discussed with me in advance) quoted the president about the need to be sensitive to the past, stated that countries with a past like Latvia must be doubly sensitive, and concluded with regrets for any past insensitivity. This was as close as presidentially possible to a public admission of moral failure, followed by an apology. The official statement went on to say that Her Excellency invited the president to visit Israel, and that he accepted. It seems that sometimes deliberate inaction is more effective than any public deed.

What I did as publicly as possible was give certificates to righteous gentiles who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. Most were from Lithuania, which had had the largest Jewish community before the war. A few were in Latvia, and I gave none in Estonia. If the honorees were frail, I visited them at home. Otherwise I arranged ceremonies in big cities,

and where possible, took advantage of rare visits by senior Israelis or of events such as Israel's Independence Day celebrations. The brave few deserved all possible public recognition. It paid tribute to them while implicitly pointing to the majority.

At those ceremonies, I could not help but think about my family and imagine what might have been had they met such people. I also wondered what I would have done if faced with their choice, of saving someone while risking everything. I wish I could be sure.

When recognizing them, and whenever else I spoke of the Holocaust, I simplified the incomprehensible into three main lessons. What passes for culture is no guarantee against barbarism; minor expressions of racism can grow and so must never be ignored; a strong Jewish state is essential for the survival of the Jewish people. I will not theorize beyond that, and I will instead recount two episodes.

In 1995, the embassies of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus in Riga arranged a festive event to mark fifty years since the end of World War II. They came together to honor the Red Army and its aged veterans. For Latvia, the Red Army's victory marked the start of Soviet occupation. Respecting local sensitivity, many ambassadors, including from countries that fought with the Red Army against Nazi Germany, decided to stay away and sent junior diplomats to represent them.

I did not do that. Without the Red Army, more Jews would have been murdered. I might not have been born. Israel may not have come to be. I was a guest in Latvia, but I am also me. I risked offending my hosts and went. No one in the local press, neither in the Latvian language nor in Russian, noted my presence in the packed hall. My small act of diplomatic defiance signified something only to me.

During every first visit to a Baltic town, I went to a Holocaust-related location. In Kaunas, erstwhile capital of Lithuania, the most prominent site is the Ninth Fort. Some five thousand local Jews and many from elsewhere in Europe were murdered there. In one cell, words scrawled on a wall by a Jew facing death are still visible. With now faded blood from the slashed belly of his pregnant wife, he wrote in Yiddish *yidden, nekomeh*—Jews, Revenge.

The Ninth Fort has become a national museum. It was closed that day. The authorities opened it for me, clearing a path through the deep, February snow. I asked for my blue-and-white Israeli flag to be put on the car. I usually traveled to Lithuania with a Latvian bodyguard. This time, the embassy's head of security came with me from Riga. Preferring the safety of anonymity, he objected. "The museum is closed," he said. "No one else is here. No one will see. Who will know?"

No one will know? Lithuanian museum staff will know. My Latvian driver will know, as will my Israeli guard. I will know. And so will they, the ghosts I carry inside me.

Chapter 17
Christianity
Get Me To the Church on Time

Haunted as they are by memories of crusades, inquisitions, and blood libels, for generations Jews avoided voluntary contact with the Church, its officeholders, and its buildings. The boycott has shrunk but still exists in some circles, whose adherents refrain from entering churches.

Well, I love churches! Sleepy country churches, deep, heavy crusader churches, elegant Catholic, ornate Eastern, soaring, stained-glass-illuminated churches—it doesn't matter; they all interest me, many thrill me. It was a treat to have worked as a tour guide in Israel, with its unparalleled variety, and then to have switched to a career that exposed me to more abroad.

However, I helped with the postmortem publication of my father's book, *Christianity and the Holocaust of Hungarian Jewry*, to which he dedicated his last years, and I am conscious of past and present issues. Dealing professionally with churches was challenging, but work is work.

In September 1993, a few weeks after I became Israel's Ambassador to Latvia, Pope John Paul II traveled to the Baltic countries. It was his first trip to the former Soviet Union. Although Lithuania is predominantly Catholic, Estonia and Latvia have Protestant majorities, and the visit was not entirely pastoral. It was largely designed to pay homage to the populations of three small countries for the role they played in overthrowing the dual tyranny of atheism and communism.

Latvia was new to statehood. The impending visit was cause for elaborate organization. Detailed plans were reported in the press; it was enthusiastically discussed everywhere. At the same time, I was new to ambassadorhood. Everything I did was a novelty. No wonder that the entire experience, not only its religious aspects, is imprinted in my mind.

The Latvian Foreign Ministry invited all foreign ambassadors to attend much of the pontifical program. What concerned me most was this: What will I do at the event in Riga Cathedral when everyone around me will kneel? We Jews do not kneel, certainly not in church. Remain seated? That will not show respect for the faith of others. Stand? And stick out more? Obviously not. I had no choice but to wait and see. To my relief, at no point during those proceedings, or at any other church service I attended thereafter, was that an issue. When some knelt, many remained seated.

What allowed me to focus on my knees and push away my bigger historical discomfort was that Pope John Paul II did much for reconciliation between our faiths, including by highlighting the origins of Christianity as Judaism's younger sister. I suppressed thoughts such as what would my ultra-Orthodox grandparents feel if they saw me entering churches of my free will.

Maybe they would understand that in some cases it was to satisfy cultural interest. In others, it was dictated by the demands of my position, and let me presumptuously add, for the good of the Jewish state. I was an Israeli diplomat who served in countries with Christian majorities. Religion had an important presence. Ignoring that would be a disservice to my employer, the Israeli taxpayer.

I have a photo shaking hands with the pope. All fifteen or twenty ambassadors then serving in Latvia stood in line in the order of precedence, meaning the order in which we

presented credentials to the country's president. I stood between the French Ambassador, who arrived some time before me, and the British, who came a few days after and whose nose penetrates the photo. The Latvian Chief of Protocol, as new to her position and to state visits as her country, introduced us all with our full titles: Her Excellency Miss Tova Herzl, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the State of Israel. She was soon to shorten it to "Ambassador of Israel," which is quite enough.

The Pope greeted us each in our own language. When he said shalom to me, which means "peace," would that qualify as a discussion of the peace process, especially as this was just days after the Rabin-Arafat handshake on the White House lawn? This I ask only half in jest. There are diplomats (and others in any profession) who, tempted to exaggerate their role, would extrapolate on such an encounter. They might report that he held their hand longer than anyone else's or smiled wider, and pile interpretations on that.

I took important lessons from the apostolic visit. Novice that I was, they had little to do with religion and everything to do with management, of personnel and of my time.

I gave my deputy a ride to the aforementioned event at Riga Cathedral, where she would sit with diplomats who were not ambassadors. We would meet after the service and drive back to the embassy together. While the service proceeded, chauffeurs were told to move their vehicles to another spot. After the event, emerging ambassadors were shepherded to the new parking area.

My deputy, who had apparently gone to the original meeting point, was nowhere to be seen. My driver Sasha spoke Russian and Latvian, but no English. Nor did I share a language or parts thereof with the day's bodyguard. We did not yet have cell phones. Desperate mimes and repeated utterances of her name proved useless. Guard and driver simply mimicked their incomprehension back to me. One ambassadorial vehicle drove away, then another. A lone car remained in a rapidly emptying parking lot. It began to rain. After half an hour, I gave up. Waving my hand in the universal sign for "Go!," I used the recently acquired Latvian word for embassy, *viestniciba*. There she was, furious and rain drenched.

She had been temporary head of the embassy until I arrived; her husband was the administrator. They had hired Sasha as my driver, allowing me no flexibility, not even for something as minor as a small change in my car's location. I said none of that, apologized for the mishap, and acted to prevent a recurrence. Her relegation to number two on my arrival was not easy; I had no desire to overturn her decisions and undermine her authority. But keeping a driver with whom I could not communicate was bad for all concerned—me, the embassy, and everyone in it, including him. It was too high a price to pay for her dignity.

The two embassy drivers switched. Sasha loved the silver Volvo and enjoyed dressing well to drive it. He resented, and soon resigned from, driving an all-purpose Soviet Lada. Gedalye, a middle-aged former boxer who spoke Yiddish (and was the father of my secretary Ellit), preferred running embassy errands and doing odd jobs to driving me around, but he did so for a few months, until we hired English-speaking Artis.

My second lesson from the Pope's visit was learned at an outdoor papal mass. Two events on the Pope's program, the service in the cathedral and the reception where he said shalom, were considered obligatory for ambassadors. Diplomats were also invited to other events. At that early stage of my career, I tried to attend everything, go everywhere. Sitting for hours in the midst of thousands of eager believers, I learned the importance of using my time selectively. For years afterward, I ran decisions on participating in potential activities through a

mental filter of that unnecessary, cold, boring afternoon.

The pontifical visit was my main Christian activity in the Baltics. I met a bishop here, briefed a priest there, and recall trying unsuccessfully to persuade a senior Lithuanian Catholic cleric to speak against anti-Semitism. Our conversation was like a game. As I focused on the issue, he spoke around it. Looking back, I should have directed my efforts at students of seminaries. In that period of postcommunist, post-atheist flux, it would have been wise to reach out to future religious leaders who were confident of their religious freedom, rather than to those dwelling on the past.

In three years in the Baltics, none of my church-related activities squeezed my personal and historical sensitivities excessively. That was not my situation in Washington.

Freedom of worship and separation of church and state are basic American tenets. Nevertheless, Congress begins its working day with a prayer recited by a person of the cloth, the national currency expresses a shared trust in divinity, and it is rare that a candidate for high office admits to atheism.

Christianity, the religion of most Americans, has its roots in Judaism. Israel is Jewish (complicated as that statement is; see two chapters ago). Ergo, Americans may view Israel through their beliefs. Is that good for us, or bad? Depends. If, as happened in the past, belief led to hostility, clearly that is bad. But the opposite is not necessarily true.

First, we should be consistent. Viewing the politics of the Middle East through a theological prism is either legitimate or it is not. If I respect those whose religion brings them to love my country and my people, then I should equally respect those whose religion points them in the opposite direction.

Then, among certain Christian supporters, fulfillment of the biblical promise on the regathering of Jews into their homeland is a precondition for the Second Coming of Jesus. In some versions, this includes our mass conversion to Christianity. Friendship that is founded on our presumed role in the messianic theology of others is problematic.

Also, some of Israel's best friends among American Christians are conservatives on domestic matters, where many, if not most, American Jews are liberals. The agendas of two important support groups are in conflict. It is uncomfortable when one's main friends are in permanent disagreement.

Moreover, Christian support originates in the same religion in whose name Jews were persecuted. Those aspects of our shared history are difficult to ignore.

Finally, the stuff of politics and diplomacy is compromise. Religion is based on absolutes. Religious support contains the ingrained potential for tension between theological rigidity and diplomatic flexibility.

Weighing all, "It says in the Bible" (whose version of the Bible?) is not the ideal basis for political friendship. Whose god is more powerful and which book is holiest or truest—such debates are best avoided. I find that endorsement based on Israel's merits and on shared interests and values is less controversial and distasteful and will, in the long term, prove more solid and reliable.

Conveniently, how to deal with this source of support was not a decision for me to make. I was part of a large embassy, and in any case, all matters American were, still are, determined by an amalgam of complicated factors and important players, led by the Israeli Prime Minister. A tiny, compliant component of the whole, I cultivated congressional offices whose ideology I found disturbing and attended the National Prayer Breakfast where thousands, including the

American President, gather each February under the auspices of a conservative Christian organization. I told myself that when I would be in a position to decide, I would be principled and keep religion and diplomacy apart.

Then I arrived in South Africa, and I found unyielding vilification of Israel. I was overwhelmed and isolated; I longed for relief. I soon realized that the country is deeply religious, yet except in certain white circles, this did not reflect on our issues. At church on Sunday, the priest preached about the Chosen People and the Promised Land. On Monday, it was politics as usual.

How religious is South Africa? Two examples will show. Tito Mboweni, Governor of the Central Bank, star of the economic pages and of the gossip columns, rarely met ambassadors, yet spent two hours with me discussing religion. I sat in the galleries of Parliament when Defense Minister Mosiuoa Lekota reported on an agreement South Africa had brokered to end an African civil war. He asked those present to go to their respective houses of prayer that weekend (a term that included Muslim Friday, Jewish Saturday, and Christian Sunday) and pray for its success.

Faith and sentiment were there, waiting to be used. I silenced my nagging principles and went to work.

I made contact with leaders of mainstream churches, but I saw no results. On the contrary, Anglican Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, whose role in the struggle against apartheid gave him worldwide moral prominence, continued to be at the forefront of international Israel bashing.

I spoke to fundamentalist Christian supporters of Israel, mostly white. Given the prevailing comparison between Israel and the apartheid regime, white support was not what Israel needed to display in South Africa at the time. I asked them to use their common faith to reach out to black churches. There was more black support at the end of my term. It was evident mostly in groups scorned by the majority for their opinions on other matters, such as discouraging the use of condoms in that AIDS-shattered land, or calling to change the name of the famous mountain “Devil’s Peak.”

I had an idea! The fastest growing church in southern Africa is the Zion Christian Church (ZCC). It combines Christian beliefs with African traditions, such as ancestor worship. The highlight of ZCC’s year is Easter. As many as three million worshippers, known as Zionists, flock to Moriah (named after the Temple Mount in Jerusalem) for the main event. Top South African leaders, including presidents, first white and now black, recognize the importance of this group and make the trip. Might ZCC provide me with an opportunity to prod a change in South Africa?

I asked to meet Bishop Barnabas. I drove three or four hours from Pretoria to see him. He spoke warmly of his trip to Israel. Actually, a spokesman spoke for him, and he nodded in approval. I suggested an agricultural program in his baobab-dotted region (nothing came of that, I am afraid). Finally, I hinted that I would like to be at Easter, hoping that if invited, he would mention my presence from the podium. That would convey his positive approach to Israel. The sentiment would be picked up by the country’s political leaders, who would want to please the bishop’s followers among their voters. I could see it coming; could almost touch the change in South Africa’s attitude.

The African Zionists embraced the idea. All ambassadors were invited. Every diplomat who attended the Easter celebrations was equally acknowledged in the bishop’s festive speech. In another first, which may have been inspired by the presence of foreigners, the speech had

political content. The bishop listed ongoing struggles around the world, including the intifada, at its peak then, in April 2002. He read the number of people killed on both sides of each conflict and prayed for them. He did not place blame, but the comparison did not put us in a good light.

What I considered to be one of my best ideas proved useless, or less. On the drive back to Pretoria I heard about another Palestinian human bomb, killing fourteen in a restaurant in Haifa. I knew that South Africa would condemn the act, and also that it would find a way to phrase its official statement so as to divert the blame onto Israel. I was engulfed by frustration at the ongoing futility of my efforts.

I often wonder what it would have been like to work where the majority is not Christian. Say, in a Muslim country? Or where public expressions of faith are forbidden? What is the dynamic in a country in which religion is central, but the faith is not monotheistic? How is it to deal with people for whom the Bible is like Aesop's fables are to me? For whom Jerusalem has geographical and historical meaning but is not regarded as a landmark on the road to Heaven?

To answer some of those questions, I would have loved to work in India. But there is only one job for which I would come out of retirement—ambassador to the Vatican.

True, I would prefer if religion did not feature in international relations. But it does. Recognizing the influence of the Church (churches, I know that), considering historical baggage, and imagining heightened levels of reconciliation—I can think of no bigger and better challenge for a Jewish Israeli diplomat.

Chapter 18
Speech
There Will Be Plenty of Time for Questions

When I was a teenager growing up in Cape Town, many of its thirty thousand Jews gathered annually in the sports arena in Goodwood, a northern suburb, to celebrate Israel's Independence Day. There is a fairly routine program for such events: communal singing, fireworks, a prayer, some kind of show, and greetings by dignitaries. One year, they included the Israeli Ambassador to South Africa.

Unlike succinct comments by his fellow greeters, the ambassador's remarks resembled a policy speech. After ten or fifteen minutes, the audience began to applaud, to indicate that they had heard enough. Most of the clapping came from the younger celebrants, pupils of Jewish schools and members of Zionist youth movements, who sat in a bloc; I remember doing it myself. The ambassador either still had much to say or he misinterpreted the jeers as cheers, and he continued.

In later years, when I found myself a captive listener, bored but unable to escape, my mind sometimes wandered to that unfortunate ambassador. Maybe those who asked him to speak did not indicate for how long, and he did what he judged best. Still, I thought that he should have been sensitive to the frustrated audience of thousands, who had no choice but to sit and hear him out.

Fast-forward three decades, and I am the Ambassador of Israel to South Africa, addressing similar gatherings. Until my humbling before Zionist youth, as I was all those years earlier, I was certain that I was never boring and was confident that my words were relevant, interesting, and stimulating.

In late 2001, my first summer in the job, I visited the camps of the Zionist youth movements, which draw thousands of youngsters from around the country. Campers aged from about ten to early twenties gather for three weeks of Zionist and Jewish education. One may guess that in addition to activities that enhance identity, they are also keen on whatever happens when youthful genders spend time together, in tents, near a sunny beach, away from parents and teachers.

Bnei Akiva, Modern Orthodox, was the largest camp. I had spent a few sleepless teenage summers at their campsite. HaBonim, which is tied to the Israeli Labor Party, was next in size. The camps of Beitar, which is connected to Likud, and Netzer, the youth wing of Reform Jewry, were smaller. I was later to learn of a camp for underprivileged children, sponsored by a donor.

The second Palestinian uprising or intifada was raging when I visited the camps. South African opinion makers in politics and in the press were virtually unanimous against us. Information that might counter the pervasive condemnation barely made it through the hostility. It was very hard to represent Israel; there was hardly any relief.

I thought that my visits with committed young Jews would allow me to bring facts and analysis to hundreds of supporters, who were full of goodwill but short on knowledge. Oh yes, I would recruit them, educate them, make them my ambassadors!

I did not relax at the popular Indian Ocean beaches. I did not visit the verdant sites of the world-famous Garden Route. I proceeded, breathless, from camp to camp, hundreds of miles,

stopping only overnight. In each camp, I asked to meet the older campers, high school and over. In each camp, the leaders suggested that I meet everyone, the young ones, too, perhaps at a meal when they are all together? No, I insisted, I must address those who can understand the issues.

What could camp leaders do? Adjusting schedules, they brought my chosen audiences to hear me. I elaborated on the history of the Middle East and discussed terrorism. I spoke of peace and of war. I refuted the comparison of Zionism to racism, highlighted by the infamous UN conference in Durban just months earlier. I provided much information and many assessments, and I methodically advised my listeners on how best to use that data when they went back to school and university.

I ignored the looks they exchanged. They were better behaved than my contemporaries and I had been decades earlier, and they did not interrupt me. Had I stopped to think, I would have understood. They wanted to cheer Israel's senior representative, maybe sing a song or two in my honor, for solidarity. I would have told them how great they are, we are so proud of them! Then we would have continued on our separate ways—me to my ambassadoring, they to being kids in summer camp.

Instead, I did what my hapless predecessor had done. I had a very important message to deliver. If my listeners were not interested—well, too bad; that did not deter me! I learned my lesson. Visiting the camps the following year, I came, I greeted, I left.

Speaking fluently—and appropriately—is not the only skill required of diplomats. As with politicians, if it stands alone and is unsupported by substance, it becomes demagoguery; the reader is now invited to recall any smooth-talking facade with little behind it. Still, in a profession in which public addresses are an integral part of work, oratorical skills are important. I was good enough, but far from the grand speakers, say Shimon Peres, who can rivet any audience with seeming ease.

In 2002, Peres, who was then Israel's Foreign Minister, came to Johannesburg for a UN conference. I accompanied him to a meeting with the Jewish community. For most of the short drive from his hotel, I answered his questions. Then he said, "Let me prepare now," signaling five minutes of silent concentration. We arrived to a packed hall. Without so much as a piece of paper, Peres spoke for thirty minutes, with one point flowing naturally into the next, a perfect balance of fact and principle, some quotes from others, a few quotables of his own, and just enough humor. Watching as he prepared and then listening when he spoke, such easy eloquence seemed to me like an Olympic feat, a perfect "ten" in verbal acrobatics.

What about the rest of us, without that inborn ability? Much can be learned. Before postings, the Foreign Ministry sends us to workshops designed to improve delivery.

After hearing myself as recorded and seeing myself as filmed, I practiced slowing my rapid speech and tried to smile more, or at least raise my eyebrows in order to seem less stern. Seeing how much I move was a shock: Without deliberate control, I seem almost mad. In contrast, it is important to move naturally when addressing a large audience: To those watching from any distance, too little motion makes the speaker seem like a statue.

Despite the training, I still have an annoying habit. I often repeat myself to make sure that I am understood properly. In other words, to be certain that my message is absolutely clear, I tend to make the same point twice, albeit in different words.

My starting point for speechifying was fairly good. Before joining the Foreign Ministry, I was a tourist guide, and earned my living by telling stories well enough to be hired again. Two

stints as congressional liaison in Washington called for little public speaking. Two ambassadorial postings made up for it. In the Baltics, my agenda was dominated by historical issues relating to the local Jewish past. In South Africa, the Middle East was my main focus.

It is easy and flattering to address supporters who think that my country can do no wrong, and who will applaud me regardless of what I say and how I say it. Difficult listeners are more challenging and more rewarding. If, after a public address, someone told me that "I didn't think of that angle before" or "that is not what I understood from the newspaper," I was satisfied. Persuading those who disagreed was rarely a realistic goal. Instilling a nagging doubt was good enough use of my time.

In that spirit, I accepted an invitation from All Africa House at my alma mater, the University of Cape Town. It caters to teachers and students of African subjects and to others from around the continent who study at the university.

August 19, 2003, was an unusually cold winter day in Cape Town, with rare snowflakes dotting the slopes of Table Mountain. I had the flu and only wanted to collapse into bed. I tried to beg off, but there was no way out of the commitment. Bundled in as many layers as I could find, sucking one lozenge after another, off I went to address the diverse gathering at All Africa House.

In almost three years in South Africa, there was no criticism that I hadn't heard, no accusation to which I hadn't formulated an answer. Unless entering sensitive territory where each word had to be calculated (like my first rebuttal of Israel's comparison to apartheid South Africa or when I began to address Baltic collaboration with the Nazis during the Holocaust), a few headlines scribbled quickly on a scrap of paper were enough preparation. I knew what to expect; what could go wrong?

I made my basic presentation to the listeners with the Africa focus, which was designed to show that there are two sides to the Middle East situation. I may have pretended not to notice that my allotted time had passed. The small deviousness was deliberate, in order to leave less time for questions.

Experience taught me that questions from unfriendly audiences, and sometimes from friendly ones, tend to be declarations, with "do you agree?" at the end. Also, in an audience that is not well informed, the first question is often repeated in different words by subsequent questioners. As a result, the time allocated for questions and answers circles one narrow point. This was not efficient use of time, neither mine nor my listeners'.

Depleted and flushed, I finished speaking and waited for the audience.

After hearing the usual critical questions and issuing my tried and tested answers, someone asked, "Do you believe in the Bible?" As explained a few pages ago, I think that the introduction of religion does not serve the political debate well (nor is religion improved by bringing politics into it).

But isolated in that hostility, the question sounded like emergency relief—even in South Africa, a reference to the Bible was often followed by a faith-based expression of support.

I let my guard down and said, "My personal faith is irrelevant but yes, I believe; why do you ask me that?" Contrary to my assumptions, the questioner was not from South Africa but from elsewhere in the continent. His attitude, with chapter and verse to prove it, decreed that due to our transgressions, we Jews and our country deserve every punishment we get, and more.

That unexpected theological interlude over, I asked subsequent questioners to name their

country of origin. A student from Uganda asked, “Did you pay us for the airport?”

Airport? What airport?

The airport in Entebbe, damaged in 1976, when Israeli commandos rescued hostages who had been hijacked in an Air France plane, which departed from Tel Aviv. Ugandan president Idi Amin, whose regime was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Ugandans and who had sheltered the hijackers, had been gone from his country for decades when that question came up.

I tried to speak of terrorism and counterterrorism, but the Ugandan student kept harping on the airport. I tried another tack. We had no diplomatic relations at the time, as Amin had severed them, so I doubt that there was any negotiation. This was not good enough; he carried on about compensation.

Heated by fever and confronted by anger, I somehow had the clarity to promise to find the answer soon and get back to him. He then stood up and declared, “I refuse to listen to anyone who refuses to answer questions!” Whereupon he walked out, accompanied by several fellow students.

I wonder how it would have gone had I felt better. Would I have risen to the unexpected challenges, might I have enjoyed the absurdity just a little?

It probably comes through that I like speaking. With memorable exceptions, I basked in the attention, reveled in my fluency, and enjoyed the sense of power that resulted from the many eyes and ears that focused upon me.

So it is good to remember that Moses was of heavy mouth and heavy tongue. His delivery was weak, and he needed a spokesman, his brother Aaron, to convey most of his messages. In this day, would he become a political leader? Could he pass the test of the sound bite? Would he even make it to ambassador?

Ha! He would not make it past the initial selection process of the Foreign Ministry!

Chapter 19
Meetings

Oh, So That's What You Do All Day!

I was the junior congressional liaison officer in the Israeli Embassy in Washington in the mid-1980s, when Dr. Yossi Beilin, newly appointed political director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, came to visit America's capital.

He judged apartheid to be on its way out, and he believed that both pragmatism and morality should limit Israel's ties with South Africa's white regime. This view included adhering to international sanctions against South Africa, which were then in place. Apparently more breached than respected, sanctions were then much discussed in official America, including in Congress.

Among the people Beilin asked to meet during his visit was Congressman Lee Hamilton of Indiana, chairman of the subcommittee in the House of Representatives that dealt with the Middle East. Hamilton was an elected official who made policy. Beilin was an appointed official who, by definition, carried out policy made by others. A politician may choose to see only foreign visitors who are his counterparts in making policy. The request was turned down.

I explained Beilin's unique situation to Hamilton's staff. Shimon Peres had recently been appointed foreign minister. Of the young men who surrounded him (known collectively as "The Blazers," a snide reference to their formal uniformity), Peres wanted Beilin as his deputy. By Israeli law, a minister need not be a member of Knesset, but a deputy minister must, and Beilin was not. Peres appointed two directors general. One was responsible for the ministry's administration and for issues of secondary importance to the minister. The other DG, Beilin, was the minister's partner on all matters that he held dear. In all but name, Beilin was Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister, and a policy maker. Hamilton agreed.

Three or four diplomats from the Israeli embassy accompanied Beilin to the meeting in the Rayburn House Office Building on Capitol Hill: the senior congressional liaison in the embassy and junior me as well as the ambassador, or his deputy, or both—I don't remember.

As expected, sanctions against South Africa came up. Beilin, who had a strong academic background, spoke in elaborate clauses that jelled into complicated sentences. I began to sense that as he was explaining Israel's new position, Hamilton was hearing the opposite. My fellow Israelis moved uncomfortably in their chairs. We were not a group of equals sitting in Hamilton's office, or a professional delegation engaged in focused talks, where each member in turn provides input. On both sides, all but host and guest were observers; unless specifically asked, comments from the sidelines were not expected.

Had I been more experienced, I probably would have remained silent. At most, I might have slid Beilin a note, but what could it say? "You are confusing Hamilton with too much analysis?" What if this hypothetical disruption made him angry with me? Or if he wouldn't read the note? And everybody stared at me for interrupting? Shouldn't I have waited for someone else more senior to do something? Without thinking it through, I blurted out, "I think what Dr. Beilin means is . . . " Hamilton was happy to hear what Beilin meant. Unlike many, who would view such a comment from an underling as criticism, Beilin was grateful to have his conversation back on track.

The most junior participant at that meeting—me—was automatically expected to take notes. The task is boring and annoying, but it is preferable to being beneath the cutoff line of "three (or two or six) may join," which threatens omitted juniors with a sense of irrelevance. One must write up the exchanges coherently after the meeting while finessing misunderstandings, have the summary typed by the embassy's cipher department, and proofread the typed diplomatic cable at least once before the document goes off to Israel in the most technologically advanced method available. It could not be sent by fax as it was classified, although not too highly—nothing new, dramatic, or overly sensitive was said in the meeting; revelation would cause little harm. Still, it was not a public discussion, and it needed some protection.

Notes are taken at meetings even when everything said by both sides can be anticipated. I would often return to the embassy (any of them) and report that "the chairman and I had a long meeting about whatever." Or I might not bother to report it at all, although one should, so that the head office would know that a particular subject was discussed with a certain person.

When a meeting merits more than cursory reporting, describing one's own words is a challenge. Sometimes it is necessary to go beyond "I stated Israel's position" and "emphasized ABC." When quoting oneself, one should try to avoid variations of "the minister listened carefully, expressed gratitude for my erudite clarification, and promised an immediate and thorough policy review." See? Clever me!

In diplomacy—as in life—there are many types of meetings. They may be accidental or deliberate, public or private, and have as few as two participants.

Let me begin with courtesy calls, including those that are obligatory. Soon after arriving, a new ambassador is expected to visit the host country's chief of protocol, the dean of the diplomatic corps, and colleagues representing countries where one has worked. There is a set choreography for the first meeting with fellow ambassadors. The visitor is met by the host's secretary at the entrance to the embassy grounds. If the embassy is in an office building, the visitor is welcomed downstairs, or at the elevator door on the embassy's floor. Host and guest sit alone, without staff, over hot or cold drinks. On leaving, it is the host who escorts the guest out of the office, past the embassy door, to that same entrance of the embassy grounds where the secretary stood when the guest arrived.

Saying that the ambassador would like to pay a call—or a courtesy call—on the minister of health, or the bishop, expresses a wish to introduce oneself and one's agenda and ask about theirs. I may (or may not) bring a small gift, say, a picture album of Jerusalem or an olive wood object, and I may (or may not) receive a comparable souvenir. We will have created the basis for a cordial acquaintance that can remain just that, or become a foundation for a substantive connection later.

If the request to meet is refused outright, or if it is arranged only after repeated asking and reminding, then the exchange takes on another meaning. But what? Especially in South Africa, it was impossible to know if endless waits reflected scheduling problems, resulted from a broken wire somewhere between the other office and mine, or were a political snub. When chancing on the pursued person, say at a reception (which is a meeting in itself, albeit unplanned and often not private), a frustrating dialogue would often follow:

Me: Minister, hello. I am the Ambassador of Israel; I hope we can meet soon.
Minister: Sure, we have much to discuss; just call my office.

Me: We have, several times.
Minister: No one told me. I will instruct them. Call again tomorrow.
Me to secretary: The minister said to call his office; he will instruct them.
Ditto, a few days later: When will the meeting with the minister take place?
Secretary: I called three times since you told me; still nothing.
Me to me: What now?

Many meetings are scheduled around something concrete. We talk about a visit of an official from one country to another, see a cinema director to discuss a film festival, or settle with a caterer on a menu. At times, the agenda is defined, yet my interlocutor and I both know that we are engaging in a meaningless ritual. Other than crossing an item off a to-do list, it is a waste of time.

Thus, the United Nations regularly debates Israel. Ahead of the UN General Assembly that meets in New York each September, the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem instructs its diplomats abroad to meet those officials in local foreign ministries who are responsible for multilateral diplomacy, the many-sided variety in which interaction between countries is not on a one-to-one basis.

The head office in Jerusalem prepares us well. We receive talking points, covering most questions that may be raised, and a document to be printed on plain paper and handed over. While taking the time to make ready, I know that my host country's vote will not change. The official I will meet—high, medium, or low: I can ask, but the decision on who receives me is not in my hands—will listen politely, comment a little, and explain that the country's position is decided by the bloc to which it belongs, say the European Union, or the African one. This procedure is repeated for special sessions of UN bodies, such as the Security Council or structures dealing with human rights, where Israel is a favorite, as though we are the world's champion evildoer.

Such meetings with local officials are not entirely aimless. Skipping that smallish effort could indicate that we don't care about the United Nations and its decisions (although some might think that would not be entirely bad). Most diplomatic encounters are not so futile, or it would be an entirely useless occupation.

My small, plastic-encased diaries, annual records of how I used my time, repeat names of key contacts. Thus, I had three main Lithuanian interlocutors on matters emanating from the Holocaust: the deputy foreign minister, the president's foreign policy adviser, and Parliament's chancellor. A visit to the capital Vilnius might include a meeting with one, two, or all three. There was no need to specify that "she wants to discuss ABC." Politicians, officials, journalists, colleagues, business leaders, influential Jews, and others were among my constant conversationalists. We had converging interests and were reciprocally flexible, squeezing each other into our respective schedules.

Meetings can take place over food, smoothed by alcohol. After dinner in a fancy kosher restaurant that had recently opened in Vilnius (but was soon to cease being kosher, and then closed), Edward Lucas of *The Economist*, who knew about diplomatic entertainment budgets, quipped, "I would like to thank you and the Israeli taxpayer."

With time and meals and drinks, gossip and personal stuff (I hate my boss/my colleague is lazy/the idiots at headquarters understand nothing) were piled onto work. Unburdening felt good. The confidence was returned, trust deepened, sometimes a friendship emerged, always a

growing understanding of the innards of the structures I dealt with; I learned where trying harder might be worthwhile, or who was a waste of my time.

When such intimate, unstructured meetings touched on something that Israel should know, I sent a short report to my headquarters. Or—this is rare and could get one fired—I sent a deliberate distortion. Say there is real trust with a foreigner, and we agree that carrying out an instruction that one of us received will be damaging, we may decide that we have done our duty by mentioning it. Neither of us will tell; the secret disobedience is safe. This is also the place to throw an unauthorized idea to the air: How would Israel react if South Africa did this? When a congressman said that?

Those personal encounters are vastly different from official, structured, and carefully reported meetings, such as between Beilin and Hamilton, which usually take place in offices. Whose office? As a rule, foreigners (diplomats and visitors from another country) go to offices of locals, although rank is considered: Locals make the trip to a very senior guest, say a president, seeing him in his hotel room or in his country's embassy. These guidelines are flexible. As I was often in Johannesburg, I usually did not expect Jewish leaders or officials, neither individuals or groups such as committees, to drive to Pretoria to see me.

The strangest location for my meetings was tunnels. Meeting American congresspeople, the assumption was that we had thirty minutes (in the Baltics and in South Africa, the norm was an hour). If the bell rang for a vote, we spent some of the allotted time walking through an elaborate labyrinth of underground passageways, escalators, and elevators to the Capitol building. Despite more than five years covering Congress, the system confused me. Alone, I avoided it and walked outside, looking at where I was headed, be it the famous central Capitol building, one of three each House and Senate office buildings or their annexes, all with subterranean connections. When guided through the maze by a legislator, I waited outside the chamber for the vote, and we would take the same underground route back.

This if the meeting was not canceled or rescheduled, as happened regularly. But who am I to complain? Visiting in Johannesburg with the Krok brothers, big businessmen and generous donors to Israeli and Jewish causes, one of them asked, "Do you know that this is the seventh date we have arranged?" No, I didn't keep track. Thanks for your patience. After two or three postponements, I would have refused to schedule any more.

I was also often late. I would ask my driver when we must leave one meeting to get to the next, but we rarely considered the possibility of heavy traffic. I would arrive panting at my destination, just in time or a little after.

On a trip to Cape Town, I called my office in Pretoria and asked to apologize that I would arrive a few minutes late. I was to meet Raymond Ackerman, the head of Pick n Pay, a giant supermarket chain. Its first branch, a medium-sized grocery, was a block from my childhood home in Cape Town. I had no specific agenda for that meeting beyond talking to an economic leader. As soon as I arrived, my host asked if all was well with the car. The embassy secretary who announced the delay thought it more dignified to blame the vehicle than the tardy ambassador. Alas, I am too old and too honest to claim that the dog ate my homework.

Then he said, "We told your office that I only have half an hour; ten minutes of that are gone." No one told me. I had assumed that we would meet for the standard hour. The meeting lasted an hour and a half. We spoke about Israel and South Africa; about his pioneering employment of blacks in positions such as cashiers, previously held by whites, thus helping subvert apartheid; we chatted about this and about that.

At the time, the embassy began to train black owners of very small farms to maximize their potential by using Israeli drip irrigation. That piqued his interest. Some years later, the proud produce of this project was sold in his stores. This was an unplanned, natural, and good outcome of the seeds sown with a simple “the ambassador would like to pay a call on . . . ”

Delegations, agreements, policy statements, exhibitions, and interviews are some visible manifestations of how countries interact with each other. An outsider could be forgiven for assuming that those are the sum of diplomacy. But the stuff of press reports does not emerge in a vacuum. It is preceded by work. Some prior coordination is written, and much—if not most—takes place in meetings, the invisible (and sometimes boring) backbone of diplomacy, which makes the visible (and sometimes interesting) stuff happen.

Chapter 20
Clothes
Do I Look All Right?

Writing about a diplomatic reception in Pretoria, Gwen Gill, the society columnist for the *Sunday Times*, mentioned outfits that in her opinion stood out, for better or worse. My red pants suit elicited her comment that the Israeli ambassador needs a stylist.

Was I upset? No. That was the most-read newspaper in South Africa, her column was popular, she noted my presence. In a profession in which name recognition is important, a gossipy snippet like that is preferable to being ignored. But she had a point. Couture is not my strongest asset. My working clothes did just what they must, no more. It took me a while to discover the simplicity that works for me, and now I will turn back about twenty years (and many more pounds) to the beginning of that education.

Cadet training for diplomats in Jerusalem includes circulation through Foreign Ministry departments. My third round was in the prestigious North America division. Someone who was supposed to take notes at a meeting with a group of visiting Americans could not do it, and I was summoned.

For this diplomat-in-training, it was a memorable first encounter with a foreign delegation. It should therefore be recalled in detail. But most of the meeting soon blurred in my mind. What the topic was, the identity of the guests, which Israelis were there—all that has faded into a hazy background.

Against it, two women are shown in glaring contrast: me and April Glaspie.

Glaspie was to become the American Ambassador to Iraq during the first Gulf War and the subject of controversy. Meeting with Saddam Hussein shortly before he invaded Kuwait, she said something that, depending on what you read, he interpreted as a red light from the United States to attack, or the light might have been yellow, and maybe it was green.

But her career is of no interest to me. It is her appearance during that 1984 meeting that is imprinted in my mind. She was perfect. Every hair was in place. Her suit was tailored. Her shirt was ironed. Her mid-heeled shoes were polished. She wore stockings. Possibly the only woman on the American side of the table, she sat near the middle, as befitted her seniority.

As the most junior Israeli, I sat at the end of our side of the table, but I would have preferred to sit beneath it, invisible. My outfit that day was an homage to Israeli casualness: faded, olive-green corduroy trousers; a white, ethnic Hungarian blouse with puffed sleeves and embroidered multicolored stylized flowers; and, a relic from my days as a tour guide, popular flat-heeled Israeli footwear known as “biblical sandals.” I was convinced that everyone’s mind was not on the substance of the meeting but on actively ignoring the elephant in the room—my appearance.

Those overused trousers and that folkloric top were not seen in the office again (but the sandals were too comfortable to give up). The encounter taught me that no matter what it said on the day’s schedule, I must be ready for any professional eventuality.

I also understood what should have been obvious—a decent standard of clothing allows others to see the person beneath them. Ostentatious individualism, such as flouting dress codes (or other norms), draws attention to those very aspects that the flouter presumes to consider

unimportant. When common standards are upheld, it is possible to look beyond them, to the issues or the people at hand.

Despite such commonality, custom allows some leeway. Above my desk hangs a framed photo cut from the front page of the *International Herald Tribune* of September 5, 1995. It shows two Yemeni women at a UN conference in Beijing. They are draped in black; even a hand is gloved. Skin is visible only at the narrow slits around their eyes.

Around their necks are identification cards that are issued at such events. The cards are plastic encased, rectangular, and include data such as name and country, as well as a head-and-shoulders photograph. Like Russian dolls within dolls, these small unidentifiable identification photos, as they are seen in the larger press photo, show a triangle of black for head and shoulders, with bits of skin visible only at the narrow slits around the eyes.

In another local variation, in South Africa, I bought two embroidered African dresses. Many prominent black women wear the loose, comfortable, colorful garments, including to elegant official events. Once, seeing my reflection in a mirror thus robed, it seemed as if I was trying too hard to please. Look at me! I want to identify! You have good taste! The dresses remained in the closet after that.

Several African male diplomats wore the most gorgeous dresses of thick, starched cotton —I admired a handsome Senegalese ambassador in crisp white. But they were exceptions, and I pitied my men colleagues a little for their narrow choices. They wear bland shirts and suits in shades of black and gray, blue and brown. Ties allow some self-expression, with bow ties for the brave. On their feet are shoes in limited designs and colors, with dull socks to match. No fun shoes for them, no sandals, no liberated toes as women diplomats enjoy in summer since stockings are no longer obligatory for us. I wonder: Did April Glaspie wear sandals in Iraq?

An aside—in my first winter in Latvia, I discovered that “coat” and “winter coat” are two entirely different items, as anyone who spends months in subzero cold will testify. I bought mine in Helsinki the first time I traveled as a courier with the diplomatic pouch. I also purchased a black hat that could be pulled over my ears, as well as gloves and boots. The coat is made of bottle-green wool. It has a wide, detachable collar of the same material to protect the coat from snow (which can be shaken off while still dry), and a very light viscose lining that miraculously keeps out the elements. I wear the Finnish coat during rare very cold days here in Jerusalem, and I have lent it to friends who traveled to cold climes.

Ethnic and climatic variations aside, diplomatic wear is mostly universal. Some wear a finer cloth, display a better finish, show dearer jewelry, or otherwise prove more creative and tasteful than others. Such efforts notwithstanding, little stands out. To add to the uniformity, there are ever fewer occasions that demand being robed in what is defined as “black tie” or “white tie.”

Still, specific clothing is required at times, such as when I presented credentials to King Mswati III of Swaziland, where I was nonresident ambassador. The instructions sent to me in Pretoria ahead of the ceremony stated that I must wear a hat. I already had an elegant one, bought especially for an event of the Zion Christian Church at Moriah in South Africa’s Northwest Province. Unpacking in my hotel in Mbabane, the Swazi capital, I realized that I had forgotten to bring my hat.

Luckily, there was enough time to remedy the omission. I asked a hotel receptionist for advice, and off we—bodyguard, driver, and I—went to the shop she had recommended. When the saleslady confided that the king’s wives frequent the same establishment, I knew that I was

in the right place, and I soon found the right item. That is how I came to own two fancy hats, each worn only once.

This is what the Ambassador of Israel wore to the afternoon ceremony at the Swazi Royal Palace: a tailored, two-piece suit (narrow, calf-length skirt and long-sleeved jacket) of charcoal gray wild silk, bought for many hundreds of dollars at Saks Fifth Avenue in Washington some years earlier. A red blouse peeked beneath the jacket. Dark gray stockings. Low-heeled black suede shoes with a small golden decoration. A red bag that echoed the hint of the red blouse. Its shoulder strap was made of golden links, as were my large earrings.

That dark finery, highlighted by subtle splashes of sun and fire, was topped by a large, red hat with a broad, black band. I was the picture of understated elegance. If only Gwen Gill could see me, oh what she could write for the *Sunday Times*!

This is what the King of Swaziland wore: the skin of a wild animal, feathers on his head.

I presented credentials eight times in my career. An official photographer was always present. With one exception, all the hosts sent me pictorial souvenirs. Mementos from seven of my ceremonies, where I handed my letter of credence to a man in a suit and tie, are stashed with thousands of other photographs in the drawers of my desk, waiting to be organized.

As for the eighth ceremony, I inquired when I was still there, and after leaving, I continued to prod embassy staff and asked my successors. Perhaps they had come across a picture somewhere, for me to display? Could they ask for Swazi help?

Alas, all has come to naught. As with the learning experience on clothing that the American delegation provided at the beginning of my career, I have but a mental record of this study in contrasting couture, of the king and I, each in our respective regalia.

Chapter 21
Press
As Long as They Spell My Name Properly

In August 1983, President Samuel Doe of Liberia announced an immediate visit to Israel. He was to renew diplomatic relations with Israel, which his country, like most of Africa, severed after the Yom Kippur War a decade earlier.

The Government Press Office (GPO) usually handled the media surrounding senior visits. However, the Chancellor of Germany was scheduled to visit Israel at the same time. GPO could not undertake two foreign dignitaries simultaneously, and the Liberian visit was relegated to the Foreign Ministry. The ministry's small press department was then particularly stretched. Two workers were on vacation; another was on military reserve duty. To reinforce the two or three who remained, I was loaned from the ministry's information department, where I was in the early stages of cadet training.

During the preparations for the visit and in its first days, I opened mail, answered phones, and watched in admiration as the ministry's veteran spokesman calmly weighed everything he said, to anyone, on anything. He was aware that his words reflected policy. They could not be uttered casually; each comment had to be considered.

A few days after Doe arrived, Prime Minister Menachem Begin resigned unexpectedly (and the German visit was canceled). Housing Minister David Levy and Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir vied for Begin's position as leader of the ruling party, Likud, and by extension, of Israel's government.

The ministry's press department, which had been providing technical information about the vacillating plans of a volatile young dictator, suddenly became the focus of national and international media attention. I then learned that unless there is something to say, it is better to say nothing. While Housing Minister Levy assured every camera and each microphone that he is better suited and likely to win, Foreign Minister Shamir allowed the press only brief photo opportunities.

As he kept his silence, reporters begged Foreign Ministry staff for just a little quote, please, did you hear anything? What are they saying behind closed doors? Among those to whom they appealed was this novice who, months from being a tour guide with a ponytail, found herself courted by top journalists. I couldn't help, and instead, I tried to impress them with my wit. When the contest for the leadership neared its end, with Shamir emerging as the heir, I asked one of the Israeli reporters, "Nu, did you remember to bring the royal scepter and crown?"

At the time Israel had only one television channel. The whole country sat down at nine to watch the news. That night, it opened with the reporter's assessment that the race seemed to be over. To illustrate, he said that in the morning, someone in the Foreign Ministry had asked him if he remembered to bring the scepter and crown.

For weeks, I was convinced that I would get into trouble for talking out of turn, saying something inappropriate, meddling above my rank. I would be found out, and poof! There would go my career. With experience, I realized that my image was a useful and harmless device to describe the clarifying situation, but I still remember that long, secret worry.

From that first working encounter with the press, I learned that once uttered, words have

their own life. I try to remember that I must slow my rapid speech a little, just enough to sift my comments through the mental sieve of a potential headline. If humor is intended, a tempered pace allows me to imagine the naked words in print, without the standard indicators—tone, a raised eyebrow, a small shrug—that they are not to be taken literally.

Sometimes I forgot my own guidelines. The Diplomatic Club in Riga is an informal grouping of locals and foreigners. When the Israeli Embassy's turn to host neared, we—my deputy and I—decided to deviate from the typical seriousness at such events ("Water as a Catalyst for Change in the Middle East"), and instead staged a show of Israeli bathing suits. A rich buffet of Israeli food rounded out the event.

The evening was ending when a local journalist used a translator to ask me if I was happy with the outcome. Reveling in our success, I answered, again via intermediary: "It was great. I only wish I had also been in the show!" He wrote a favorable report. It was illustrated with numerous photos of scantily clad local models (Latvians are among the tallest and blondest Europeans). Opposite them was a photo of me. All shared a headline in Latvian: "AMBASSADOR REGRETS NOT MODELLING BATHING SUITS!"

Oh well. In the symbiosis between press that needs subjects and subjects who need the press, in this give and take, sometimes I was careless as above, or thoughtless as below, and gave too much.

A Muslim radio station in Cape Town asked to interview me live on its midday show. Given its declared animosity toward Israel, refusing would have been reasonable. But eager to expose its listeners to Israel's positions and confident that I was able to wrestle verbally with any question, I agreed.

The telephone rang on schedule, and the anchor welcomed me to the program. Then, he welcomed someone else. A representative of an extreme Muslim organization was sharing the broadcast with me. The one-on-one interview had become a debate. I would be outnumbered, two against me.

What did I do? I complained! I argued! I said, "This is not what we agreed!" One of the men asked, "If you have answers, why do you care how many we are?" I continued to accuse them of misleading me. After a few minutes, my rival got off the line. He scored points for being gracious. I may have answered every question perfectly. Still—I lost. The impression was not of a solid person representing sound positions. My responses were buried in a pile of pettiness. I sounded defensive—and wrong.

Instead—oh, the wisdom of hindsight!—I should have retaliated for their underhandedness with one of my own. I should have responded normally to one question and pressed a finger down in midsentence during my second answer. Station staff might guess what I had done, but blaming an unreliable telephone service would be simpler than admitting to having misled me.

Another time, I was invited to a South African morning television show. Waking in the Pretoria dark, I carefully chose clothes. No elaborate patterns to distract the eye, no bright colors to grab attention, no white blouse to dazzle, no dangly earrings to divert attention from the face, or long chains that touch the clip-on microphone and produce rustling sounds or annoying squeaks.

I drove to Johannesburg, had my face made up (otherwise one shines greasily into the camera), entered the studio, and found an unusually ignorant interviewer.

She was short on basics, such as the different legal status of Israel and the occupied

territories, and she confused facts and opinions. For example, she referred to the fence that Israel was building in order to stop suicide attacks as “the apartheid wall.” She could have questioned “what some have called the apartheid wall,” but using it as if it were its name was either judgmental or ignorant, and in any case unprofessional.

I found myself in a difficult situation. Answering a question that is based on a wrong premise can be understood as agreeing to it. That was not good. Correcting her mistakes was also not good—to viewers, I would seem argumentative, and that does not generate their empathy. Confronting her would lessen my chance for future invitations and shrink my limited screen time. I saved my opinions for after the cameras were turned off, and I learned the importance of inquiring about more than the name and the time of the program. Having answers is not enough; I must also know who will ask the questions.

It is unnerving to be caught off guard, to discover such challenges mid-interview. Simultaneously, one has to delve into one’s mind for a response, perhaps rephrase the question to suit one’s agenda better and then answer the new question, weigh what is appropriate for that audience, maybe argue with the basic premise.

On television and more so on radio, with nothing visual to fill the vacuum, a few hesitant seconds to balance such considerations will seem like a silent eternity. Print media is more forgiving. The reporter will at most mention my hesitation in a sentence or two.

It is a challenge to balance substance and image, to keep reactions in check, to find just the right answer to each question, and to phrase it so that it will also hold, credibly and convincingly, when quoted elsewhere—how will my statement to a supportive audience look in a hostile newspaper? Can I stand behind it, exactly as is? If I have to insist that “it was taken out of context,” that could mean that I should not have said it at the outset.

I tried to pick my press battles carefully. Responding is instinctive, but apathy can kill a topic, whereas an official reaction would give the proponent added visibility and imbue the claim with legitimacy. After all, if the embassy reacts, might there be something to it? Beyond standing tall and feeling good (important, but not at any cost), little would be gained. Those who believe the lies will continue to do so; official attention would help spread them. This is why, if a small-town newspaper wrote that the Holocaust never happened or a remote radio station claimed that Israel trades in Palestinian organs, I would often decide to ignore it.

I never wrote a letter to the editor. Such missives are generally viewed as less important than the article that elicited them. Instead, without mentioning the offensive piece directly, I addressed the content of the problematic article in a piece that I wrote soon after, and it was printed either in the paper that had published it or in another.

That way I also avoided being regarded as a complainer (a trap I did not avoid when surprised by the extra interviewee on the Muslim radio program in Cape Town), which is not a helpful image for a country or for its ambassador. As much as possible, I refrained from criticizing editors for their decisions and reporters for their writing—kvetching is not a sure path to good press coverage.

The nature of local press dictated variations in my work. In the mid-1990s, ambassadors were a fresh and interesting phenomenon in newly independent Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. I visited editorial offices regularly, briefed staff, and was quoted at length. In those years, when the new independent nongovernment media were finding their feet, a press release was often printed as is, without comment or explanation, as though it was the product of journalistic effort. Minor exhibitions and low-level visits, which would rarely receive mention in bigger

capitals, were widely reported. The press aspect of my job was relatively easy.

My responsibilities in two Washington postings did not include press, but I had some exposure near the end of my second term. In late 2000, the second Palestinian uprising began. The Israeli Ambassador in Washington was a political appointee whose major skills were not in the public arena and he avoided appearing on TV. Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations and our consul general in New York were also external appointments. Both were fluent in French.

Israel's three senior representatives in the United States were not available to speak to the country's media, and several of the major news organizations did not want to interview junior diplomats. I had been an ambassador; the designation could be attached to my name. During some weeks from the time they discovered this and until I left for South Africa, I spoke to CNN and PBS several times. Two or three stopped me on the street; I felt very important.

My big press presence was in South Africa, where public opinion, including in the press, did not support Israel. My files show thirty articles written in three years, almost one per month. They were written at my initiative or by invitation—maybe editors thought that giving me a platform countered their perceived anti-Israel bias.

The first pieces took agonizing weeks to write, rewrite, and correct. With time it became easy. An average six-hundred-word piece took a day or two to complete, while continuing with my routine. One or two hours went into writing the first draft. Then came two or three big revisions, followed by a few quick polishes, and off it went. I played a game with myself and wrote precisely the number of agreed words. If the editor had asked for 800, he did not get 799 or 801. The exercise in writing discipline ensured that my text would see print exactly as I wrote it, without editing, each word and idea in its rightful place.

After every such piece, or in parallel, the paper gave comparable space to a rebuttal. Articles elicited letters to the editor, for and against my positions. Did the resulting debate undermine the value of what I had written? Would it have been better to simply stay silent? On balance, was my effort counterproductive? I think not, but I cannot be sure. Regardless, I felt that Israel's positions had to be aired publicly in the least confrontational manner.

When I wrote, as when I spoke, I aimed to show that the situation was not—apologies—black and white. My objective was not to persuade those who will never believe that Israel is right—with rare exceptions, it would be a useless effort. Nor did I direct my words at those who believe that Israel can do no wrong, which would also be a waste of time.

My target was the large middle of uninformed opinions. If I made any of them think that there is some justice with us, that the situation in our part of the Middle East is more complicated than it seems, that the truth may be different than it appears in headlines, I felt that I had done my job. My biggest challenge in working with the press may have been to highlight little-known data or shed a different light on familiar facts.

That must not be confused with distorting data, or hiding facts. The correspondent for the *Jerusalem Report* (an Israeli news magazine in English) who wrote a profile about Israel's first ambassador to the Baltic countries probably thought he was doing this woman a favor. He subtracted a year from my age at the time, made me thirty-nine, and the butt of jokes from those who knew the truth (although they also knew that I would not hide it).

Or this ill-conceived evasion: In 1992, during my eighteen months as the press secretary to Israel's presidency, President Chaim Herzog undertook the first high-level Israeli visit to China. He flew in a plane belonging to Shaul Eisenberg, an Israeli businessman with interests in China.

Such private transportation could be explained in combined terms of security, cost, scheduling, and overall convenience, but it is irregular.

The director general at the President's Bureau recognized the problem and hid the information where he could. However, hiding it from reporters who joined the trip and flew with the president was not possible. The plane had barely taken off when my phone in Jerusalem began to ring. Having been caught unaware, I had no information, no explanation, no way to obtain any. I muttered and mumbled as best as I could. An explainable decision became a cover-up. It generated plenty of publicity for the visit, but of the wrong kind.

Most of my press work was about policy and politics. Yet the style section is often the most read in any newspaper. Party girl that I am not, initially I did not understand that.

In 1985, before my first posting, I participated in a short cooking course taught by one of Israel's top chefs, Shalom Kadosh, at the Jerusalem Plaza. The program was open to diplomats who were going abroad that year and to their spouses. No men came; all the other women in the hotel kitchen were diplomats' wives.

A reporter from a women's magazine wanted a picture of this young female diplomat rolling marzipan, or was it stuffing chicken breasts? I was certain that they would never ask a young male diplomat to pose that way, and I felt that the image, nay future, of female diplomacy rested on my solid shoulders. I refused to be recorded doing something so light, so slight.

Now I know that the reverse is true. It is taking oneself too seriously that is silly and counterproductive. Unless embarrassment or illegality are involved (although notoriety has its own attractions), every press mention adds prominence, which is an asset to someone who works in the public arena. It did not take me long to learn to be satisfied if reporters just mentioned my job and spelled my name correctly.

Chapter 22
Advice

Why Doesn't Somebody Do Something?

Purim is a minor Jewish holiday. Its celebration includes dressing up in costume. Years ago, I bought a cheap, curly blond wig, which has since served as my easy annual disguise. In 2002, Purim fell on Tuesday, February 26. The meeting I would attend in the Johannesburg offices of the South African Zionist Federation that afternoon promised to be confrontational.

I hesitated about donning the wig. Doing so would be in keeping with the holiday spirit, but it might undermine my authority and weaken my position, yet it could cut the tension. I decided in favor. A communal leader entered, looked around, and stated, "We are only waiting for the ambassador." Ensuing laughter did not eliminate the impending argument. I was determined to win it, and I did.

Whence the disagreement? Why my determination to fight unto wigged victory?

Jewish life outside Israel features a range of voluntary organizations. Some support a local cause, such as a Hebrew school or the community's poor. Others have an Israeli agenda and promote anything from a hospital to a political ideology. If such focused groups criticize the government of Israel (for building too many settlements or not building enough; for being overly generous to the ultra-Orthodox or giving them too little), I would not deign to interfere.

Such specialized groups are different from umbrella organizations, whose mandate is to advocate for general local Jewish interests, for Israel's relations with their country, or for both.

In South Africa, the Jewish Board of Deputies furthers communal interests. Were ritual circumcisions to be banned—unlikely, given the prevalence of the practice among Africans—the Board would handle that. The South African Zionist Federation, known as the Fed, advocates for Israel. It is the local representative of the World Zionist Organization (WZO).

WZO was founded in 1897 with the aim of establishing a state for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel. Until this happened in 1948, WZO's sister organization, the Jewish Agency, served as the government of the Jews living in what would become Israel. WZO and the Jewish Agency still exist, albeit with altered agendas, such as promoting Jewish and Zionist education. They defer to their offspring and successor, the government of Israel, on policy. By extension, so does the Fed.

The Fed's constituent bodies (such as youth groups, women's associations, and supporters of assorted Israeli political parties) were to gather for their biennial national conference in the second weekend of March 2002. Some weeks earlier I saw a draft program.

The South African government would be represented by an official who dealt with the Middle East. The Fed also invited Tony Leon, leader of the parliamentary opposition, who is Jewish. The glaring gap between senior politician and mid-level official was no accident. Its message of rebuttal to the government of South Africa was clear and deliberate.

The lopsided invitation was understandable. The gathering would take place a few months after the UN Durban Conference against Racism, where South Africa's role was problematic. The Durban meeting, subject of the longest chapter in this book, heightened the community's triple sense of isolation, as a small group in the English-speaking segment of the white minority.

Given the Fed's mandate as the main local advocate for Israel, its decision on whom to

invite would be attributed to Israel. The embassy had not been told about the Fed's demonstrative act, and it would not have approved—except in extreme and well-considered situations, public confrontation with the host government is not an advisable way to handle disagreements and promote relations. I explained why I could not support their step and added that if the Fed proceeded as planned, I might not attend their meeting. They understood that my absence would undermine their standing. There was much grumbling of "who does she think she is, telling us what to do."

By definition (and in some countries—also by local law) the Fed, like similar groups elsewhere, is independent of the government of Israel. I was careful not to tell them what to do. The reverse does not apply—I was free to listen to them and sometimes acted on what I heard. But that is not the same as allowing them to dictate policy to me and to Israel. I refused to be coerced into seeming to endorse a step that I considered to be ill-judged and detrimental.

South Africa was then realizing how the Durban conference reverberated, both locally and internationally, and wanted to remedy that. Deputy Foreign Minister Aziz Pahad asked to address the upcoming meeting. The Fed refused. This was harsher than not inviting a senior South African at the outset. Purim, less than two weeks before the Fed's conference, was my final arm-wrestling contest with communal leadership on the matter. Realizing what my absence would mean left them with little choice.

Pahad came and made a public apology about aspects of Durban. Not everyone was happy. A brochure was distributed at the conference—where did I put it?—against my meddling. It included threats to sue me in an Israeli court for interfering in an internal community matter, as though the conduct of relations between two countries is no more than that.

I learned much about the role that local Jews can play in promoting relations between Israel and foreign governments during two postings in America, with its many sophisticated Jewish organizations. Because I dealt with Congress, my main interlocutors were in the America Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), often described as "the powerful pro-Israel lobby." They had a clear and bipartisan view of what would serve the relations between their country and Israel, knew what they wanted to achieve, understood the players and the balance between them, and could judge the best way to handle each particular challenge.

Sometimes it could be said that they were a little too enthusiastic. For example, barring major developments in the region, it is unrealistic to think that America will move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and so alienate, maybe incite, large parts of the Muslim world. In fact, congressional resolutions concerning the move include a waiver that allows the administration not to act in certain situations. This effectively admits that placing the item on the legislative table was an exercise in futility.

It has been said that such initiatives are largely designed to display activity and power and so generate ongoing support for the organization. However, looking at the complete picture will cause such thoughts about organizational self-interest to pale. During more than five years in Washington, I witnessed concrete results in one legislative cycle after another, many of them vital to Israel's security. If the organization that is instrumental in making them happen needs a little self-promotion—so be it.

All the above begs a question. If there are embassies, why have a Fed, an AIPAC, and myriad other organizations? The answer is that if the interaction between two countries could be managed by their respective embassies and foreign ministries, that would be a flat

relationship indeed.

Take something as simple as visas. Must tourists from one country get one before traveling to another? How much will a visa cost; how fast or slow the process? Airlines and hotels will push for exemptions. If those tourists tend to stay on beyond the time they are permitted and remain to work illegally, there will be a counterpush from immigration authorities. Taxes, farm subsidies, going to war, public medicine—everything is the product of countless principles, interests, needs, and pressures. When there is potential for loss or gain, be it monetary or any other, then interested parties will try to influence outcomes.

Chambers of Commerce aim to promote trade between countries. Defense industries can pull to one direction on arms sales; human rights groups may push the other way. Historical ties are evident. Some countries that used to be British maintain the Commonwealth, with its political meetings and sports tournaments. Even titles reflect this. In Riga, my British colleague was an ambassador. In Pretoria, with its British past, she and her Commonwealth counterparts were high commissioners, with the queen at their helm. Religion can be meaningful, as in Vatican influence on Catholic countries. There are businesses, individuals with personal ties, nostalgic expatriate associations. The list goes on.

Then there are Jews and their relationship to Israel, a unique phenomenon on the spectrum of religion and nationality and history and interests. Wherever interested Jews live, assorted organizations spring up, with many agendas. Some individuals will join a team effort. Others prefer to serve their favorite cause privately. Egos come into it, and who can object when those who invest skills, contacts, time, and money expect recognition?

Especially when working in America, it was not comfortable for me to know that the embassy is circumvented by powerful individuals with close ties to Israeli leaders. Telling myself that whatever translates good intention into useful action is welcome did not eliminate the sense of redundancy, or the offense at being sidelined.

In South Africa, heartfelt Jewish intention often faded into inaction. For example, when I paid calls on members of the new black elite, they listened politely, sometimes placed a question on the desk that separated us or argued a little. Our contacts were limited to such formal exchanges, which did little to elevate Israel's position. Informal access might change the interaction. For that—I needed help, but hardly had any.

A handful of big Jewish worriers about Israel lowness in South Africa regularly boasted to me about their close ties ("he sent my wife flowers on her birthday") with the very people I wanted to know better. I begged them to invite us together just once, allow me to share drinks and laughs; I would take it from there. I swallowed my pride to remind that the *Johannesburg Star* included me in its end-of-year roundup of ten best in ten categories, judging me a good dinner guest, so please, you see, I am fun, really, just once, that's all I ask.

Less than a handful of dedicated Israel lovers in South Africa invited this representative of an abhorred country to their tables. Deep concern about Israel, donating money, and volunteering—that was one thing. Displaying their association with it in full view of their influential friends—well, that was something else.

I recall a top manager in a big telecommunications company. With family and friends in Israel, how she wished that there were something she could do to make things better for us in South Africa! Well, could she invite me to one of her regular staff luncheons, where visitors discuss current affairs with middle management, most of them educated young blacks? Oh yes! What an excellent idea! How did she not think of it herself? I am still waiting for that lunch.

Others could raise funds for projects or write credible rebuttals to nasty articles. But they were so sorry; it was not possible just then. Another time, for sure. They would then direct me to someone else who could do it, while continuing to bemoan the overall situation—oh, why doesn't someone do something?

"Why doesn't someone do something" was not meant to criticize; it simply expressed frustration at a seemingly helpless situation. But hearing it embittered me. Having plenty of frustrations of my own, I had no need or ability to handle the frustration of others. As the comment implied that we were all in this together, I would suggest something small that the complainer could do, say, share information from the Israeli Foreign Ministry website with colleagues. Many thought it was a great idea, and did nothing. Others openly rebuffed me ("I don't want to mix politics with work"). My ready response was sarcastic, bordering on rude. Here is a belated apology to anyone who was offended, but you see my point, right?

Have you heard about the man who was a nobody, but as soon as he married he became a somebody? His wife constantly says that "somebody should take out the trash" or "somebody must wash the dishes." And do you know about the person who suggested to Winston Churchill during World War II that boiling the sea around Britain would stop German submarine attacks? "What an excellent idea," responded the British leader. "But how shall we do that? And still preserve fish? While allowing our navy to operate?" "Those are good questions," replied the innovator, "but I think strategically. Let somebody less creative handle the technicalities."

You see, there were no spare somebodies to do somethings. Each foreign ministry issues lists of diplomats from other countries who are posted in its capital. The diplomatic lists are deceptively long. They include security and administration as well as envoys of other agencies, such as the Mossad or the Ministry of Trade. In most Israeli missions, all interaction—with the local government, politicians, press, cultural institutions, academia, students, as well as head office in Jerusalem—falls entirely on a couple of diplomats. If you will—please help share the burden. If not, please don't comment, just let me continue to do what must be done.

At times, I had relief and aid from Jewish organizations. At other times, as with the Fed conference in 2002, they were an extra ball for me to juggle as I tried to keep my balance on slippery ground. There were a few individuals who helped, a few to whom I could turn for advice and knew it would be good.

I was particularly lucky with one couple in Cape Town, the Osrins, who were not only leading members of the Jewish community and extraordinarily astute on all local matters, but also had been my parents' friends when I was a teenager there, giving our relationship a solid foundation. Discussing issues with them was like being upgraded from economy to the best seat in a plane's business class.

Then there were the somebodies who tried to use their contacts to do something, but . . .

"You Israelis don't understand that the regime here has changed for good. You think that the whites are sure to come back."

The gentleman voicing the bizarre allegation was a South African parliamentarian. My meetings with legislators were draining, yet hoping for minuscule change, I kept trying. I focused on members of the ruling party, ANC, which accounted for two-thirds of Parliament, and I tried especially to talk to those who served on the Foreign Affairs Committee.

My interlocutor belonged to both categories. He was high on the list of those whose prejudices I wanted to dent. Before I could ask him to clarify his startling charge, he continued: "When our parliamentary delegation went to Israel, your Prime Minister did not meet the

group. He saw one person only, a white man." Had I overcome my embarrassment and shared the truth, I doubt that he would have believed me.

In early 2002, a delegation from the South African Parliament traveled to the Middle East. After due consideration, including on the delegation's composition and its agenda, we—the embassy in Pretoria and the Africa desk in the Israeli Foreign Ministry—decided that they would meet ministers, but no higher.

Some weeks after they returned, a South African newspaper reported that one member of the delegation, Koos van der Merwe, had met privately with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. He did not belong to the ruling party and was white. The meeting made no sense. I made a few inquiries, did not learn anything, and dropped it. What could I do? Resign?

A few months later, I was out of the office when one Cyril Kern from Cape Town left instructions with my secretary regarding written information that I should send, immediately, to certain parliamentarians. I returned to the embassy and got on with my work. Within an hour, Marit Danon, secretary to a chain of Israeli Prime Ministers, rang. "We haven't told Sharon about your delay, but Kern is very upset."

I didn't think of asking the obvious question. Why should the Prime Minister of Israel be told how fast the Israeli Ambassador in Pretoria responds to some Kern in Cape Town? Instead, I erupted, "If the Prime Minister thinks that I am not doing my job well, he should tell the Foreign Minister to sack me, and I promise to be on the next plane home without a word of argument. But until then, let no one tell me who to send what to!!!!"

I barely put down the receiver, and Ra'anan Gissin, the prime minister's close adviser, was on the line from Jerusalem. "Please, just do it. Kern is Sharon's good friend." Aha! "Did Kern arrange the meeting with Koos van der Merwe?" "Well, yes," the retired colonel mumbled. "He said it was important."

This was not the pattern I knew from America. There, direct contact between foreigners and Israeli leaders may shrink the circumvented diplomats, but I never saw a prior acquaintance leading to such pure damage. I returned Kern's call, fast. Certain that he would immediately report both my content and my tone to Sharon's office, I told him what I thought of him, of his understanding of South Africa politics, and of how to improve Israel's situation there.

Kern would later become a household name in Israel. He was tied to an investigation against Sharon and his sons on campaign funding. It was halted by the prime minister's stroke in 2006, and it features when I describe my unexpected brushes with legal matters. But at the time, I had no idea who Kern was. Calls to my Jewish contacts in Cape Town revealed nothing. Finally, Michal Leon, the opposition leader's Israeli wife, knew that Kern was a Jewish English businessman who moved with his Swedish wife to South Africa, where he established ties with opposition figures. He had been a volunteer in Israel's War of Independence in 1948, and he became a lifelong friend of Sharon.

Sometime later, the Leons invited me to a dinner party in Cape Town with the Kerns and others. Sitting at one table was initially awkward, but we overcame and later met for drinks, just Cyril and I. When the investigation on Kern and Sharon became known, I thought that even this slight connection was inappropriate, and I dropped it.

But he remained in the background, pulling strings. When Tony Leon was to visit Israel, and I asked that the prime minister see the leader of the South African parliamentary opposition, my ambassadorial request was refused. Kern dropped a friendly word to his old pal, and it was done.

As outside involvement goes, working in the Baltics was easiest for me. External players acted almost exclusively on Holocaust-related issues. Trade and tourism were minimal. The Jewish communities of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were small and just finding their feet in their newly democratic countries. They drew on the embassy for advice or support on many matters, or turned to Jewish bodies, such as the World Jewish Congress, an umbrella for the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, and similar national Jewish organizations. With few exceptions, such as a businessman who mediated in an arms sale between Estonia and Israel, local Jews did not play a significant role in Israel's relations with their countries.

Although the embassy's solo status in the Baltics was convenient, it reflected paucity in the relationships. Outside interest indicates the breadth of interaction, and it goes on to deepen it. Confrontations with Kerns and Feds are not pleasant. But they happen only because there are those who are concerned and who try—with varying degrees of success—to contribute.

That is far better for a diplomat and her country than when little happens, and when no one cares.

Chapter 23
Importance
It's All Relative

For years after completing my stint as Israel's most junior diplomat in Washington, whenever I met new contacts in other Israeli agencies such as trade or intelligence, they would inevitably ask, "Are you Tova Herzl from Washington?"

Never mind that in Washington, with countless other players pulling this way and that, my contribution to the relations between two countries and to the embassy's overall activity was negligible. Or what I did after that job in America, such as being Israel's first ambassador to the Baltics, where I was instrumental in determining the agenda between Israel and three countries. None of that registered on the radar of relevance. Washington glowed like a jewel on my professional biography, casting a pall on all else.

That anomaly, the disconnect between perception and reality, is easily explained.

Politicians and officials from Israel traveled to America regularly. Embassy staff briefed them on issues and escorted them to meetings. Latvia, like other countries that were not considered particularly important or interesting, attracted few visitors. My diplomatic cables from Washington reached Israel's top echelons, while hardly any reports from Riga were read outside the East European department of the Foreign Ministry. There was no permanent Israeli press presence in the Baltics, whereas half a dozen Israeli journalists buzzed around the embassy in Washington.

No wonder that my name recognition survived for years. But such lasting visibility did not reflect effort, initiative, or outcome.

Compare what I did with the most valuable of resources—time—in those two postings. In the Baltics, allocating it was almost entirely at my discretion. A fraction, no more than a quarter, was dictated by necessity or by instructions from home. In Washington, allocating my time was almost entirely dictated; I doubt that a quarter was left to me to use at will.

Much of what Congress does interests Israel, including generous financial assistance. The process lasts almost a year. It begins in February, when the president sends the following year's detailed budget proposal to Congress. Every topic is then discussed in hearings (often several on each subject), where administration officials, other experts, and interested parties testify. The document may be changed and is then voted upon (known as markup) in specialized subcommittees. The process is repeated in the full committees (such as foreign affairs, health, or defense) before reaching the plenary of each house.

Multiply that by four: authorization (which can be compared to writing a check) and appropriation (which is comparable to making sure there is enough money in the account, or signing the check) in both Senate and House of Representatives. Once authorization and appropriation laws are passed in both Houses, more meetings are called between the representatives of both chambers to reconcile the versions. Only then can the two laws be signed by the president.

During my first posting in Washington in the mid-1980s, Congress took weeks to publish the proceedings of committees and subcommittees. Diplomats had to be physically present. Jerusalem, whose time is seven hours earlier, expected to read the report the following

morning. A hearing on foreign aid (or missile defense or human rights) was almost a full day's work.

It began with getting to Congress in time (the House subcommittee on appropriating foreign aid met in a small room; there were not enough places for everyone who wanted to attend). This was followed by listening and taking notes, returning to the embassy, summarizing the proceedings, waiting to have the draft typed by the cipher department (which may be busy with more urgent tasks), and at least one proofreading.

Having left home before eight in the morning, I sometimes returned twelve hours later. Large chunks of a day were spent on covering a meeting that lasted two or three hours. The process was vital, but it would happen without me. I did little beyond listening for what was important to Israel and summarizing it. But my name appeared on the bottom of the report.

I began each Washington day by reading at least one American newspaper and watching one television news show. To catch up with events at home, I listened to a shortwave radio in the 1980s and checked the Internet when I returned there a decade later. On reaching the embassy, I found dozens of cables from Israel, containing questions to answer, instructions to obey, and updates to read. It was essential to know what happened in the Middle East the day before—in that well-informed city, no one wants to talk to an ignoramus. Time is short, meetings are focused, lunches have agendas, everything must be done this minute as Israel, or the ambassador, or the congressman's office, needs the information now!

In Riga, periodically a cable from Israel instructed us to brief local officials ahead of a vote in the United Nations, or we were told to convey information about a development in the Middle East. Sometimes we were offered a film festival or an exhibition. If we accepted, that generated work. If not, who would notice? Who would care? A random query would come our way from a journalist or a businessman; the consular section handled visas. We had few visitors and little dictated agenda. Days could go by when, if not for our initiatives, there would hardly be anything to do beyond meeting colleagues and attending receptions.

Another difference was outside involvement, the subject of the previous chapter. Each external player in Washington diminished the individual diplomat's relevance. Representatives of Israeli government agencies (among them military, finance, science, and agriculture), Jewish organizations of every religious and political inclination, Christian supporters or critics, defense industries, personal acquaintances of Israeli leaders, academics, third countries with shared or conflicting interests—all are ingredients of the mix that is American-Israeli relations.

The proverbial cogs were tiny; the wheel was gigantic. If the abilities of a diplomat were limited—this happens, although the ministry usually sends to Washington those it considers its best—the damage is minor. Someone in the embassy, or in one of the complementary or competing bodies, will compensate. Only the incompetence of an ambassador will be noticed.

In Riga, the entire operation was the ambassador and her deputy, a consul-administrator, the security chief, and a specialist who dealt with local Jews on communal matters such as education and emigration. We liaised a little with Israeli attachés in neighboring embassies: tourism and trade in Stockholm, defense in Copenhagen. Before rare visits of security officials, they asked for our advice and technical support. We were expected to report to Jerusalem about internal developments; follow the press on Israeli, Jewish, and general issues; and—the vague, catchall phrase—promote relations. If we did some of it inadequately, or hardly at all, who would know? Who would tell?

In Washington, with so much outside input, everything was subject to countless

considerations. Will it be good for trade? Might it annoy a third country? How will the liberals react? What if someone in Jerusalem thinks that something I did was wrong?

In the Baltics, steady interest in us came primarily from Jewish organizations that dealt with the Holocaust. It was almost exclusively on its painful topics that we had to consult and consider. On everything else, we—the Embassy in Riga and the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem—decided alone. If there was discourse beyond those issues, if some substance developed, the embassy deserved much of the credit.

Take this small example of what a small embassy can do that makes a small difference. In its early years, Israel provided generous technical assistance to newly independent countries in what is known as "the developing world." With time we cut back, but Israel still runs courses abroad and invites foreign experts to study in Israel. This shares skills and generates goodwill at relatively little cost. I believe that were the cost of one tank to be invested annually in such outreach (I dare not dream of a fighter plane), it would contribute more to our national security than that war machine. However, I do not determine budget priorities.

When mapping the new relationship with Latvia for potential areas of cooperation—facing historical issues, academia, technical assistance and so on—it was obvious that Israel's agricultural expertise did not suit the climate. Where can we make a meaningful contribution? Politics gave an answer. Latvia wished to join European structures. Due to emigration within the Soviet Union, almost half the people who lived in Latvia when it became independent were Russian speakers who spoke no Latvian. Some knowledge of Latvian was a condition for citizenship, meaning that these emigrants, as well as their non-Latvian-speaking offspring, were destined to remain sidelined. A large, disenfranchised minority was not acceptable to Europe. It expected Latvia to help its residents acquire the tools they needed in order to become citizens.

Perfect! Being a society of immigrants, Israel has unequaled experience in teaching a new language to adults. Our unique skills would be combined with a local need of both government and people.

Coming up with the idea was easy. Proving to Latvia that Israel has something special to offer was also easy. Convincing Jerusalem was not so easy. The official in the Foreign Ministry who was responsible for technical assistance courses knew about drip irrigation courses, early childhood courses, courses on opening a small business. But language courses?

He sent me to the Department of Cultural Cooperation, saying that language belongs there. They refused, rightly. Helping to establish a language program was as much technical assistance as training foreigners to breed bees.

I went back and convinced the reluctant official. An Israeli expert joined an international team that spent a few intense weeks in Latvia, developing a national plan. His contribution was highly praised (and I managed to keep my mouth shut and not tell anyone in Latvia that soon after returning to Israel, he was arrested, tried, and imprisoned for stealing money from his college).

Yes, I know. Figuring out how to best spread the Latvian language is not billions in assistance. An exhibition of photographs cannot be compared to strategic cooperation. But American friendship would be there without me, whereas in Latvia, the project made a difference, I made a difference. America is important, but I was minor. The Baltics were not considered important, but what I did there was major.

This leaves South Africa. Its peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy gave it a moral halo. Growing corruption and the early disregard for the AIDS epidemic soon tarnished

the shine. In addition to being home to a large Jewish community, it was the continent's economic leader and exerted vast political influence in Africa and beyond, especially in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). In international forums it voted regularly with NAM, including on human rights, where its ethical image would instead point to a principled, democratic stand. Overall, one could choose to shrug South Africa away, or see it as central.

In its own eyes, South Africa was very important. The view was not shared in Israel, neither by its leaders, who barely visited, nor by diplomats applying for positions abroad. This explains the mediocrity of some staff during much of my term as Israel's Ambassador to Pretoria.

When something new or important comes up in Washington or in New York, in London or in Tokyo, the Israeli Embassy usually has a good human infrastructure and is backed by competent outside players. In Riga, it was almost entirely we. In South Africa, it was a little of both. The Jewish community was active, but its activities were not always entirely helpful. Other Israeli government agencies were represented, but not always fully and not always by stars.

So was South Africa as important as it saw itself? As unimportant as indicated by Israeli attitudes? Is it possible to measure? It is, but Israel does not make the effort to do so.

Some foreign ministries weigh trade, diplomatic clout, the presence of an expatriate community, anything else they choose, and grade embassies by overall importance. Budget and other resources are then allocated proportionately. Before qualifying to work in a country ranked "1," one must serve in a "3" and then a "2." In other diplomatic services, personnel must alternate between hardship posts and easy ones, with clear definitions for each.

Israel has no gradation by importance, no system of rotation, no real compensation for difficult stints. With few exceptions, hard places do not come with pay, prestige, or promotion. They are left to idealists, fans of a region, or the less competent.

It is sad that a country with such international challenges has not found the way to ensure that skills are distributed as needed. Lacking incentive or obligation, many Israeli diplomats choose comfort. Russia and Ukraine are big, influential countries with large Jewish communities. Objectively, they are more important to Israel than many countries in Western Europe. But English is spoken in Ireland, and Belgium is so convenient, why would anyone volunteer to live in a cold Slavic country? Or prefer Nigeria to Boston? Jordan to Switzerland?

I retired early and did not head one of those missions that are attractive and considered important. I never had to contend to any excessive extent with influential outsiders, be they Israeli defense agencies, Jewish organizations, businesses, or individuals. I wonder how I would have adapted to them. Would I bend, or be rigid? Could I handle them? And they, me? Would there be conflict or cooperation? Would running a diplomatic supermarket be more or less rewarding than managing my little kiosk in Riga? I cannot be sure.

But this I know, without doubt. Looking back, it is not my two posts in Washington that make me proud. Oh, it felt good, regarding myself and being regarded as a part of newsmaking developments or being on first-name terms with famous politicians. Still, to me, what is really gratifying is looking at lesser developments in small, cold places or in a large African one and knowing that it was I who made them happen.

Chapter 24
Phalcon

We Were Generals, We Know Best

Unexpected weather, a terrible childhood, anti-Semitism, oil money—how useful to have something or someone to blame. Take the 2001 World Conference against Racism in Durban. As you will read a little later, I think that Israel could have prepared better and functioned differently. Nevertheless, what happened there was not of our doing.

There is no such convenient excuse when the damage is homegrown. Years later, I still cringe at the memory of a professional experience that emerged two years before Durban. To me, the two were comparable, in that the barrage in both was encompassing, and there was nowhere to hide, no way to avoid it. I refer to the Phalcon affair, in which Israel's dogged determination to sell a spy plane to China despite overwhelming American opposition, and the deal's ultimate cancellation, damaged Israel's relations with two superpowers.

As background, I must state the obvious. America is Israel's best friend. The United States provides us with political support, financial aid, and superior technology. We naturally try to take its interests into account. In any group, be it as small as a family or as big as a country, there are disagreements on its best interests. Otherwise, what would political parties do, reporters write, people complain about? In this case, there were no disagreements. Everyone in America—liberals and conservatives, the defense establishment and Jewish supporters, the administration and Congress—opposed the deal. Meanwhile, Israel acted as though it could mold reality to suit its wishes.

I was working in the East Europe department in the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem in 1997 when Israel bought the shell of an airplane from Russia. The intention was to retrofit it with surveillance equipment and sell it to China. There would be one plane to start, with an option for China to buy three more.

As an aside, let me say that dealing in arms is not like selling toys. But maintaining Israel's costly military advantage is vital, and selling weapons enables it. I think it's all right, as long as the deals are fair and the arms go to decent regimes. In 1988, Albie Sachs, a South African Jewish political activist, was in exile in Mozambique. Returning from a jog on the beach, he was hurt by a bomb that had been planted in his car. He went on to become a judge in postapartheid South Africa's Constitutional Court. When we met in his office in Johannesburg, he pointed at his missing eye with his remaining arm, and said, "Maybe your people taught the people who did this to me." I hope not and believe not, but could I deny it with absolute certainty?

Not that anyone asked me, but my opinion on the anticipated deal with our two new big friends, Russia and China, was, why not? I had no opinion on possible repercussions in America, and I didn't need to have one: Before it is approved, an interministerial committee considers the implications of every potential transaction.

But I was to find myself deeply involved in the sale. In 1998, I was assigned to the embassy in Washington as congressional liaison. A decade earlier the Berlin Wall had collapsed. China was emerging as a dominant power. A realigning world was the backdrop to the affair.

I remained in Washington during much of Congress's 1999 summer break. A program on a

remote television station provided background noise for the hateful task of sorting papers. A congressman was interviewed. He was not on any committee that dealt with Israel, and I had never met him. I paid little attention until something caught my ear. He expressed hope that America's good friend Israel would not follow through on its plan to sell a spy plane to China. His statement was minor; I may not have even bothered to report it to Jerusalem and doubt that any colleague in the embassy did so.

In early 2000, a new Israeli ambassador came to America. David Ivry had an impressive record, including as chief of Israel's Air Force when it bombed the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981, and later as director general of the Ministry of Defense. He was widely respected, including in American defense circles. Ivry was handpicked for the position in Washington by Ehud Barak, Israel's former chief of staff and its most decorated soldier. Barak entered politics, rose quickly to prime minister, and kept the defense portfolio.

By the time Ivry arrived in America, the proposed Phalcon deal had become well known, and was universally disapproved. American opposition was expressed in each meeting during his first day of introductory calls in Congress. Legislators were welcoming toward him and warm regarding Israel, but their message on the impending sale was polite yet unequivocal: Please, don't do it! At a meeting of senior embassy staff the following morning, I reported on the ambassador's visit to Capitol Hill. My colleagues in the embassy were beginning to hear the same, but less—initially, the rumbling in Congress was loudest.

A basic tenet of Washington was not understood by senior Israelis rooted in our defense establishment: Nothing can be done without an anchor of local support. Both houses of Congress were then Republican, and they were against the deal—China was viewed as a potential threat to American strategic interests, and the plane would enhance its capabilities. China's human rights record contributed to the opposition of Democrats, including most of the Jewish legislators. There was no American sector, say, a branch of business or industry or academia, that supported the sale and would help promote it. Deep and wide American support for Israel notwithstanding, in this we were entirely alone.

During the early months of 2000, from the new ambassador's arrival until May, the Phalcon sale seemed to be discussed everywhere. For example, William Safire, a prominent columnist for the *New York Times* who was Jewish and a supporter of Israel, tried to warn the prime minister. Barak did not return his calls. Safire waited a few weeks and then used his column, at least twice, to appeal publicly to Israel not to proceed while also criticizing our obtuseness.

Making matters worse were anonymous Israeli officials who told the Israeli media that American defense industries were behind the campaign against the deal. The obvious reply to that is: So? Should American opinion leaders and policy makers prefer Israel's industry to their own?

I watched helplessly as Israel became more confrontational. Like this: Israel's Deputy Defense Minister told Israel's press that he would recommend boycotting American companies. I knew him to be too clever for such comments. I should have discussed it with the ambassador or cabled the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem and asked them to do something. Instead, I circumvented proper channels and called him directly. As we spoke, it emerged that my countless communications to the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem, all copied to the Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv, had not reached him. He knew little about the controversy beyond what he read in the Israeli press.

I use the first person a lot here, because Congress led the opposition. I reported developments and added my assessments. Soon, embassy colleagues joined in sounding alarms. Then elements in the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem understood that the sale could not proceed. However, our decision makers remained blind and deaf. It was like watching a child screaming, “I don't care! I want! It’s mine!”

A little modesty and some wisdom might have minimized the fallout. We may have persuaded the Americans to allow us to complete the sale of the first plane, already paid for by the Chinese, while possibly modifying its technology to comply with American concerns. Instead, Israel marched obliviously along, as though we could do anything whatsoever in Washington.

Reality set in almost a year after the obscure television interview that I chanced upon in August 1999. In May 2000, the foreign assistance process was advancing in Congress. Sonny Callahan from Alabama, then chairman of the subcommittee in the House of Representatives that allocates international U.S. assistance, introduced a short clause. It would effectively suspend a quarter-billion dollars of the proposed aid for Israel, the amount we stood to earn on the sale. Not one member of the subcommittee, long a bastion of friendship for Israel, would oppose this step. Republicans and Democrats, who usually overcame disagreements to vote unanimously in support of Israel, were at one in supporting this unprecedented punitive measure.

At the same time, President Bill Clinton told Prime Minister Barak what should have been obvious from the start, what I had been shouting from every diplomatic cable: Continuing with the deal would cause irrevocable harm to Israel-U.S. relations.

After painful months, Israel finally understood what was at stake. The day before the scheduled vote in the subcommittee to suspend some of Israel’s aid, Ambassador Ivry called a select group of lawmakers and informed them of our decision not to go ahead with the sale. It was as if the entire political city heaved a communal sigh of relief.

Since then, the United States is doubly suspicious of Israel’s dealings with China. A mechanism was established between America and Israel to ensure that we don’t cross particular lines again. A director general of the Ministry of Defense was forced to resign some years later because of apparent imprecision in our reporting on a deal with China. Who knows; perhaps he was paying the price for the earlier fiasco.

Almost a decade later, already a pensioner, I joined a basic two-week tour of China. Our Israeli guide spoke about Chinese concepts of national honor and the importance of avoiding any perception of humiliation. Ignorant of my background, the example he gave to the group was that China was slighted when Israel reneged on a signed contract to sell it a plane. The press reported that, despite receiving monetary compensation, its injured pride rankled. For years, China regularly snubbed us by evading diplomatic encounters, limiting contacts with our ambassador in Beijing, and so on.

In late 2000, a few months after the sorry affair ended, a defense delegation from Israel came to Washington for strategic discussions. Many of its members were the same brash people who had been involved in the aborted sale. One of them was walking up the stairs to the defense offices on the third floor of the embassy. Seeing me in the second floor political offices, he called out, “Ah, here is Tova. She knows everything!”

Like many of his colleagues, he likely believed that the deal could have been saved had our embassy, particularly its congressional department (meaning mostly me), made a more robust

effort. Or—let me give him credit—maybe this was his clumsy way to acknowledge that I had been right. He may have finally understood that technical knowledge about early-warning systems does not necessarily imbue those who develop them, or sell them, with expertise on the internal workings of other countries.

Having sadly proven that professional specialization counts for something, my answer was valid for both interpretations of his comment. I said, “No, she knows very little. But what she does know, she knows well.”

Chapter 25
Visits

You Are Welcome, Any Time!

I live near Jerusalem's King David Hotel, the hostelry of choice for visiting dignitaries. When I stand at the kitchen sink washing dishes, sirened convoys sometimes whiz by, and I look up from my soapy labor. Do the black limousines trigger weighty thoughts on the ties between the countries? No. Instead, I recall detailed planning and tedious coordination, changes, glitches, and relief when the visit was over.

In fall 1996, Yevgeny Primakov came to Israel, his first visit as Russia's Foreign Minister. He had been a journalist, academic, and top spy, and had visited previously, but this was different. It was a public display of the state of relations between the two countries and showcased his role in any changes. Some of that could be achieved in correspondence, telephone conversations, or press statements, but as we know from making an effort to meet people in person, proximity makes a difference.

Ahead of such visits, there is a flurry of activity. Substance is discussed in meetings between the two governments and is conveyed in diplomatic cables that go back and forth between the embassies and the political departments in the foreign ministries of both countries. There may be professional input from secret services, direct contact between other agencies such as the trade ministries of both countries, pressure from businesses, and so on.

Foreign ministries have special departments that squeeze all the demands into a doable schedule. A few days before a senior visit to Israel, the director of the department for official guests summons some dozen officials, who sit for hours and discuss every detail.

They include the department's coordinator of that visit, who reserves hotels and vehicles, allocates meeting rooms, hires interpreters if there is no common language, deals with any other technicalities, and generally ensures that it runs well. Protocol is there to ensure that formalities, such as who sits with whom in which car, are done by the rules.

The office of the host (in this case, Israel's Foreign Minister) sends someone to oversee. Representatives of the security forces, who are to guard the guest, attend. A police officer came and informed the gathering that one vehicle would drive before Primakov's entourage for the duration of the visit. As the recently installed director of the department dealing with Russia (my relative inexperience is my pathetic excuse for not anticipating the upcoming embarrassment), I was also there.

A roomful of experienced officials consider every minute of the visit. Their decisions lean on common sense, precedents, and guidelines.

A state visit between heads of state, meaning presidents and kings or queens, is the highest expression of close relations. It is followed by official visits and working visits, with decreasing ceremony. Each country makes its own rules, but overall they are comparable. They include the number of days and size of entourage that the host will cover, beyond which the guest pays. Thus, for a head of state, Israel will cover a dozen guests for three days. Symbolic components, such as laying a wreath at a particular grave, are defined. Expectations are clear; there should be no misunderstandings.

I escorted Primakov during that visit. Shortly after it began, I noticed the obvious: one

police car driving before an entourage may indicate the guest's importance, but practically, it is meaningless. It is the closing vehicle that makes it into a convoy. Without flashing police lights on both sides, the guest's limousine must sit for long minutes in rush-hour traffic, like every other car on the road. Even when the main car has moved on, other vehicles carrying the entourage must obey signals to stop. As a result, arrivals to appointments are staggered.

I appealed to the director of the department for official guests: "Russia is important, his trip includes Syria and Egypt where he is whisked from place to place, this is his first visit as minister; just two more days, please; speak to the police, I beg you; only one car; let him not waste his time sitting and waiting!"

He refused. Heads of state and heads of government have closing cars. Foreign ministers, even of Russia, are not entitled. Rules are rules.

If that was embarrassing, here is a joke Israel's Foreign Minister told his Russian guest over lunch in Jerusalem. A Russian law enforcement official visited the United States and was impressed with the electric chair's efficiency. When the American reciprocated the visit, he heard screaming. His Russian host explained, "We adopted your system to kill criminals. But today, unfortunately, we have a problem with the electricity, so we are using candles."

Among the officials dutifully smiling at this display of international humor, which a professional interpreter had carefully translated from Hebrew, was Israel's Ambassador to Moscow. To maximize the benefit of senior visits, ambassadors often travel home in order to accompany foreign dignitaries when they visit the ambassador's country. The envoys provide their knowledge during the visit, are then better able to follow up on anything that was decided, and also enjoy quality time (think hotel breakfast), which will ease access to the leader when they are both back abroad.

In three years as Ambassador to Riga, I accompanied four high-level visits to Israel. The president of Estonia and Latvia's prime minister came, as did the president and prime minister of Lithuania. For the record: Estonia's prime minister visited shortly before; Latvia's president came soon after.

Two or three agreements were signed during each Baltic visit. The impending visit of a foreign dignitary can trigger discussions on a new agreement or speed the completion of another that has been lazing in the pipeline. The documents can mean a great deal or hardly anything.

Thus, it took years to finalize a free-trade agreement between the United States and Israel. When I was a cadet in the North America division at the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem, reams of faxes arrived almost daily from our embassy in Washington concerning the fate of roses from California—dropping American barriers to Israeli flowers raised concern about the future of these American blooms.

Such scrutiny is not applied to agreements on cultural cooperation, essentially a photo opportunity that means as much, or as little, as the effort that is subsequently made to imbue them with substance. Most agreements, such as avoiding double taxation, protecting mutual investments, or dropping tourist visas between the countries, fall somewhere on the spectrum.

As foreign dignitaries visit us, so senior Israelis pay calls abroad. I was never happy about the extent. In Riga and in Pretoria there were too few. In Washington, too many.

The prime minister and ministers of foreign affairs, defense, and finance each came to America's capital once or twice a year. Their schedule often included a day of meetings in Congress. These entailed substantial work: scheduling, writing briefings for each meeting,

accompanying the guest, reporting. All that went to the heart of Israel's diplomatic work in Washington, and it was rewarding.

Such satisfaction was not guaranteed in visits by other Israeli ministers and legislators (a surprising number of whom asked to see the President of the United States, his Vice President, and the Secretary of State). Busy Washingtonians want to know the purpose of expending their time. "The member of Knesset addressed a Jewish fund raiser in Baltimore and wants to stop in D.C." is not a good-enough answer. Several friendly congresspeople agreed to meet errant guests from Israel, who could then declare, "I briefed the senator in detail!"

Once, I was among the diplomats who entertained three-and-a-half Israeli cabinet ministers in ten days. The half was a deputy minister who had previously been a full one, and had to be treated accordingly.

Background: Every two years, the entire House of Representatives and a third of the Senate are up for reelection. Congress tries to finish its yearly business of producing a budget by October, so that everyone can leave town to campaign, for themselves or for others. Nonelection years have no such built-in pressure on the legislative process. It can drag to December, with last-minute jockeying between Democrats and Republicans. In late 1999, Congress was embroiled in one of those impasses. A special allocation for Israel was under discussion, but the deadlock had nothing to do with us. It would have been best to sit and watch the process work itself out, as it always does.

Instead, Prime Minister Ehud Barak sent chunks of his cabinet across the ocean with instructions to guarantee the special allocation. This would entail meddling in the most sensitive negotiations of the American political calendar. We kept the Israeli travelers away from the main players and asked other helpful legislators to see them, thus massaging visiting egos. After such a meeting with a senator, one of the ministerial visitors, a gruff general turned gruff politician, commented—it was part complaint, part question—"But they are all for us?!?!" He seemed almost surprised that he did not have to engage in hand-to-hand combat in the trenches of Capitol Hill.

To be fair, any of those unnecessary guests would have been welcome in Riga and in Pretoria. Guests generate interest. They are interviewed, meet with leadership, enthuse local Jewish communities, provide a reason to entertain. Without them, a country's contacts with locals rest entirely on the embassy's shoulders. The most determined ambassadorial presence cannot compensate for being an isolated and repeated voice.

In three years in Riga, a deputy minister of trade rushed through, part of Israel's campaign to explain its new relations with the previously shunned PLO. I nagged the Speaker of Israel's Parliament into spending a week visiting my three countries. A mid-level official visited once or twice. That was all.

As for my three years in South Africa, we hosted a handful of officials. The office of Foreign Minister Shimon Peres asked us to inquire about three provisional dates, but it did not translate into a visit. Planning was embryonic; we only asked about the availability of certain people. Still, we had to explain: If he planned to come, why won't he? If he did not mean it, why the inquiry?

A trinity of unconsummated visits is unusual, but postponements and cancellations can occur after everything has been set—there is a special vote in Parliament, a coalition crisis, a flu. No problem, say the hosts; how about next week? Next month? Then the little people in four structures—two ministries on either side of the visit and their respective embassies—grit their teeth and begin again, paying excruciating attention to each repeated particular;

otherwise an important guest finds himself waiting in traffic.

Peres eventually came. In the only ministerial visit during my three years in South Africa, he was joined by two colleagues, for environment and for regional cooperation. They participated in a UN conference on sustainable development. For several days in late 2002, three limousines drove around Johannesburg displaying Israeli flags. Given how many other world leaders were there then, all competing for official and press attention, this multiple presence did little to further Israel's interests in South Africa beyond enabling some activities with local Jews.

At the same time as senior Israelis stayed away (but I took advantage of the random academic, journalist, or musician who came by, and introduced them to counterparts), other Israelis were welcomed grandly. In 2001, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa decided to help bring peace to the Middle East. His scheme was named the Spier Process, after the wine estate near Cape Town where the first meeting was held. He invited those he assumed could contribute. They included Palestinian officials, opposition figures and retired generals from Israel, even leaders of an American Jewish organization who were expected to pressure Israel, but no representatives of the Israeli government. All met the president, were hosted in luxury, and traveled in screeching vehicles.

Around that time, in an attempt to improve the relations between the two countries, the Director General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry came for talks with his South African counterpart. He was the most senior Israeli official to visit in many years, but he met no one higher than the deputy foreign minister.

We asked the South African Ministry of Foreign Affairs to help speed his passage through passport control— not because he was important or tired, but because he had a connecting flight. Like the answer I got when trying to ease the Russian Foreign Minister's movements through clogged Jerusalem traffic, the South Africans were sorry that they could not do it— rules are rules. He made his flight, just in time.

Finally, private guests. Given the facade that a diplomat must maintain, it was wonderful to let it down, to be myself with those who know me as I am. Visitors in Riga, then considered a dull city, were most appreciated. My life there was rather isolated; familiar faces were welcome relief. They were rewarded by a stunning display of what was one of tourism's best-kept secrets, streets upon streets of Jugendstil buildings, like rows of giant wedding cakes, ornately iced in many colors.

I couldn't take much time off during the week to be with my guests, but I tried to incorporate them into my travel schedule for work. Some who came to visit me in Latvia drove with me to Lithuania and Estonia. Visitors to South Africa could join me on visits to Cape Town, where the embassy has an apartment, and the guest room overlooks the Atlantic Ocean. I equipped them with a map, a guide, and suggestions, and I tried to clear my weekends.

A few times, I did a little extra. Twice, I drove friends across the border from Lithuania into Belarus: one to Volozhin, where her grandfather studied in the famous yeshiva before emigrating to South Africa, and another to Radin, to the grave of a rabbi he admires and who is famous for his theological opposition to gossip.

Three of my four trips to the Kruger National Park (I regret not going more often) were with Israelis who came to see me in South Africa, and as a bonus, saw animals in the wild. To make the most of our two nights and three days, I paid a little extra for a bungalow near the camp fence, overlooking water. We watched animals as they came to drink. When we

barbecued, they came to smell. Early one morning, a window suddenly darkened. An elephant's shadow had blocked the sun.

Most of my personal hosting was a treat. Not all. Memories of providing board and lodging to virtual strangers during my first stay in Washington still irritate. When one and then another close friend came to me one summer, their long-anticipated visits blended into a merciless cycle of changing sheets and washing towels, and their company gave me no joy.

A father of several small children called me at the embassy late one afternoon to ask if the family could spend the night with me en route from here to there. An ancient family connection did not allow me to refuse. My fridge was empty; bed linen waited in the laundry basket. "Why didn't you phone yesterday?," I asked the wife, after rushing from work, running to the neighboring convenience store to shop (they keep kosher; telling them to eat out was not an option), and cooking between trips to the washer and dryer in the basement. She intended no irony when she explained that "we don't like to disturb."

A distant cousin spent a week with his girlfriend, part of the post-army trip that is almost compulsory for young Israelis. Ignoring lesser ice creams in my freezer, he announced, "The Häagen-Dazs is finished." Indeed, who can eat something cheaper while watching basketball? Never mind my Sunday talk shows. "The game is almost over, let us finish." They would love pasta for dinner, said the girlfriend one morning. Well, so would I, if someone would prepare it for me before I came home from a twelve-hour working day.

I have not seen them, and others, since they enjoyed my hospitality. Hotel Herzl did not repeat itself. Perhaps it was so hard for me in Washington because I had very little help and did almost everything alone, or because guests camped in the living room and left me no privacy. Possibly I learned to refuse, to do what is good for me. Not always easy or pleasant, yet an option in private relations.

Not so between countries. Russia's Foreign Minister was visibly displeased with the Israeli minister's executioner joke and with his sessions in Jerusalem traffic. But he had no reason to think that they reflected policy, and they did not determine the outcome of his visit. A newspaper article from that time reminded me that during that visit, Primakov overcame his objections to the sale of a Russian plane to Israel. We would add intelligence equipment and sell it to China.

Without that visit, there might have been no Phalcon deal, with America angry when we insisted on going ahead and China angry when the deal was canceled. And this book would have one less chapter.

Chapter 26
Crime and Punishment

Please, Minister, May I Have an Organ?

Illegalities did not appear in my early imaginings about diplomacy, certainly not regarding interactions with my leaders. Oh, I imagined how the minister would offer me a drink, and ask me what I think. Alas, assorted wrongdoing featured in my work.

Let me begin with Ariel Sharon, an army general turned politician who rose to prime minister and was felled by a stroke in 2006. I had front row seats (but on the sidelines) at two investigations against him.

In 1997, I worked in the East Europe department of the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem and handled parts of a trip to Russia by Sharon, then Minister of Infrastructure. This begs a question: Why parts of the trip? What about the rest? Is the Foreign Ministry not responsible for ministers' travel abroad?

Well, mostly. Sometimes we were told that someone else would handle a professional aspect. Or we were asked to leave a day or two empty. True, most diplomats are not qualified to compare the relative merits of gas and coal, but they specialize in how other countries work. If politicians choose to take limited advantage of our skills, and our own minister does not insist, what can we do?

A couple of years passed. I was posted in the Israeli Embassy in Washington when I received a call from police headquarters in Jerusalem. They were interested in Sharon's visit to Russia and would travel to America to talk to me in person. I was planning a holiday in Israel some weeks later, rendering their trip unnecessary.

Two sets of suspicions were investigated, both concerning bribes. Due to lack of adequate proof, that investigation closed without indictment. But that was not the last I heard of Sharon in a legal context. In 2003, when the second story to which I was connected broke, he was prime minister, and I was working in South Africa.

One morning in January 2003, an Israeli news site reported that Sharon was suspected of receiving an illegal loan to finance an election. The alleged conduit was a friend who lived in South Africa, Cyril Kern.

Despite international coverage of the affair, the press in South Africa displayed no interest. Had they asked, I had a ready answer: In Israel, no one is above the law. However, in view of the embarrassing list of Israeli leaders facing criminal procedures, this citizen finds that to be of scant comfort.

The investigation about Sharon was secret; Israel's Attorney General ordered an inquiry into the leak to the press. As Israel's official request for South Africa's help with the inquiry had gone through the embassy, my staff and I were among those questioned. We were probably never real suspects—someone phoned from the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem and asked us each a few questions; that was all. The journalist's informant was soon revealed—a government attorney who was part of the investigation. She thought that Israeli voters should know of this suspicion about their prime minister, who was up for reelection. Sharon won.

My legal adventures will now move down a notch, to cabinet level. And to kidneys. Humans need one in working order. Otherwise, unless a transplant is performed, it is dialysis or

death. Probably due to beliefs on reincarnation, organs from the recently deceased are in short supply in Israel. Kidneys can also be given by living donors with matching tissue.

If family members or altruistic strangers do not come forth, the simple economics of supply and demand dictate that those who have money but no kidney will trade with those who will spare a kidney to get money. Such organ trade is illegal in both Israel and South Africa.

South Africa's leading medical ethicist, a Jewish doctor whom I knew from my adolescence, called from Cape Town. He had heard that sellers and buyers of kidneys travel together from Israel to perform the exchange in South Africa. The embassy cabled Jerusalem. The Foreign Ministry made inquiries and received a categorical denial. Relieved, the embassy conveyed it to the doctor who had inquired.

A few weeks later, a diplomat in the embassy mentioned that his distant relative was part of a group that would come to the embassy that week to have documents notarized. As a rule, documents are notarized where they are issued. Doing it abroad usually signals emergencies. Had the tourists been robbed? Did they lose their documents in a fire? He explained that his relative came to South Africa with several renal patients and an identical number of donors.

As the story unraveled, we learned a little about the trade. Middlemen in Israel match sellers and buyers; South Africa's good medical facilities are relatively inexpensive; several direct weekly flights connect the countries. One problem stood in the way of completing the deals—South African hospitals demanded a notarized statement from both parties attesting to a close family relationship, or the organ transfer would not be legal.

Any Israeli could see that there were no blood ties between, say, a recent immigrant from Ukraine and a veteran Israeli of Iraqi origin. Notarizing what he knew to be a lie could end the legal career of the middleman's Israeli lawyer. He phoned our consul in Pretoria, told him that notarization is needed by the hospitals, and asked for the embassy's help. The consul, new and inexperienced, had paid no attention to recent cable traffic on the topic, and he did not ask the obvious question: Why are they not traveling with the necessary papers? He scheduled a meeting, designed to put the embassy's stamp on a fiction.

Circumstances of all involved, those desperate enough to sell a kidney and those desperate enough to buy one, were tragic. That did not justify the embassy's knowing complicity in a crime. The group arrived at the embassy on schedule, only to leave empty-handed. The dejected middleman gave the consul a copy of a letter from our very own minister of health (I have a copy of it somewhere) congratulating him on his outstanding lifesaving project.

Question from this taxpayer to her elected official: If you think that compensating donors for body parts is good, why did you not act to legalize that in Israel? It would save ailing patients the need to travel and huge costs. Question from an ambassador to a minister: Did you stop to consider that if organ trade is illegal in Israel, it might also be illegal elsewhere?

That was not the end of cabinet-level kidneys. The consul called me during a trip to Cape Town to say that an assistant to Israel's minister of interior needed to talk to me urgently. I had a lunch meeting with a member of Parliament in an Indian restaurant and apologized that I must leave my phone open (but was ashamed to explain why).

The minister's assistant called and went straight to the point: "There is a group of Israelis in South Africa for transplants. The embassy refuses to sign. No one can understand your cruelty. What do these dying people ask for? A small stamp that will save their lives? How can you be so bureaucratic? Have you no heart?"

He was trying to score political points for his boss by pressuring the embassy to act

illegally. I replied that I had a heart, and it was breaking. Sadly, unlike in foreign ministry business, where I have some influence, here I had absolutely no discretion. In everything consular, embassies merely represent his ministry. No, it was not he who should have been asking me to help save lives. It was I who was begging him. All we needed was written instructions to deviate from the rules. He could send them directly to the embassy, or do the kindness via the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem, which would convey his orders to us. We could sign immediately; nothing would stand in the way of lifesaving surgery.

Naturally, no such written authorization came from the minister's office. These two groups, and others we heard about, found other solutions.

Some years after I left, the international organ network was uncovered. Its heads were tried and punished. Local hospitals and health schemes were shamed and sanctioned. Israeli doctors were named. It is easy to imagine the disgrace we—the authorities in Israel and the embassy that represents them in South Africa—were saved, simply as a result of chancing to hear that a diplomat's distant relative planned to visit the embassy.

But my tour in South Africa was not bereft of coverage of illegalities. The press reported in graphic detail the actions of Israeli criminal gangs. They were regularly eliminating each other and doing away with their respective foot soldiers. I was taken aback when the minister of internal security asked me, "Why do they come to this country?" I did not respond as I might have. "Well, minister, this isn't an officially sanctioned export. These people find the best places to operate. So perhaps the answer to your question lies with you?"

The embassy in Riga was the victim of counterfeiters, many of whom did a bad job of forging easily intercepted visas; presumably some of the better ones were not recognized as such. Many of them were found in the passports of good-looking young women who, tempted by the promise of much money, were about to embark on flights to Israel.

Several years after I left Latvia, a scandal broke in Israel. The University of Latvia offered distance programs of academic study, with academic degrees at the end. It emerged that some activities of the Israeli branch were not quite scholarly. Hundreds of the degrees it awarded (but not all) were derecognized. The person in charge was found guilty of bribery and of selling degrees. He was sentenced to prison and paid a fine. The saga continued as those who lost their degrees, and the pay hikes that came with them, disputed the ruling in Israeli courts.

The embassy in Riga was not involved, but whenever the matter was mentioned, in the press or in conversation, I could not help but wonder if perhaps, sometime, I was party to a hint, which turned into an idea, which led to a crime. A reason to feel guilty is always a good thing to have. . . .

The episodes above were all impersonal and fell somewhere on the spectrum between frustrating and embarrassing. But they did not hurt. My hardest professional brushes with the law were internal ones, of assorted wrongdoing by staff, resulting in the termination of employment.

Such situations created a dilemma for this boss on what to explain to remaining personnel about sudden changes. Knowing the people who were involved, caring for them and for their families, these private involvements turned each episode into heart-wrenching, long-lasting dismay. Discussion would have made it harder still. I usually chose the cowardly way and said nothing.

I often think that I should have pursued a legal career. I can see both sides of situations and enjoy playing devil's advocate. I am able to scan my mind for remote connections, a mental

process that is similar to finding precedents. I like to talk and to persuade—if you must, call it argue. However, it seems that I will not be a lawyer in this life. So I am lucky that in addition to everything else that it gave me, diplomacy also provided me with a unique angle on unexpected aspects of law.

Chapter 27
Sickness

You Only Have One Liver to Give to Your Country

Soon after retiring, I went for a routine checkup at Hal'a, an excellent breast clinic in Jerusalem. One in eight or nine women is stricken by breast cancer, the mammogram is painful, and the technician who performs it does not say if she saw anything suspicious. When I finally reached the surgeon who performed a manual examination, I was neither calm nor happy.

I lay on the narrow bed, my exposed parts covered in ultrasound goo. The young stranger who kneaded them suddenly exclaimed, "I know you! You are the ambassador!" A recent immigrant from South Africa, he had been in an audience of thousands that I had addressed in Johannesburg just months earlier. There we both were in Jerusalem, and this time I was looking up at him, nervous and helpless. Meeting people out of context is always surprising. That mammary encounter may have been my most bizarre ever, and an unforgettable education in humility.

Ten years earlier, I was showering at home in Riga before a short trip to Lithuania, and I felt a little lump in my armpit. What would I do? And it was Sunday. I called my deputy. She knew a Jewish man and his daughter, both doctors. My driver and bodyguard waited in the car, our packed suitcases in the baggage compartment, while we four met at their home.

The doctors decreed that I could continue to Vilnius as planned, but I must return soon for more tests. Soviet medical training was good; I did not hesitate to entrust my body to their hands and to their knowledge. However, the daughter-doctor suggested that a biopsy might be needed. I did not say anything about their facilities or express concern about local hygiene, sentiments shared by most foreigners living there then. Instead, I said, "If the news will be bad, I want to hear it surrounded by family." A mammogram (as harsh on the tender tissue as anywhere else) revealed that all was well, and that was that.

Unlike medical care, foreigners who lived in Riga soon after independence had no concerns about dental treatments. A Canadian-born and educated dentist, whose family had emigrated from Latvia in the 1940s, packed himself and his fine equipment and opened a clinic in Riga, where he treated picky expatriates and rich locals. One day he replaced a filling. A few days later, half my face, from the jaw toward the eye, felt rigid. I was not pleased—did he not know how much anesthetic to use? He saw me immediately and noted the obvious—the treated tooth was on the other side of my face.

He asked if I have a doctor in Riga. Extensive medical tests are standard procedure before going abroad. They showed good health, or my ministry would not have sent me where medical standards were unknown. If something small came up, I phoned my doctor in Jerusalem. The ministry had specialists on call for urgent consultations. "No," I said, "I do not have a doctor in Riga. Do you think I need to see one?"

In the hour that passed between noticing the problem and hearing the dentist's urgency, I went from being annoyed with him to understanding that half my face was half-paralyzed, and I was far from medical treatment that I trusted. My despair eased when the dentist said that an American doctor happened to be in Riga. He was based in the American Embassy in Warsaw and was responsible for the health of embassy staff and Peace Corps volunteers in several

surrounding countries.

It was Friday afternoon; the working week was over. I located the American Ambassador, who permitted the doctor to see this non-American. The Jewish Sabbath had begun when the doctor came to my home. He pinched here, pricked there, and stated, “If I were you, I would go home tomorrow.” But I am Sabbath observant and do not travel on Saturday; can’t it wait until Sunday? He answered, “Doesn’t your religion demand desecration of the holy day when faced with danger?”

Symptoms indicated the onset of Bell’s palsy, or something similar. A day or two had passed before I noticed the problem. It may have already been too late; my face might remain crooked. Still, he thought that I should see a specialist immediately. I needed to speak to someone with authority to spend Israeli government money on medical needs. For that, we—the Poland-based American doctor and I—called Jerusalem and spoke to the Foreign Ministry’s authorized doctor.

Given the time that had already elapsed, she allowed me to wait until Sunday morning to fly out, no later. There was no direct flight to Israel on Sunday; connecting through Copenhagen would make for a long, tense day. At its end, I would probably be hospitalized in the neurological department of Hadassah Hospital, where my late father was treated for his fatal illness. That would be hard, especially for my mother. I was forty-three; how would I live for the remainder of my life with a crooked face? In a job that includes public appearances?

I woke on Saturday with a straight face. It, whatever it was, had inexplicably gone away. After Shabbat (it was no longer an emergency), I called Jerusalem. The ministry doctor thought that the trip to Israel was not medically necessary, but if I needed reassurance, she would approve the expense. I didn’t.

The doctor to whom I spoke in Jerusalem reported to a ministry department that handles personal aspects of postings, such as registering children of returning diplomats in Israeli schools and sending them gifts for holidays when they are abroad. The department helps to decide where a diplomatic family member should be treated, but the head of the mission has the last word. A diplomat in Riga, who had immigrated to Israel years earlier from those parts, wanted to undergo a minor surgical procedure there. Not due to medical knowledge—I have none—but thanks to common sense, I thought it better to avoid local knives. Against his will, he flew to Israel for a few days.

In South Africa, I had one unusual problem—nights of stress-induced teeth gnashing. The painful infection cleared within days of my retirement. But my environment there was, literally, viral.

One of the local guards who protected my house stopped working, and then we heard that he died. A few years after I left Pretoria, the embassy’s young switchboard operator died. She came to us after working in a department store, and she initially answered the phone thus: “Thank you for calling the Embassy of Israel; how may I help you?” No one said what killed her, only that she lost much weight in the final months. In all likelihood, her life was cut short by the omnipresent HIV-AIDS.

She was followed by my cook. Again, her death was not attributed to any specific cause beyond such vague phrases. The passing of someone who had been an integral part of my life for three years was sad. Infection requires the exchange of bodily liquids, the virus does not survive in fresh air, there is no danger from toilet seats or from a drop of saliva on a knife handle, and she seemed healthy when I knew her. However, had she been ill or infected when

she worked for me, and had I known, there was little I could have done.

At least a tenth of the population carries the virus. Laws are in place to protect the ill from discrimination. One does what one can, such as asking the dentist and pedicurist how they sterilize equipment, and hoping that their answer is honest. Or allowing pregnant diplomats or diplomatic wives to deliver their newborns back home in Israel. Even if a week earlier another embassy wife chose to deliver in South Africa, in a fancy private facility, the prevalence of sharp tools and the rate of infection among medical staff cannot be shrugged away.

When an embassy child needed blood, it was not taken from a blood bank. We of the common A positive variety lay down to give a unit. What might have happened had she belonged to a rare blood group such as B negative? Would she have had to fly abroad with a parent for every transfusion?

This opens a series of dilemmas. If the malfunction of a sick child's parent is strongly felt in a small mission, is it fair to replace the parent? Is it fair not to? Should medical tests before postings reveal something in the family, must the diplomat be deprived of the job? Go, although treatment is costly? When a posting has ended but treatment has not, what then?

A colleague in a country with questionable services had his tumor treated in a fancy facility in New York. It was covered by the Israeli government's medical insurance for diplomats. Had he been diagnosed in Israel, he would have had to wait his turn for a bed in a crowded ward. Health, money, distance, family, and career: It's a complicated mix. When the answer is not straightforward, the ministry's administration, doctors, and the workers in question find the solution together.

In South Africa, I sometimes vacationed for a few days in areas infected with malaria. To repel disease-carrying mosquitoes, I tried to keep my wrists and ankles covered, dabbed citrus oil on pulse points, and slept with air conditioning or a fan. However, if posted where such illnesses are common, the diplomat has no choice but to take strong preventive medications, which are hard on the liver.

An American diplomat who saw me drinking a strong bitter local drink in the bar of the Ridzene Hotel in Riga said, "Sadly, you only have one liver to give to your country." He was joking about the risks of social drinking, but the comment can apply to ruining vital organs in a medically challenging posting.

In 1997, I visited Israel's embassy in Kiev. More than a decade had passed since the explosion at the nuclear facility in Chernobyl, and much of what the staff consumed was imported into Ukraine. Still, the jokes they made at dinner ("let us turn off the light to see if this fish radiates") were more nervous than funny, and they had no choice but to breathe local air.

I survived my postings medically unharmed. Nevertheless, my career caused small permanent damage to my health.

On Thursday afternoon, July 3, 1997, many Israeli officials headed to Herzliya, on the Mediterranean coast. They would celebrate the American July Fourth reception, marked in Israel a day earlier that year because of the Sabbath on Friday evening. As director of an East Europe department in the Foreign Ministry, I set out to celebrate the Belarusian national day.

My heels weren't too high, and Brody Street in Jerusalem is not too steep, but the combination resulted in a broken ankle. Surgery, physiotherapy, recovery—it lasted painful weeks. I no longer wear high heels, it hurts when the weather changes, and the metal pins in my ankle sometimes beep in security checks.

At the time, bureaucratic issues delayed Israel's appointment of an ambassador to Belarus.

For months, a junior diplomat headed our embassy in Minsk. Some at the Belarusian Embassy in Tel Aviv (headed by a former head of his country's secret service) were convinced that the delay was tied to international criticism of the only traditionally communist country that remained in what had been the Soviet Union. My absence from the reception was viewed as part of an elaborate scheme to express disfavor toward the country and its policies.

Conspiracies are wonderful stuff of fiction, sometimes of life. But believe me, dear colleagues—hospitalization, crutches, and a lifelong suspicion of sloping streets are a high price to avoid a party. Pleading a headache, an upset stomach, or an urgent evening mammogram—those excuses would have served just as well.

Chapter 28
Passages
A Time to Be Born and a Time to Die

My plans to celebrate my fiftieth birthday were derailed by the murder of my niece.

December 29 is in the middle of the southern hemisphere summer. In 2002, it fell on Sunday. That afternoon, more than a hundred people would come to the embassy's apartment in Cape Town; we would party into the night. I would invite friends and professional contacts who lived there and others from around the country who vacationed at the coast. My two sisters, Sarah and Miriam, would travel from Israel to the city of our adolescence. It was clear and detailed in my mind, but it was not to be.

On Wednesday afternoon, June 19, Israeli news on my computer in Pretoria reported a "hot terrorist alert in Jerusalem." At the time, the height of the second Palestinian intifada, such terminology from intelligence sources was all too familiar. It meant that a human bomb had infiltrated the city, heralding a race between being located and blowing up.

I drove to a Jewish event in Johannesburg. Someone told me about a suicide murder at French Hill Junction in Jerusalem a little earlier, with several dead. A day before, nineteen people were killed on bus number 32, and conversations during predinner mingling were somber. Only after we were seated did I notice something unusual: If I did not contact my family in Jerusalem after a bomb, someone would routinely call to reassure me. A few hours had passed; there had been no contact.

As prayers were being said for Israel's welfare in those harsh times, I tried to speak to my mother, remembered that she had gone to a wedding, and called my sister Sarah. Her seventeen-year-old son answered. Is everything in order, I whispered. Not sure, he said (years later, I get the same goose bumps when I recall his words). His sister Michal, twenty-two, returning home from her last day of college, chanced to be where the bomb exploded and is not answering her phone. His parents had gone to look for her in hospitals. More whispered calls elicited the same.

I explained the situation to my neighbors at the head table, asked them not to disrupt the proceedings, and got up to return to my big, empty house in Pretoria.

From the car during the half-hour drive, I called Malcolm Ferguson, a Middle East expert in the South African Foreign Ministry. During a year and a half of working together, we had become friends. The second call was to Daniel Pinhassi, my deputy, then returning from a short family vacation. Both came to the house. Others trickled in. All tried to calm me, comfort me, feed me.

It was a long Thursday at home in Pretoria, waiting for an evening flight via Switzerland. Shivering in shock, covered in a blanket, I met a visiting Israeli official in the small downstairs study. My mind an automaton, I described pertinent issues and responded to his questions (but did not join him, as planned, for his meetings with local officials).

I remained with my family in Jerusalem for two weeks. It would have been hard to go back alone, even to a supportive environment. In South Africa, it was insufferable.

As was my practice, I spent a few hours skimming newspapers that had accumulated in my absence. In one, "bereaved" headlined a short report with a photo of me, grinning. I had been

photographed numerous times; there were other options. Did the editorial choice reflect bad taste? Amateur journalism? An odd sense of humor? Perhaps deliberate dehumanization of Israelis, portraying us as perpetrators, never as victims?

People in pain may demand too much sensitivity or expect unreasonable attention. Even with long hindsight, I am sure that this was not my case then.

I received many touching letters of condolence from Jews and Jewish organizations, private South Africans, colleagues, and members of the opposition. The government, which takes pains to acknowledge officially the suffering of both sides, more or less ignored the loss of the closest I had to my own child.

A letter from the deputy foreign minister who was responsible for South Africa's dealings with the Middle East arrived five weeks after the event, apologizing that the original had been mislaid. The chairman of the foreign affairs committee also wrote, and there was one more letter from a member of the ruling party. At the French Bastille Day celebration soon after my return, the vice president's foreign policy adviser expressed his sympathy. That was all.

A month after the tragedy, a journalist-friend invited me to lunch. A senior Palestinian representative who sat at the next table came over, stretched out his hand, and expressed sympathy. His lunch companions, a table of local officials with whom I worked regularly, did not move.

Some time later, I paid a call on the premier of one of South Africa's nine provinces. She drew the usual comparison with the blacks' struggle against the white regime and insisted that like them, Palestinians would never target civilians. When I answered that my niece had been killed by the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, established and funded by Yasser Arafat's Fatah, she responded that she doubted it. That they took public credit for the action and compensated the perpetrator's family was not enough to sway her.

For the remaining eighteen months of my tour, I continued to live and work among people who ignored my loss. It was difficult for me not to imagine South African responses had a close relative of an Arab ambassador been killed by Israelis.

A professional, I did what I had to do. I had meetings, went to receptions, entertained, and kept my feelings to myself. With one exception—I met a grief therapist. I let down my guard, spoke freely, cried a little. As I was ready to leave her clinic, she told me how pleased South African Jews are with me as Israel's ambassador. She was showing kindness, but at that moment it seemed to me that she could not separate me from my job, was unable to see me as an ordinary person in pain. I did not return.

My niece's murder was political; my job was political. That intersection was an extreme example of how diplomats shift from who they are to what they represent, zigzagging between self and duty. But even in less dramatic transitions, when a diplomat marks life-cycle events, the delineations between private person and official persona are vaguer than usual.

Take gifts. I try (but do not always succeed) to avoid the impersonality of writing checks. A gift certificate sends the recipient to a shop chosen by someone else. Selecting the right something is time-consuming. Unless one knows the recipient well, it is difficult to be sure that the choice is appropriate.

As a diplomat, giving presents has added complications. Say an invitation to a celebration comes from people who are not close, and it's obvious that they are motivated by my name-dropping appeal. For whatever reason, I decide to attend. Must I bring something? Having given what they really want—my presence—should I give less than usual? Maybe give more, as befits

my status?

I found a solution. Long before Israel's establishment, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) worked to counter centuries of desertification. It maintains parks, develops nature walks, and plants trees. To raise money, it sells virtual trees—as few as one, as many as a forest.

True, a normal thirteen-year-old celebrating his bar mitzvah would prefer cash, maybe credit at a music store. Still, I felt that a certificate for trees, with the celebrant's name and mine printed on it, was suitable. How many trees? Easy. Hebrew letters have numerical value. The number 18 is "chai," life. Multiples of that are common; hence donations in sums like 36 or 900 are often made to charity, rather than a round 35 or 1,000.

When the first child was born to the King of Lesotho, I honored the little princess with a certificate for eighteen trees. Given land problems in rural Africa, I assumed that my cover letter explaining the JNF's objectives and its actions would make the gift more relevant than a toy. I was disappointed to not receive a response.

Nor did former President Nelson Mandela acknowledge my eighty-fifth birthday gift to him. Bono, former U.S. president Clinton, thousands of Mandela's closest friends, and I went to his party. I brought a slim book of poems that my mother wrote before, during, and after the Holocaust, and published in her seventies. I included a note about the strength of the human spirit, as reflected in his life, and hers.

Yes, it was work, a duty. But a person who invested thought and effort expects this small politeness, an acknowledgment.

In this perpetually divided self, of who I am and what I do, professional responsibility could clash with personal wishes. Boys were born to two Israeli diplomats during my South African tour. Circumcision must be on the eighth day, and it is traditionally performed in the morning. The babies' parents, living far from their families and friends, wanted to share the event with colleagues.

They included embassy security, whose absence from the office means opening the embassy late. Whoever phoned the embassy before coming would hear a recorded message announcing the delayed opening. What about someone who came to the embassy according to the normal schedule, only to find a closed door and consular services unavailable? We did not have hundreds or even dozens of daily visitors, but public service is just that, service. I ignored strong pressures exerted by my conscience, favored people's needs, and I allowed the embassy to open late.

Moving from birth to death, let me mention two colleagues who died in the line of duty.

David Ben-Rafael, a close friend, served in London and Chicago and became the Deputy Ambassador of Israel to Argentina. He was one of twenty-eight Argentinean and Israeli victims of a car bomb that destroyed the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992. For weeks afterward, the cafeteria of the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem was stunned into silence. To the shock and sorrow was added a frightening thought: It could have happened to any one of us; it could have happened to me.

As ambassador to Latvia, I was also responsible for Estonia. Until he left in 1994, American Ambassador Robert Frasure and I overlapped for a year. He was generous with his time and his knowledge, and I tried to see him on every trip to the capital, Tallinn. His subsequent duties in the State Department included negotiating in Bosnia. In 1995, he was killed with two other Americans when their vehicle, circumventing a blocked highway near Sarajevo, plunged into a ravine.

These fatalities touched me deeply. But most work-related deaths are just that—work. I was in Pretoria when former President Nixon died. The American Embassy sent a note announcing the times when diplomats and sympathetic locals could come to sign a condolence book.

I formulated a text, focusing on Nixon's role in supplying Israel with emergency equipment during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and naturally ignored any scandal associated with him. I drove to the American Embassy and meticulously copied my carefully considered words into a special thick, black book. It was placed on a black tablecloth covering a small table, which also had a photo of the deceased, with a slanted black ribbon across the corner. As I wrote in the volume, which would soon be sent to America, I knew that other than perhaps a curious staffer in the embassy, no one would ever glance at those sentences.

Attending funerals is also part of diplomatic duty. Walter Sisulu died in 2003, aged ninety-one. He had been a leader in South Africa's liberation struggle. Several members of his family went on to hold important positions after apartheid. It was said that political prisoners on Robben Island turned to Mandela with their problems, and Mandela turned to Sisulu.

I had visited him at his home in Johannesburg a year or two earlier and had found him frail but alert. He told me about a longish visit to Israel in 1953, en route to Europe. That sojourn in my country did not appear in the postmortem reports of his travels—apparently the officials who provided the data for his obituary wanted it to be politically correct, and Israel did not qualify.

Sisulu had no official role, but in recognition of his place in South Africa's history, there was a "special official funeral" in Pretoria's City Hall, and ambassadors were invited. At the scheduled time, I was supposed to meet Moeletsi Mbeki, an academic, businessman, brother of South Africa's president, and critic of his policies. Their father, Govan, was a contemporary of the deceased.

Might Moeletsi go to the funeral? Better not to ask directly; there may be sensitivities among the Mbekis or between the two families. Instead, my secretary contacted his office for a routine confirmation, which was given. Aha! Suspicion confirmed! There is a grievance somewhere! My deputy Daniel would therefore represent us at the funeral. I arrived in Mbeki's Johannesburg office on schedule and was not entirely surprised to discover that he was not there, as he had gone to Pretoria to pay his respects.

Daniel had an interesting experience at the funeral, designed to celebrate a life rather than mourn it. He reveled in the singing and dancing ("you should have seen Madame Foreign Minister move!"). And I never did meet Moeletsi Mbeki.

The mourning Sisulus would receive comforters for seven days. This was similar to the Jewish custom whereby immediate relatives—spouse, children, siblings, parents—sit shiva, meaning seven. Sisulu's widow, Albertina, had welcomed me kindly when I visited her husband. I traveled from Pretoria to Johannesburg to express my condolences. About eighty-five then, she was resting. I waited among neighbors and struggle veterans, and I left without meeting her.

By coincidence, I was at the November 1995 funeral of my murdered Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin. I flew from Riga to Israel for my nephew's bar mitzvah. It was celebrated in Jerusalem on Saturday morning. That evening, after a peace rally in Tel Aviv, Rabin's life was ended by Yigal Amir, who objected to Rabin's actions on the peace process.

Jews bury quickly; the funeral was on Monday. Delegations from about eighty countries

came. More than half were headed by a king, a president, or a prime minister. To make room for them, tourists were herded from their hotels to simpler or more remote hostelries. Hundreds of buses were hired. I never lend a blue baseball cap distributed there, evidence not just of an unusually warm winter day but also of the detailed planning that went into organizing the event at short notice.

Among those who paid respects in person were the prime ministers of Latvia and Lithuania and the President of Estonia. He was the most senior of the three; I was asked to accompany him. The entire proceeding was weirdly jarring. On one hand, the numbing political murder. On the other, the ordinariness of escorting a foreign dignitary. It was somber yet exciting, and it felt like a giant cocktail party, with spontaneous mingling in hotels, at the reception that Israel's President Ezer Weizman hosted for visiting delegations, and during the funeral itself.

The King of Jordan, the President of the United States, his counterpart from Egypt, and the heir to the British throne all received much media attention. Others had little. Estonia's Lennart Meri had an unusual knack for publicity. In this case, he had to sign a law, and he did it by fax. That was a first for Estonia, and the novelty became news there but also in Israel and elsewhere, giving reporters and readers a break from the morbidity.

For a few days, Rabin's murder had a special angle in Riga. It emerged that the murderer had been in Latvia for several months in 1992. As soon as it became possible, Nativ, an Israeli government structure that deals with Soviet Jewry and was then still covert, dispatched young Israelis to the nascent republics, to imbue and enthuse local Jews. Among them was Amir.

Latvian journalists noticed press reports that the assassin had been an emissary of some official but indeterminate Israeli body, and they demanded to know if he had been sent to spy on Latvia. At the request of the Latvian Foreign Ministry, I wrote a letter categorically—and truthfully—denying any activity beyond working with youth. I will also admit to backdating that letter by a day or two in order to make the official who asked me seem as alert as his country's press.

Several years after the Rabin murder, I traveled from Washington for another family bar mitzvah. A beloved relative died during that short trip, and I could attend his funeral, adding sadness to the joy. Those short roller-coaster days showcased one of the difficulties of living and working abroad. Being at major life events demands travel. It is expensive and disrupts work.

Work is why I missed the wedding of my first niece to marry. The timing was bad—it was at the height of the Phalcon crisis, and there was a lot of pressure in the office in Washington. When two years later her cousin was murdered, I did not consider delaying my trip. Since then, when people mention the cost or the effort of going to a celebration, I ask, if it were a funeral, or to visit a deathbed, would you go? Invariably, they would.

Isn't it odd, and sad, that this is what we people do? That we do not hesitate for sorrow, but think twice for joy?

Then I tell them about my nieces and urge them—and you—to invest in happiness.

Chapter 29
Demonstrations

The People Have Spoken, but What Did They Say?

Every year, as March 16 approaches, I worry that I will be found out and shamed. It's not about something I did, but about doing nothing when I could have done something.

Since 1990, when Latvia began to emerge from the ruins of the Soviet Union, on that anniversary of an important battle, Latvian veterans who fought against the Soviets in World War II don their old uniforms and parade the streets of the capital, Riga. Taking up arms against the Soviets, as they did, can be equally seen as fighting alongside Nazi Germany.

Were the young Latvians drafted? Perhaps they were naïve to think that they were defending their country against communism? Maybe they were racists, murderers? Much has been written on every possibility. Although I do not have tools to weigh them, the basic facts automatically pit me against what the march represents.

From 1993 to 1996, my term as Israel's ambassador to Latvia, these processions garnered little attention. The local Jewish community and foreign missions did not raise their voices against them, nor was there any other significant reaction, there or abroad. Some years later, maybe during the short-lived status of March 16 as an official memorial day, Russians began to object. The parades became controversial, inside Latvia and out.

Each year, when March 16 draws near, there is speculation in the Latvian and international press. Will the parade pass quietly? Might there be a clash between supporters of the veterans and their opposition? How will the authorities respond? Reading about it from a distance of time and place, I am embarrassed to admit—even to myself—that when I lived and worked just a few blocks away, I simply ignored the event and did not so much as consider its relevance.

In recalling my neglect, I also ask, what would happen if these marches would have continued quietly, without public criticism, while nature whittled participation? On balance, is it better to ignore a negative phenomenon that is not prominent, or to take a loud, principled stand against it, giving it levels of visibility it could not obtain otherwise? I don't know.

Likewise, I cannot judge with certainty the value of certain pro-Israel demonstrations in South Africa. Every Friday at midday, a group of placard-bearing supporters of Israel gathered outside Parliament in Cape Town. This was a steady and isolated expression of public sympathy for us, and it indicated that Israel was not universally condemned and was not considered entirely bad.

I was grateful to those who willingly subjected themselves to derision on our behalf. However, all the demonstrators were white. This enhanced the pervasive comparison between the apartheid regime and Israel, between the Palestinian situation and the anguish of disenfranchised blacks. In that environment, were we better off with this pale support, or without? Is a problematic crack in hostility better than none, or worse? I am not sure.

I also have a divided opinion on some Jewish rallies in Johannesburg, where looking bad had to be weighed against feeling good. When isolated, there is value in solidarity; strength can be drawn from a shared commitment to a cause. However, due to concerns about security—they were legitimate, not paranoia—gatherings were often held in fenced enclosures. What can be interpreted as cowering in fear does not convey confidence, neither to random television

viewers nor to any of the potential menaces, who no doubt reveled in their success. On balance, which is better, to gather like that, or not gather at all? It is difficult to be sure.

The guest of honor at one such event was a member of Israel's Knesset, a former fighter pilot. At the time, Israel was ruled by a very broad coalition. Opposition numbered only twenty or twenty-five, about a fifth of our Parliament. The guest speaker belonged to an opposition party that criticized the government from the right, for being too lenient toward the Palestinians.

I discussed with his local hosts their plans to expose him to the South African press. They should try to guess what he would say and consider consequences for Israel and its supporters. Will his statements improve matters? Will Israel and its local supporters be better off, or worse? Too late to disinvite him completely, they understood his potential to harm the very cause—Israel's standing in South Africa—that they wished to advance.

The opposition parliamentarian came, addressed the rally, and returned home, furious at having had no chance to share his thoughts with South Africa at large. He later wrote to a series of Israeli foreign ministers about the extreme left-wing ambassador who did everything in her power to derail his visit, simply in order to promote her private radical agenda.

Demonstrations were more of an issue for me in South Africa than elsewhere. There were two main reasons for that: Protests are a common form of political expression there, and Israel was disliked. The best-known demonstration took place in Durban on Friday, August 31, 2001, during the World Conference against Racism, a UN conference described in the next chapter.

Sitting in the plenary during the gathering's first morning, word came to the Israeli delegation that an anti-Israel demonstration in the afternoon would be bigger and harsher than anticipated. We were instructed to return to our hotels.

From my room, I looked down on tens of thousands of demonstrators—foreigners, South Africans, Durbanites—as they marched and cried "Amandla, Intifada!" The Palestinian uprising then raging was known as the second intifada. *Amandla* means "power" in some local African languages; it was the rallying cry of the antiapartheid movement. Placards borne high stated that "Israel is an apartheid state" and "Zionism is Racism." Racism is illegal; apartheid was dismantled. What should happen to Israel is obvious. That march was arguably unprecedented in size and vitriol, certainly in a country that is home to a large Jewish community and has full diplomatic relations with Israel.

In Jerusalem, my mother, a Holocaust survivor, watched the demonstration on television. We spoke on the phone, and she said, "Now you know what it is like." I asked, "What what is like?" She answered, "Anti-Semitism." For me, born into a sovereign Israel and convinced that the painful past is just that, it is behind us—listening to her comment while looking at the demonstrators below was a shocking moment of revelation. Regardless of Israeli policies that deserve criticism, I can find no other explanation for what I saw and heard that day.

Organizations claiming to support human rights teamed up with its abusers. Graduates of the South African struggle, who call each other comrade, marched under a common banner with those who do not permit women to vote. Supporters of sexual freedom walked in step with those who hang homosexuals. A coalition of hypocrites, created just for us. The demonstration was not part of the official conference. Yet for many, it came to symbolize the entire unfortunate gathering.

It took months for the UN and South Africa to understand that in some circles, Durban was not considered a success. Major players such as the United States and most of the West would

cease to invest time, effort, and money in order to come together to debate the awfulness of one country. A year later, in 2002, Johannesburg was to host another huge UN conference, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). Everyone made a serious effort to avoid another Durban. For example, certain limits were placed on street protests.

Israel and international Jewish organizations had also learned from Durban. They were better prepared, including for the possibility of hostile demonstrations. Dozens of Jewish students came from Israel and elsewhere. Eager to help, they found little to do.

This is not to imply that WSSD was an Israel lovefest. A guest who garnered much attention was Fadwa Barghouti, wife of an imprisoned Palestinian militant leader. Supported by veterans of the struggle in South Africa, she compared her husband to Nelson Mandela. Her agenda was unrelated to sustainable development. She wanted freedom for her husband and publicity for his cause.

A senior official from Jewish Agency headquarters in Jerusalem was responsible for the restless students, who had been recruited and trained for action that failed to materialize. He instructed them to disrupt Ms. Barghouti's appearances, which he claimed were Durbanizing WSSD. This was not entirely wrong, but any action against her would draw reactions from her supporters. There would be altercations, police would be called, headlines would ensue. Once again, Israel would top the agenda at a big UN meeting in South Africa.

Unlike Durban, where the bellicosity was imposed on us, in Johannesburg, it is our side that would have created the conflict, and so put Israel back where no one wanted it—at the center of attention, the heart of the action. I called someone in the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem. He contacted a leader of the Jewish Agency who, understanding that some expressions of support can cause more harm than they do good, put a stop to this initiative.

Every few months, demonstrators came to the Israeli embassy in Pretoria, carrying placards with the usual accusations. South African cabinet ministers led several such marches. I asked my interlocutors in government if the opinions borne aloft (and effectively called for the elimination of Israel) reflect official policy.

There were two standard answers. One was that South Africa permits freedom of expression, and the ministers are merely expressing their private opinions. The other common response was that they march not in their capacity as ministers but in their identity as members of the ruling party. It was inappropriate for this guest in their country to hint that both explanations are incompatible with recognized concepts of shared cabinet responsibility.

The American embassy was also a popular destination for protestors. One march, chanting slogans against American imperialism, was led by the mayor of a big city. The following week, the same mayor again came to the American Embassy, this time for a scheduled meeting with the ambassador.

He did not come to discuss the political issues that had taken him to the streets, or to convince the United States to improve its ways. No, he came to ask for money to fund a project, and he did not understand why his host spoke of the previous week's loud, outdoor visit. How could the American not separate those two identities of the same man: party member who demonstrates vocally and elected official recruiting funds?

There is something impersonal about a demonstration. Hearing one's country criticized and vilified is not pleasing. But country and I are not identical, and no one is saying anything bad about me personally. Also, there is usually a physical distance that creates, well, a distance. I was never attacked bodily, neither with a tomato nor with a shoe. Still, when lines were

blurred, it was unnerving.

The Cape Town branch of the South African Institute of International Affairs invited me to talk on developments in the Middle East and peace prospects—the usual. The audience would also be the usual—a mixture of interested listeners, supportive Jews, critics, and journalists. Before the event, the organizers asked for my permission to allow demonstrators into the hall. The protestors had promised that they would raise some signs, but there would be no vocal disruptions. I assumed that it would not disturb me.

I was wrong. Accusations flashing in my face, protesters moving the signs between them—it was disconcerting; I felt trapped, threatened. But even had I guessed my reaction, I would not have refused. It would not be compatible with the respect my country and I have for freedom of expression, including the freedom to demonstrate.

Supporting the principle of demonstrations is one thing; joining them is another. As a concerned citizen, I complain a lot, but I do little to change things beyond voting and giving a little charity. I participated in a demonstration just once or twice, and I discovered that socializing with old acquaintances and meeting new ones under the banner of a shared cause feels very good indeed.

I worked in Washington when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was to meet there with President Ronald Reagan. On Sunday, December 6, 1987, shortly before their summit, I joined some quarter million people who gathered on the American capital's Mall to demand "Let My People Go!" Meeting after this massive display of support for the exit of Soviet Jewry, Reagan repeatedly mentioned the number to his guest.

Returning to Moscow, Gorbachev began to make arrangements to allow Soviet Jews to emigrate. Their exit may have contributed to subsequent Soviet reforms and to changes in the long-established bipolar world. Had the turnout at the Washington protest been smaller, who knows if Reagan would have emphasized the issue, what the outcome would have been, and which changes glasnost would have wrought.

Among the new policy's historical outcomes was the disintegration of the Soviet Union into fifteen republics. Latvia's population became free to express national feelings. Two years after we demonstrated in Washington, Latvian veterans began their controversial marches to Riga's Freedom Monument. Maybe, in some minute way, my participation in the big rally in Washington helped set in motion the very process that enabled those Riga parades.

Chapter 30
Durban

You Were Really There?

Several friends introduce me with a dramatic "She was in Durban!" as though I survived a plane crash. They refer not to the vibrant port city on South Africa's Indian Ocean coast but to the United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, which met there in 2001. WCAR (pronounced "weikar") gathered dozens of world leaders, hundreds of press teams, thousands of delegates, and countless demonstrators.

New acquaintances inevitably respond with "Was it as bad as it seems?" It was worse. To the highly publicized hostility must be added fax machines, rooms, and enough vehicles to transport a delegation scattered in seven hotels. If this text will zigzag between administration and politics, imagine what it was like for me then, pulled to one and dragged to the other.

WCAR opened on Friday, August 31. On Monday, Israel and America left. The conference was scheduled to end on Friday, September 8, but it lasted a day longer. It garnered much world attention before it began, during the meeting, and immediately after, but it was overtaken by the events of 9/11.

In a way, there were three separate Durbans. Each had its own agenda and dynamics, with each of the three affecting the other two. WCAR was one. The second was the semiofficial meeting of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which commonly meet alongside UN gatherings with similar agendas. Public events such as demonstrations were the third. The trio became known collectively as "Durban."

WCAR first met in Geneva in 1978. Israel did not attend. Three years earlier, the UN General Assembly had passed a resolution equating Zionism with racism; who will go to a game knowing that he will be the ball? In 1983 Geneva again hosted WCAR. Again we stayed away. In 1991, sixteen years after its adoption, the UN repealed its resolution equating Zionism with racism. When the next WCAR was planned, with newly democratic South Africa as host, Israel decided to give the meeting a chance. But we were to waver before going—when earnest preparations began about a year before the conference, we were embroiled in the second Palestinian uprising, which resuscitated hateful discourse on Israel.

Among the early preparations ahead of these international gatherings are meetings of the UN's five regional groups. Countries of Asia, Africa, South America, Eastern Europe, and WEOG (Western European and Others Group) meet separately in a regional capital to discuss the agenda. The Asian group, where geography puts Israel, includes many Muslim countries, and it will not have us. For years Israel did not belong anywhere—we paid dues, but we were not eligible for any of those UN positions that are allocated by region. Since 2000, Israel's status is a unique "permanent renewal of full temporary membership" in WEOG.

Regional groups send their drafts to the relevant UN headquarters—human rights are centered in Geneva. As it is almost impossible to settle big differences during short conferences, laden as they are with speeches, dignitaries, and receptions, the UN usually mediates between the regional versions, aiming to reach a more or less agreed text in advance. Such early understandings are adopted at the conference, giving them a public stamp of international approval.

The Asian group met in Tehran ahead of WCAR. The draft it produced accused Israel of racism, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and apartheid. Mary Robinson of the United Nations and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Foreign Minister of South Africa, headed the preparatory proceedings in Geneva and were to head WCAR. They decided to leave the calumny in brackets, meaning that it was to be decided during the conference in Durban. One country was singled out; one conflict was mentioned. Israel thought that perhaps it shouldn't go after all.

But I am running ahead, in time and in substance. Let me go back to the main topic—me.

Near the end of my second posting in Washington (about a year before WCAR), a few cables about it crossed my computer screen. They carried updates and instructed Israel's embassies to approach certain parties, such as local governments and Jewish communities, and ask for their help to try to mitigate the impending Israel bashing. I skimmed the cables, maybe discussed the issue with one or two of my professional contacts, saw press reports on Israel's hesitation about participating. That was all.

I spent the last seven weeks of 2000 in Jerusalem preparing for my job as Israel's ambassador to South Africa. They included a meeting with the deputy director general (DDG) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who was responsible for international organizations, a professional area in which I had negligible experience. This is what DDG told me about WCAR: "As the current chair of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), South Africa will play a leading role at the conference." South Africa was indeed the chair of NAM. As conference host, it would also chair it. Not one word was said about that.

Nor was anything said about administration. Unlike some other foreign ministries, Israel does not have a special department to handle conferences. The task usually falls to the local embassy, guided by the head office in Jerusalem. Rooms? Cars? Office equipment? Nothing was said. DDG was diligent, a good man. But the upcoming gathering would be unprecedented in its challenges, dimensions, and impact. It would require extraordinary organizational abilities and outstanding leadership skills.

E, my deputy in Pretoria, had worked in DDG's department back in Israel, and he had the professional background that I lacked. True, the Foreign Ministry, which needs personnel for its missions, had declined to send him abroad for ten years previously, but I was determined to make it work (with the bonus of proving everyone else wrong). However, before we left for Durban, he was back home, just a year after coming to South Africa. Here is one example of why.

Around March 2001, the South African Foreign Ministry invited all embassies to the first in a series of briefings on Durban. E went, returned, and reported nothing, not to me orally and not to the head office in writing. When I asked about accommodations, he answered that hotel rooms for the visiting delegations will be allocated by the South African Foreign Ministry.

A few weeks later he couldn't go to one briefing. I went and learned that he was only partially right. The ministry was indeed involved in accommodations, as in all other organizational aspects. However, other than a basic number—I think seven rooms per delegation—all the reservations had to be made through a commercial company.

In hindsight, that should have been obvious: No ministry can juggle thousands of rooms in hundreds of hostelries. But lacking relevant experience and receiving no guidance, how could I recognize that? Then I knew I had no choice but to take charge.

Rooms were a precious commodity in Durban. Some delegations were sentenced to a thirty-mile commute each way. Every few days, Israel's delegation grew. If memory serves, we

also helped Israel-based volunteer organizations find places to stay. I cabled Jerusalem to say that finding rooms was hard, but giving up any extras would be easy, so I begged for an overestimate. I spoke to the editor of *Business Day*, a business newspaper, and faxed to the head office his front-page story on the frustration of "diplomats in Pretoria" about the hotel situation. The reply was, "It is recommended to reserve rooms as needed, without putting down a deposit."

This begs a question: Why did the ambassador handle rooms? Was there no administrative officer? A, near retirement, began his career in the ministry as a driver. With limited English, he usually undertook routine tasks in which he felt confident. For almost everything else, he relied on his competent local assistant, who—I discovered this when it was too late to stop without losing the cost of her ticket and causing much disappointment and resentment—he permitted to take a three-week vacation just before WCAR, to attend her boyfriend's brother's wedding in Israel.

A once canceled our hotel reservations. When Israel's pendulum of indecision swung toward staying away from WCAR, he decided against wasting taxpayer money on expensive rooms that were likely to remain empty. I heard of A's thrift late on a Friday afternoon. The Jewish Sabbath was fast upon us, if not already there. From the bath, I called someone in the South African Foreign Ministry and begged him to halt our impending homelessness.

Then, still bathing for the holy day of rest and calm and tranquility, I phoned Jerusalem and delivered my unholy opinion to the official who had approved A's initiative. He was an assistant to Deputy Foreign Minister Michael Melchior. Rabbi Melchior was responsible for the political aspects of WCAR, but he and his staff had nothing to do with its administration. The assistants repeated "but A told me . . . " did not, so to speak, hold water.

We also needed somewhere to meet. The Durban Jewish Club, an easy walk from the International Convention Center, seemed perfect. It had rooms in many sizes to answer different needs and a kosher cafeteria for inexpensive meals. Yehuda, the efficient executive director of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBOD), coordinated its use with the wealthy Durban community, the embassy, and international Jewish organizations. What could be bad?

Only this: Some in the Durban Jewish community treated it as a normal business transaction. While Israel and its friends around the world prepared for the impending onslaught, the embassy and SAJBOD were charged market rates for a Jewish facility that was otherwise in little use, and we paid more for every extra.

In a memory that still rankles, we once failed to make payments on schedule, and we were threatened that the complex would be rented to someone else. I wonder who? The Iranian delegation, fresh from writing hateful draft language? Arafat's people, who were finessing the suicide bomber into a choice weapon? Maybe the ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionist delegation that appears regularly at Israel hate fests, to be embraced by our worst detractors? We paid—and how we paid.

I made my feelings known, albeit not intentionally. We invited Jews whom we knew of at WCAR—in other delegations and in the press, as well as representatives of Jewish organizations—to a Friday night dinner. The demonstration described in the previous chapter had marched a few hours earlier; we were not happy. After distributing the evening's required blessings among South African Jews, including from Durban, I welcomed the guests, told them that I hoped we could all relax in informal surroundings, and that comments would be limited to DDG, head of

the Israeli delegation.

However, an American member of Congress took the floor. He was followed by a British lord. The local rabbi then approached me and suggested that his boss, the head of the Durban community, should welcome the guests. I answered that this would open a floodgate of speeches. He muttered, “Who do you think you are?” I told him, rather too loudly, who I thought I was, and I also expressed my uncensored opinion about a penny-pinching landlord who expects to cohost his tenant’s party.

Incredibly, this was my only major tantrum during WCAR, but there was one before. In June or July, Jerusalem realized that the technicalities were too much for DDG and me to handle between us. U, a mid-level administrator in the Foreign Ministry, was tasked to take over. His family had already made vacation plans for the summer holidays, and he stuck to them.

U arrived in South Africa a week or two before WCAR. He stopped in Pretoria, spent some days in Durban, returned to the embassy, and announced, “My impression is that everything is in order.” Wow! “You lay on the beach instead of rushing here while I slaved! And then you have the audacity to grade me? You think I did your job adequately, do you? Will you recommend me as a conference administrator?” I apologized. My content was right; the tone was not.

Other than those two episodes and a few smallish outbursts about a dead cell phone battery, I recall no loss of self-control. All things considered, I think that was quite impressive.

The conference technicalities were in place, but one vital piece was still missing. Would Israel attend? If so, who would head our delegation? Jerusalem and Washington coordinated. Participation and its level (the Foreign Minister? his deputy? an official?) would be decided jointly.

Despite the uncertainty, on Monday, August 27, I drove three hundred miles from Pretoria to Durban. WCAR would begin on Friday, but I wanted to be there for the Non-Governmental Organizations’ Forum. Eight thousand delegates from three thousand NGOs gathered to advocate for hundreds of agendas. Their issues were all but ignored.

The prevailing anti-Israel rhetoric was so harsh that NGOs such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which often criticize Israel, did not support the declaration adopted by the Forum. WCAR also deviated from the practice common at UN conferences, and it did not endorse the NGO Forum’s Declaration. The text accused Israel of targeting refugees, women, and children in its brand of ethnic cleansing, described our actions as “genocide,” and called to sever all ties with Israel. NGOs such as the World Union of Jewish Students (WUJS) suffered through the proceedings. Their daily reports were a warning of things to come.

Finally, America and Israel decided to attend. DDG would lead us. This level of representation showed dissatisfaction with the direction that the conference seemed to be taking. Our delegation did not arrive in time for the opening. Given earlier uncertainty about our participation, press cameras would naturally focus on the sign with my country’s name and on the person sitting behind it. For my hour in the limelight, I wore a deep purple blouse, put on lipstick, checked my hair, and smiled, just so.

My phone rang, disrupting my pose. Israel’s delegation was still on the plane; who could it be? A helpful colleague, I think American, called from his corner of the huge plenary hall. Aware of my ignorance on UN matters, he alerted me to an upcoming procedural vote. No one told me anything about a vote, but all delegations must. I asked my caller for advice and raised my hand

accordingly. A harder procedural problem would await me a few days later, after Israel left.

The opening session, during which the Israeli delegation arrived, included speeches by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki, and others. Many vilified Israel. This was more distressing to me than to some of my fellow Israeli delegates, who were accustomed to the standard rhetoric about us at international forums. That afternoon's demonstration, described a few pages back, heightened my feelings.

However, writing this more than a decade later, I am not sure what was harder for me then, what remains a worse memory: the animosity that enveloped us, or the incompetence with which we faced it.

I recall a late-night meeting during which the entire Israeli delegation waited while DDG completed a report of the day's proceedings. This is a job for a junior, but DDG did it himself. We were about a dozen competent people, professional diplomats and a few outsiders who were invited for their special skills. We all wished to be useful, but we were largely left to our own devices on how.

Take Benjamin Pogrund, a South African expatriate living in Israel. He had impeccable antiapartheid credentials as well as good connections that remained from his days as a leading journalist. His subsequent work on human rights in Israel added to his credibility on the topics at hand. At my suggestion, he was asked to join the delegation.

Given his political opinions, he refused, but changed his mind when he saw that the Tehran draft was not directed solely at the day's right-wing government of Israel, but rather it targeted Israel at large. Other than helping to write the press release about our early departure, he was not given any tasks. Like others, he contrived things to do. It was not good use of his time, contacts, skills, airline ticket, hotel room, and daily allowance.

Or me, with my ties to South Africans. True, Foreign Minister Dlamini-Zuma refused to meet with the relatively low-ranking head of our delegation, thus closing the main channel between us. Still, I thought that Israel was not wise to avoid contact with the country that chaired the conference. I was in the dark on what role South Africa was playing behind the scenes or on what we would like it to do. Relying on guesswork, common sense, and stray information, I decided what they should be told, and without instruction or authorization, I asked for meetings, and I told them.

In another private initiative, I briefed representatives of international Jewish organizations who had traveled long distances in order to help us. They milled, unguided, around the Durban Jewish Center. No one informed them about what was happening or suggested what they could do. I gathered them a few times, feigned knowledge, and gave an update. This achieved barely more than giving them a little attention and showing our appreciation. At least that.

Undirected except by the delegation's press officer, who was as ignorant on substance as the rest, some of us periodically swept the adjoining press center, giving an interview here and a briefing there, guessing our way.

On Sunday evening, the Israeli delegation called a press conference. Given the surrounding drama, the secret negotiations, the titillating headlines, we would obviously say something important. Will Israel leave? Stay? Announce a compromise text? Hundreds of eager journalists set up their equipment and came to listen.

DDG sat on the dais with some of the Israeli delegates. The first question was: Is this anti-Semitism? DDG referred it to a history professor, one of the external experts in our delegation. She gave a long, erudite explanation. It was suitable for an academic seminar, not for a

headline. An accomplished immigrant from Ethiopia sat silently. She seemed like a token black rather than living proof that Israel is not racist.

It became clear that the press conference had no focus or purpose. Journalists drifted away. A local Jewish editor watched this with me. Half sad for us, half relieved for his country, he whispered, "I am glad to see that South Africa's officeholders are not alone in their ignorance on how to work with the press."

Only the ministry's legal adviser had DDG's trust and cooperation. I begged him, "This is the worst attack on Israel in years. DDG ignores us; he takes only you to meetings and seems to trust you and share with you. You are equally senior. Do something, please; make him distribute tasks and share knowledge; he cannot do this alone." If the legal adviser did anything, there was no evidence thereof.

Almost half the conference was over. There was no progress on the draft language about Israel. On Monday afternoon, the Americans and the Israelis were instructed by our respective capitals to leave. To show that they were not staying any longer than necessary, my Israeli colleagues took an immediate but circuitous route back home, via Cape Town and London.

I had to stay in Durban for three more nights. A Dutch couple who had saved Jews during the Holocaust later moved to South Africa. Their adult children (one lived in Durban) would receive a certificate recognizing their deceased parents as "Righteous Among the Nations." As serious world focus on racism began after the Holocaust, I thought that WCAR would provide a suitable background for a ceremony. Months earlier, I had randomly chosen Wednesday evening, and I had to explain to colleagues who saw me breakfasting at the Hilton why, despite having left, I was still there.

On Thursday morning I was ready to leave Durban behind me. A colleague, maybe the one who had alerted me to the vote at the opening session, called and asked, "Have you withdrawn?" Of course we had; everyone knew that! He insisted, "Did you inform the conference secretariat?" Just as arriving is not enough and participants must show documents in order to be accredited, so a press release is not a departure. He explained that if an acceptable formula on Israel were not found, other democratic countries will leave before the conference ended. The remaining countries would undoubtedly adopt the harsh draft unanimously. If Israel does not withdraw, it will become part of an anti-Israel consensus.

Ten days after leaving Pretoria, I wanted nothing more than to go home. Instead, I spent hours searching for DDG and more time persuading him that legally we were still at WCAR. At noon on Thursday, a fax from Foreign Minister Peres came and announced our withdrawal. I was free to leave Durban.

Back in my office in Pretoria on Friday, I requested to meet with South Africa's President Mbeki as soon as possible. I wanted to alert him that Durban's name would forever be associated with the unprecedented demonization of Israel, and it would be tied to growing Jewish concerns about an increase in anti-Semitism. This would cause discomfort to the country's important Jewish community and would harm South Africa's image. I might also add that WCAR was bad for the future of multilateral diplomacy, which South Africa supports.

WCAR continued into the weekend. A formula was found that didn't go beyond the familiar level of criticism, such as noting the plight of the Palestinian people. Israel could tolerate that. But this did not erase the preceding week, or eliminate the need to meet with the president.

On Monday, September 10, someone from the South African Foreign Ministry called to ask

the purpose of the meeting with the president. In other words, why was I circumventing the minister? Answering diplomatically, I refrained from mentioning her role in turning WCAR into what it became.

My request to meet the president faded the following day, 9/11. The theory that the attacks were an impromptu reaction to WCAR was quite popular in South Africa. I should have overcome my disgust and bought one of the quickly produced T-shirts that declared: “Osama, we are with you.”

Africa had never before hosted anything as big as WCAR. Credit goes to Pretoria. But success is not only judged on technicalities, and the South African government eventually understood that WCAR had not been perfect. Six months later, in March 2002, Deputy Foreign Minister Aziz Pahad addressed a meeting of the South African Zionist Federation. His words do not quite admit failure, but do include an apology:

> I wish to make it unequivocally clear that the South African Government recognises that part of that component was hi-jacked and used by some with an anti-Israeli agenda to turn it into an anti-Semitic event. Recognition of this, however, was precisely the reason for the refusal of the world’s governments at that Conference to accept the final statement of NGO proceedings into the final document of the Conference. Additionally, the South African Government as Chair, worked hard to ensure an acceptable and honourable outcome of the final document which avoided singling out Israel for exclusive criticism in regard to the current crisis in the Middle East.

If so, it is to be regretted that this hard South African work was not seen earlier, during the advance preparations or nearer to the beginning of WCAR. A conference is not remembered only by the final text. Process counts, and it was shameful.

A year later, South Africa hosted another big UN conference. It met in Johannesburg to discuss sustainable development. The UN ensured a decent draft before the conference began, and South Africa kept demonstrations under control. Were there to be another agenda hijacking, ignoring everything except how awful Israel is, and who would come again? As for Israel, an official in Jerusalem coordinated technicalities, and Daniel, my excellent new deputy, pulled it all together.

I wonder: If we had prepared better for Durban and functioned there more efficiently, might some of the disaster have been averted? Should we have gone at all? If yes, was our low representation useful in making clear our disapproval? Was it counterproductive, stunting our ability to operate? Should Israel have boycotted entirely? Once there, should we have left? Battled it out? I doubt that there are clear answers. I also doubt that anyone in Israel later analyzed seriously what happened before and during WCAR, or asked if, other than on technicalities, we could have acted differently.

In my apartment in Jerusalem, I have some souvenirs from my postings. Latvian ceramics, carved animals from Africa, and fake Tiffany lamps from America can be bought by any tourist. Only one item is proof and product of my career. My WCAR delegate card hangs above the toilet bowl in the guest bathroom.

Chapter 31
The Paper Trail
Like a Trip through a Cemetery

From early December, holiday cards began to arrive.

I use "holiday" deliberately, rather than Christmas and New Year. Many of my professional contacts in South Africa were Muslims, there were Buddhists and Hindus, the Speaker of Parliament was Zoroastrian, and each faith had its own distinct calendar. Even in America and in the Baltics, where almost all of my non-Jewish interlocutors were Christian, I felt silly sending greeting cards that called that season "New Year," which we Jews mark three or four months earlier.

I would regularly recommend to my ministry in Jerusalem that the text should be replaced with a neutral "Holiday Wishes" or an encompassing "Season's Greetings." This was not the only one of my very helpful suggestions to be ignored by headquarters back home, nor was it the most important. . . .

A mass of cards displayed behind my desk was as decorative as it was meaningless. Each reflected someone's mailing list and indicated that I had sent one, before or after, to the officeholder whose reciprocal offering was sent to me. Sometimes—say an ambassador from a country that has no relations with Israel told staff to "send all ambassadors a card"—one arrived by mistake. Better not attribute undue importance ("In a tentative move toward normalization, the local representative of North Korea sent me a personal card") to such arrivals.

Early in my career, I wrote a few personal words in each card before it was sent. After seeing what others did, I only added my name to the printed text. Given how little thought went into that scrawl, an automatic signature machine would have done as well.

When I was a diplomat, millions of pieces of this colorful prettiness crisscrossed world capitals each year, creating volumes of work for secretaries and weighing down seasonal postal bags and their carriers. I wonder: Have they been replaced by electronic greetings? Elaborate, with layers of fancy paper and assorted glitter, in January the cards were thrown out and forgotten. Their short public life was glamorous, but far less significant than that of their humble cousins, the visiting cards.

Unlike in the past—we see this in films—when rectangular pieces of cardboard were delivered by gloved servants of the elite, indicating a desire to visit or to call (hence their name, visiting cards or calling cards), now cards cost almost nothing to print, and anyone can have them. "Do you have a card? Here, let me give you mine" is a ritual of sorts. It may follow the introductory handshake, or take place before parting, and in some societies it is accompanied by a bow.

Thousands of cards, a personal and professional archive, joined piles of unsorted photographs in triggering memories for writing this. Plastic-encased, pocket-size calendars, holding records of work and play, meetings and haircuts, also helped. As each year ends, I place one more diary into a box, where they lie with dead passports. Viewed together, these small documents tell my story. Once upon a time, there was a diplomat . . .

. . . who has many cards from Lithuanian archives. Not because that country has more than

others, but because my work touched historical issues, engaging me with keepers of records. Or, a major challenge in South Africa was public opinion. Talking to politicians can elicit slow change, but the press can be a vehicle for quick (if short-lived) success. That explains why I have many cards of journalists.

Such insights are not only the stuff of nostalgia. Regular reviews of accumulated cards served to remind me of neglected people or to point to issues needing attention. Sifting through them was like having a staff meeting with myself, when I could evaluate past use of my time and determine priorities for the future. Lots of cards from business, few from academia? Must act to remedy that. Not enough records of clergy? Time to act.

My cards reflect a technological revolution. My own first card was printed in 1985. It shows the address of the embassy in Washington and has numbers for phone (mine) and fax (a general embassy number, serving dozens of workers). Later, the growing use of cell phones becomes evident, followed by emails and websites. My career ended before the onset of social networks.

Current cards have come a long way from those cinematic cards, with just a name, possibly a title. Then as now, the shorter the title, the more important the person. Everyone knows what is meant by The Queen or The Minister. “Assistant to the First Deputy Undersecretary” is a mouthful, and can anyone who doesn’t work in the same place be sure how much, or how little, that signifies?

And the material. It is interesting to see who introduces himself on plain paper and who uses the thick-grained variety; if the text is printed or embossed. Visible expenditure does not necessarily indicate wealth. In Riga, the Belarusian Ambassador’s Volvo had leather seats, whereas the Swede, whose country produces them, did not. Luxury may reflect little beyond the will to impress.

As for sloppiness: On official embassy paper that welcomed me to Pretoria, the English lettering on the left is large and slanted. The Hebrew on the right, already shorter for having fewer vowels, uses upright, small letters. As a result, the Hebrew “Embassy of Israel, Pretoria” has about half the presence of the English. The Israeli state emblem is set at approximately one-third from the right. One can but guess the impression that letters typed on this paper made on their recipients.

When a digit is added by hand to a telephone number, the addition may indicate an upgrade in the country’s phone system. But when cell numbers appear in ink or pencil, titles change, and errors are manually corrected, it is better to say one doesn’t have a card than to provide an improvised mess. It is disrespectful to the recipient, and it also shows a lack of self-respect.

Who uses the state emblem? Can it be only a minister, an ambassador, or their entire staff? Is there a rule? Does each officeholder decide alone what to display? I never saw Israeli instructions about color for cards and other paper. Blue on white for invitations? Which blue? Black on white? Gold? Each mission chooses. When different people in one embassy (or ministry or parliament) provide different data on their cards, or have assorted designs and formats, does that indicate lack of order? The encouragement of self-expression?

The most orderly cards in my files belong to South African parliamentarians from the ruling faction, the African National Congress (ANC). A stylized depiction of Parliament’s building runs along the bottom of each card. It is done in the national flag’s colors, which combine the apartheid-era blue, red, and white with the ANC’s black, green, and gold. On the top left of each

card is the ANC emblem. Under it are contact details of the member's office in Parliament. Top right shows South Africa's flag. Details of the member's constituency office are under it. The member's name appears in large print between those emblems, of party and country. Committee assignments are listed under the name. They are typed over a pale gray emblem of South Africa's Parliament. The graphics are pleasing; the information is clear. I wonder if the uniformity is a relic from the ANC's days as an underground movement or a reflection of contemporary efficiency.

More interesting than imposed order is how people choose to represent themselves. Two titles are equally prominent on a card I have from Latvia: chairman of the country's senior judicial court and vice president of its tennis association. Some put only their own language on a card, others use the local language, and some have both. When working abroad, I never had Hebrew. Was that practical, or did I lack national pride? Could an Israeli-Arab diplomat then use Arabic, Israel's second official language, and omit Hebrew? When a leader of the Estonian Jewish community added German to Estonian, did he hope for that country's financial assistance? Express how he saw relative power in Europe? Was it just a personal preference, dating to his prewar schooling? Like mysterious markings on graves, paper tombstones do not always reveal everything.

Look for unusual spelling; it often tells a story. In Hungarian, the letter *s* is like sugar. A Hungarian diplomat named Sandor (Alexander) will not spell it Shandor for the convenience of foreigners. But émigrés or their offspring might replace the original Rosenstein with a phonetic Rozenshtein, and so tell of their effort to integrate into their new country.

The spelling of my name also tells a story, but because I replaced an unusual spelling with the normative form, it elicits no questions. For decades, Israel obliged its emissaries to replace designations adopted in the Diaspora with Hebrew family names—what people were called before and how they chose the new name are common topics of conversations. The regulation was dropped when our leaders understood that a salad of ethnic identities will do as well as an unidentifiable artificial puree. Several of my contemporaries returned to their original names when the rules changed.

Thanks to Theodore Herzl's historical role in Israel's establishment, I was not expected to change my family name, with its German roots. For generations, we spelled it Herczl. Before getting my first diplomatic passport, I decided that the mysterious *c* is unnecessary. How then shall I spell my family name? The most phonetically correct would be variations on Hertzl or Hertsel, but I decided on the shortest and most familiar option. I eliminated just one letter, and now my spelling differs from that of my family.

Guest books are another type of written record. A head of state or a minister who visits another, or a meaningful site, knows what is expected. At the designated time, the dignitary will pull a piece of paper from a pocket, ready for copying. "Words cannot do justice to my feelings during my visit to this orphanage/science center/you, my dear colleague." It may seem odd to define emotions in advance, but not everyone can produce the right formula spontaneously. As the guest departs, hosts will examine the text, maybe share it with the press. So, what did the President of Lithuania write in the guest book of Yad Vashem, Jerusalem's Holocaust Museum? Was it contrite enough?

Those are not the same as guest books that some diplomats supply at the end of every dinner party, sometimes even after receptions. I did it once or twice, and then, realizing how the demand annoyed me, stopped subjecting my guests. Thank you for your kind hospitality,

your home is lovely, the company was wonderful, the food was excellent. How often do I need to tell you that? You want a record? Keep the guest list, or even photograph guests as they arrive. But please, don't expect me to inscribe creative new superlatives every time you feed me. Now, I almost regret stopping the practice—guest books would be nice to look at sometimes, and remember.

That is not the only record of which I deprived myself. In September 1988, my posting as the junior congressional liaison officer in the Israeli Embassy in Washington ended. I carefully placed piles of unsorted documents into the container that returned my personal belongings to Israel, planning to organize them soon, very soon. They included outdated insurance policies, paid medical bills, and operating manuals for long-forgotten electric appliances.

At the same time, determined to eliminate unnecessary clutter, I threw out the cards I had accumulated in three years of work. Although they could have fitted easily into any of a dozen unused handbags that have moved with me across the continents and over the decades, that act of neatness made sense at the time. I was sure that I would not need the cards again; why keep them? Ten years later I returned to Washington and was again handling the embassy's relations with Congress. I was more senior that second time, and many of my earlier acquaintances were no longer there. But a partial contact list is better than none, and none it was.

Even without going back to the same capital, trashing them was dumb. Looking at old cards is like walking through a cemetery. It tells stories of people and of periods, challenges and actions. At least, like inscriptions on tombstones that hint at more than they tell (Why is she buried with her sister and not with her husband? What is this abbreviation? What is the significance of the particular biblical verse that is engraved?), it asks questions. Together with the discarded December holiday cards from all my postings, that record of a Washingtonian part of my professional life became part of a landfill.

It is wise to write a few words on the back of a card after each meeting. What was discussed, an impression, even where and when we met—all are better than nothing. Unfortunately, as with the photos I accumulated over the years, which triggered the writing of this book, all I have on the cards is—nothing. I must rely only on memory, and some names remain a mystery to me. A Swiss businessman gave me a card with a small photo. That would have been expensive then, maybe vain, but is a good way to help remind, and it would be cheap now.

But let me be honest. If I had a better record of where and when I met whom and what we discussed, if I knew exactly who came to dinner when and who they sat next to, or who sent me a sparkling card in December, then those facts would ground me in details that would overtake my impressions and leave little place for my feelings. And this book would be completely different.

Chapter 32
Between Home and Abroad

It's a Life! It's a Job! No, It's Diplomacy!

Whenever I returned home to Israel—for vacation or after a posting—I performed a private ritual. I bought a falafel, swamped it in tahini sauce, and let the overflowing pita drip as I walked and ate.

The messy combination of chewing and moving was a small act of defiance against my regimented life as a diplomat abroad. It expressed the gaps between my two lives, my here and my there, the zigzag in work, status, image, responsibilities, standard of living. It came to symbolize the difference in everything, even the weather.

One day you represent a state, you are sought and quoted; the next day you wait in line in the ministry cafeteria back home. With access to opinion makers and staff to follow instructions, even the most junior diplomat can be forgiven for seeing an important person in the mirror. In Washington, this novice spoke to American lawmakers, among the most influential people in the world. When I met Nelson Mandela and told him I was a little nervous, he quipped, "But why? You are an ambassador, and I am a mere pensioner!"

Doors in politics, academia, business, and culture open with ease. Then you return, and hint for invitations to receptions because you worry that if you are not seen where it matters, you will be forgotten. The grand ambassador abroad has become just another employee in yet another ministry at home.

And although most middle-class Israelis lead fairly comfortable lives, returning home often means a drop in living standards. This applies especially to heads of missions with their many conveniences, and to those who served where household help is cheap. No wonder that some hark back and yearn to go abroad again, as soon as possible. Oh, when I was in Riga, things were so different!

It may seem obvious, but should be noted: Diplomacy is different from other ways of making a living, which also include long stints abroad. It is not an academic sabbatical in a foreign country that ends before one can say Fulbright Fellow, or a medical specialization that lasts a few years but happens only once or twice in a career. True, some employees of international companies and news organizations find themselves moving between countries, languages, and cultures for one decade and then another, but few commit themselves at the outset to such extended roving—rather, circumstances make it happen. Moreover, whereas engineers remain engineers wherever work takes them and continue to use the same equipment, for diplomats, a new location changes everything. The employer is constant, and the pension continues to accumulate, but that's about all.

Life and work in Washington, where everything but the weather was comfortable and support for Israel was pervasive, were nothing like living and working with translation in somber post-Soviet Riga or in crime-ridden, beautiful, critical South Africa. Variety is a big part of diplomacy's attraction and also one of its biggest challenges.

Facing them without family and friends was hard. I was loneliest at the beginning of postings, when everything was new and overwhelming. But being solo is not all bad—one doesn't disrupt the lives of others. A spouse may be part of the initial decision to choose a

diplomatic career, but usually children are literally born into the nomadic life, where nothing—not friends, not school, not home, not language—is permanent. The large shadow of a known end looms over everything.

I was surprised to discover that a diplomatic career also claims a price back at home. A visit to the bank, a little shopping, a day or two in the office, and seeing my closest people all took time and energy during my short visits to Israel. Little remained for the second circle, those who were not so close. Relationships dissolve without deliberate upkeep. In the normal course of events, new ones replace them. When posted abroad, only the first half of that turnover happened. Returning to Israel, I found a diminished pool of less intimate but still important ties. A conscious effort is required to re-create that circle. Or knowing that it will again be temporary, one may decide to live without.

Of course, roving has benefits. Languages learned on the way are an asset. My parents taught Hebrew in South Africa, enabling me to write this in English. Having grown up alternately between two countries and two societies opened my mind and personality in many ways.

But feeling comfortable everywhere means never being fully at home anywhere. Imagine what living in three or four countries before graduating from high school does to the psyche of a diplomatic child, and what suspending half of a couple's career for the sake of the other half may do to a spouse, or to a marriage. The alternative, to serve alone and live apart, also has consequences.

Adults that diplomats are, we are also someone's child. As we mature, so do our parents. I was three months into my first posting in Washington when my father, only sixty-one, was suddenly taken very ill. I flew home immediately. My new American bank account did not have enough money for the ticket; my check bounced. I remained at his bedside for three weeks, until his doctor said he was out of danger, but I had not accumulated enough vacation days in America; my pay was docked.

Had I been living in Jerusalem at the time, urgent transportation to my father's bedside would have been by taxi rather than by plane, and I could have gone back to work partially within a few days. My mother and two sisters remained in Jerusalem; I can but imagine how hard it must be for an only child who is serving abroad to leave a sick or elderly parent.

A lesser-known source of stress and tension sits on the cusp between the personal and the professional. It results from the limited pool of personnel moving between home and abroad. Thus, in 1988, I completed my job as junior congressional liaison in the embassy in Washington and traded desks with the woman who followed Congress in the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem. It was human for us both to observe very carefully how each performed in the other's recent position.

Or we may replace someone we know well, for better or worse, from a period of working together. Children learning at schools where mothers teach, interacting as neighbors (several colleagues in Washington lived in what was known as "the kibbutz"), professional rivalry, personal dislikes, the spouse of one diplomat working as the secretary of the other—these layered relationships are almost incestuous, with competition for the next post as an added complication.

A chasm lies between "they" and "we." "It has been ten days since we asked something; we sent a reminder already; what is taking them so long? Don't they understand how much we need it? What do they do all day, anyway?" can be seen from the other side as "It has only been ten days; it is a trivial question; surely they must know how much urgent stuff we have to do;

why do they nag?" The process of turning into "we" is gradual. You know that you are well settled wherever you are, here or there, when you stop looking through your former eyes and identify fully with your current position.

If all that seems irrelevant, do the math. Postings last about four years. One in four diplomats goes out annually; one in four returns. Half the diplomats move each year—think of their adjustments. At the same time, the static half must open to new colleagues, new relationships, new office dynamics. True, workers are hired and fired and promoted and sidelined everywhere. In foreign services, it is like perpetual tectonic motion.

Not only work and colleagues demand adjustment. Diplomats must adapt to neighborhoods, foods, smells, even to weather. During three years in Riga, snow was a permanent feature in my life for months at a time, affecting not only clothing but also the visual environment—no green, some white, and a lot of dirty slush, filtered through limited winter light. Then almost tangible relief as spring creeps in, its blossoming ease extending into summer, with its unending days.

We hardly have weather here in Israel. It gets hot or it rains, but we have nothing drastic like the summer thunderstorms in Washington and in Pretoria, which come from nowhere to provide immediate relief from the heat. Weather—varying and extreme—was a new experience for me.

Every few years, snow dribbles from the Jerusalem sky. It usually melts on reaching the ground, but that is enough to give me a thrilling rush of nostalgia. I knew it would be cold in Riga, but had no idea that the atmosphere would envelop me, not just body but soul, too. These cycles—they gradually become part of you, blood flows to the rhythm of the seasons, the heart beats with the landscape.

Physical time is complemented by local religious and national cycles that only personal experience can instill, such as sensing when matters will begin to slow before holidays, or understanding when a legislative process will clarify. There are unwritten rules that are somehow understood. For example, in some countries, phoning professional contacts after working hours and on weekends is acceptable. Elsewhere, only an emergency allows such an intrusion.

Adjusting to driving on a different side of the road (how long it took me to approach the correct car door in South Africa!) is a process, as is finding a suitable doctor and a shop that sells shoes for narrow feet. Even the taste of butter varies, depending on what local cows eat. Israelis yearn for soup nuts, small squares of baked or fried mixture of flour, oil, and food coloring, crisp as they hit the hot wetness and soggy a second later. Some miss our type of cottage cheese; others ask guests from home to bring supplies of a particular brand of instant coffee. These little things make for a sense of comfort; their absence creates a lacuna.

Adjustments are technical and emotional and mental. By the time you find someone who cuts your hair just so, don't mind the taste of the water, and understand local humor, it is time to move on, to transfer to another posting, a new adaptation. It is a blessing to feel good in all places, sad to leave a small piece of you in each, a challenge to remain just you.

All this exacts a toll from the people who do it, and from their families. It is not a cheap system. Is the effort still necessary? Maybe diplomats have become redundant?

Ya'acov, a historian friend, asked me, "Say I knew the language of a country, spent time reading its books and blogs and followed its press and arts, wouldn't I know as much as any of you; couldn't I be as effective?" I found the answer that afternoon. I met Mari-Ann, a first time

visitor from Estonia, in a Jerusalem hotel lobby. Widely traveled and highly informed, she was blind to information that is clear to any local.

Staff at the hotel's reception desk included a local Arab, an immigrant from the Soviet Union, and a veteran Israeli. Their name tags revealed their identity; their accents would tell me the same. I could guess their relations, what they joke about, what they avoid in conversation. My Estonian friend did not have tools to understand anything about them, beyond their age and gender. She recognized that a young man was a soldier, while his beret told me a lot about him. Were the young man and woman sitting quietly in the corner writing a paper for a university? Preparing for a trip abroad? No, they were an ultra-Orthodox couple, on a date, meeting in a public space that ensures modest conduct and is quiet enough to talk.

To understand all that, and other signs I interpreted for her, Mari-Ann would have to live here or at least visit very often. Immersion heightens sensitivity and allows understanding, which enables action.

Without firsthand knowledge, it would be almost impossible to assess the best way to approach a particular politician. Only a person embedded in both societies can know which activity from one country will make the best impression in the other and also what is best avoided. The remote diplomat could not lobby or negotiate. Calling a personal favor to solve a problem, visiting prisoners, anything requiring a human touch—all those would be impossible.

Diplomacy is an odd occupation with ingrained contradictions. Straddling the gap between principle and expediency is a challenge. A diplomat must neutralize her personal thoughts and feelings, yet in order to be effective, she must seem sincere. Much of the work is rigid, but it opens fascinating vistas and makes for personal growth. To represent one country successfully in another, a diplomat must be open to nuances of life abroad while remaining rooted at home. A diplomat moves between home and abroad, shuttles from having status to living an ordinary life, swings from novelty to routine and back again. It is a life divided between two selves, person and persona.

Finally, dictated by the calendar or—as in my case—by choice, after decades of moving and investing and trying and learning and enjoying (or not too much), it is over. What now?

Many people derive a sense of identity from what they do. "I am a teacher" (or gardener or doctor) is different from "I was a teacher" (or gardener or doctor). When their defining activity changes, who are they? In diplomacy, a profession with unusual prestige, the new vacuum may be more marked than in others. Lacking outside recognition, some are bereft of their familiar core, and feel lost.

Other pensioners enjoy the freedom, maybe volunteer, revive a neglected hobby or find a new one. Some join think tanks or look for positions where the title helps, such as fund-raising for an organization with international ties. There are those who build on recent professional contacts to pursue business interests. Or, finally able to express themselves freely on the issues of the day, they aim for a political career.

Scattered among the types of retired diplomats are those who are convinced that their particular experience is uniquely fascinating and must be shared. So they decide to write a book.

About the Author

Tova Herzl is a retired Israeli diplomat. She began her diplomatic career in 1983. Her postings included three years as Israel's first ambassador to the recently independent Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and two stints as congressional liaison in Israel's embassy in Washington, D.C. She held assorted positions in Jerusalem, among them in the foreign minister's bureau and in the president's office. In 2003, after three years as her country's ambassador to South Africa, she took early retirement. She was born in Beersheva in 1952 and lives in Jerusalem.