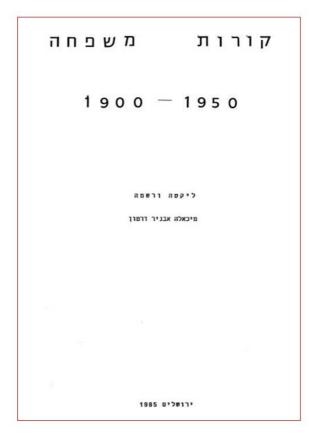
A Family Story

By

Michaela Avnir-Darmon

Jerusalem, 1985

Chapter 10: Munich - The Bavarian Exile With Prologue, Background and Epilogue



Translated from the Hebrew - with the addition of a Prologue, Background and an Epilogue by Hanan and Maya Yinnon Haifa, Israel, November 2017

Prologue

The following is a translation of chapter 10 - "Munich - The Bavarian Exile" - of the Life Story of Michaela Avnir-Darmon, born in Warsaw in 1925 as Michaela Hildebrand and died in Jerusalem in 2017. Michaela's story is typical of the life stories of those few European Jews who managed to survive the holocaust and lived to see the end of World War 2 and the birth of the State of Israel. Practically all the survival stories of those people are replete with "miracles" – lucky coincidents that rescued them from death and allowed them to survive yet another day.

Michaela wrote her story in 1985. The next to last chapter describes her stay in Munich together with her husband Israel Steingarten, and later the birth of their first born son – David. David was born in 1947 in the St. Ottilien monastery temporary post-war hospital, west of Munich. That chapter translation is given below for the sake of those who want to know more about Jewish life in Munich after the war, when it served as a huge temporary home for tens of thousands of Jewish holocaust survivors on their way to the land of Israel or to other locations.

Background

The end of the war found Michaela in Uzbekistan to where she and her parents had fled from Poland and where they lived for much of the war. The war had ended in mid-1945 but news about possibilities of repatriation of the refugees reached them only towards the end of 1945. Early in 1946 the Russian authorities began registering the refugees from Romania, Lithuania and central Poland. In April and May 1946 the refugees were packed on trains and sent back west. Together with other refugees from Poland, Michaela and her parents boarded a freight train which the Russians converted to passenger train, complete with sleeping arrangements.

As they reached Polish soil the Jewish refugees encountered brutal hostility from the Poles. They were not happy to see the Jews coming back to Poland. However, the returning Jews were sent to Silesia in the west of Poland. Silesia was practically empty as the German population was sent or escaped back to Germany following the annexation of that region to Poland after the war. Whole cities and towns were empty and the Polish government planned to rematriate the refugees in that area

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Michaela's father, Matityahu (Max) Hildebrand, decided not to continue to Silesia and the family got off the train in Lodz where Matityahu had commercial connections. The family settled in Lodz and Michaela even found work there, but the hostility of the local population towards the Jews convinced her that she should not stay there.



Michaela around 1945-46

Originally Matityahu objected to Michaela's wish to leave Poland. She meant to find a way out of Poland and immigrate to where she felt her true home was – the land of Israel. As time went by, Matityahu also realized that the Jews were not welcome in Poland and eventually he agreed to Michaela's departure. In August 1946 Michaela left Lodz in one of the trains going west together with a distant cousin who also survived somehow the war as a partisan in the forests of Poland.

On the way they were deeply impressed by the huge migration waves that swept Europe at that time. Entire communities were moving in all directions as though Europe has undergone a huge population earthquake. People were intoxicated by their newly found freedom. Speaking a thousand languages and eager to find shelter and some warm food, they tried to reach their homes, the place where they felt they belonged. This feeling penetrated also Michaela's soul. She longed to find a place where she would belong.

However, crossing the border between Poland and Germany was not easy. An organization was founded to help the Jews leave Poland and immigrate to the land of Israel. The organization was named "Habricha" – the Escape. Originally it was conceived by Polish Jews even before the war ended, but later it was organized and funded by the "Hagana", the military defense organization founded in the land of Israel to protect the local Jewish population from Arab aggression.

Habricha organized small groups of Jews near the western border of Poland (and other countries) preparing them for the dangerous border crossing. The groups were organized in the kibbutz format. The kibbutz is an Israeli invented form of communal life. The kibbutz groups in Poland were self sustained with sleeping quarters, a kitchen and, most importantly, the ability to defend themselves against the hostile Polish population with arms smuggled by messengers of the Hagana.

Michaela and her cousin joined such a kibbutz in a small town called Walbrzych near the southeastern Polish border. There she first laid her eyes on a kibbutz member, Israel Steingarten, her future husband. Most of the kibbutz members were males – men who were partisans or had hidden themselves in various ways during the German occupation of Poland. Out of 35 members there were only 5 women and they were naturally assigned to housekeeping jobs. Michaela was chosen to be the kibbutz cook although she had no cooking experience whatsoever.



Members of the kibbutz in Walbrzych, 2-5-1946. Israel is second from right on the top row

Israel Steingarten (who later, in Israel, changed his family name to Avnir) came from a little village in present day Belarus (then in eastern Poland) called Ratno. His entire family there was murdered by Nazi death squads and by their local population supporters. He alone survived by escaping to the Ural in Russia. As a teenager in Ratno he had attended a Jewish Hebrew school, and therefore had a good command of Hebrew. He therefore organized

courses in the kibbutz for teaching the members Hebrew – the language of the country where they were heading.

Michaela and Israel became friends, and when the time came to cross the border into Germany they did that together. The Habricha agents organized the border crossing as a military operation. The refugees were given false Greek passports and were instructed not to speak a word, as, naturally, nobody spoke Greek. They crossed the border to Czechoslovakia at night walking across the Tatra mountains for the entire night.

Early in the morning they found themselves in a small border town in Allied occupied Czechoslovakia. From there the American army sent them to Bratislava. From Bratislava they were moved to Vienna where they stayed in a hospital organized by the Habricha and the Jewish Joint organization.

The flood of Jewish refugees became so intense that housing options were quickly depleted. The only available options were American army camps. The Americans were willing to help the Jews, partly because of lobbying by Jewish rabbis within that Army. Only very few British army camps were opened for the Jews. Consequently five army camps were opened for the refugees in the Salzburg area and Michaela, her cousin and Israel moved there.

In Salzburg Israel contacted an organization which had just been founded to unite young Jews and arrange their immigration to Israel. The organization included previous partisans and Jewish soldiers who had fought with Polish or Russian armies and was called Partisans,

Soldiers, Pioneers (PSP, or Pechach, T"T in Hebrew). The organization asked Israel to move to Munich and serve as the editor and publisher of the organization newsletter. He was uniquely capable of taking this job as he had excellent command of Yiddish, the language spoken by most European Jews, as well as of Hebrew. And so, Israel and Michaela found themselves in Munich. There they were registered with the city as a married couple and so Michaela found herself married.



Chapter 10: Munich - The Bavarian Exile

In the beginning of their stay in Munich, Israel and Michaela Steingarten lived in a single room allotted them next to the Pechach organization office (Maria Theresia-Str., 9, 2nd floor, Munich). They did not maintain a normal household but ate at the Pechach canteen which served also other organizations in the same building. It was not very convenient, as there was no sense of privacy. They were registered in the housing waiting list and waited to be granted an apartment. It was not to be a real apartment but a single room in another location. Luckily,

within a month a friend managed to arrange a room as a sublet in the apartment of a German couple in the north part of town in Schwabing. The couple's name was Drepler.

Munich was partly in ruins. However, some boroughs were left intact and Schwabing was one of those. It was inhabited mostly by artists: painters, sculptors, actors and the like. Munich was full of refugees of all kinds. Among them were Germans who had been evicted from the Silesia region after it was reunited with Poland. Munich accepted them and had to provide them with accommodations.

The German couple in whose apartment Israel and Michaela received a room accepted them warmly. In that winter of 1946 food was in short supply. Bread, flour and dairy products were rationed, so income from subletting a room was badly needed by most Germans. The payment received was used to buy cigarettes, coffee and food, as well as to pay for heating which is essential in the Munich winter. Michaela and Israel also badly needed food. Refugees like Israel and Michaela managed to survive only thanks to help by refugee organizations and the American army.

The room they have received was rather spacious. Originally it served as either a dining room or a guest room. Now it contained a wide bed for their use and an excellent radio. For the first time after years of wandering, Israel and Michaela enjoyed a decent dwelling.

Israel maintained a certain distance from the Drepler couple in spite of their continuous effort to be friendly. He knew that the Dreplers were members of the Nazi party, although passive members. They were among those who maintained after the war that they did not know what the SS and the SA units were doing.

Michaela's situation was more complicated. She remained at home for long hours during the day. Although the room door was closed, she could sense the presence of the Drepler woman in the house. Since Michaela had the right to use the kitchen the two women met there on a daily basis. There was a need to create an environment where the two women could work together while maintaining some distance.

The winter weather was humid and wet. Munich winters are not very comfortable – it does not snow but it is damp and foggy. The houses became damp as they were not properly heated at that time. As Israel was working long hours, Michaela stayed alone in her damp room from morning till late evening.

Israel accepted the role of the editor and publisher of the Pechach movement newsletter. The newsletter was written in Yiddish – the language that most Jewish refugees spoke and read. One can still see on the remaining copies of the newsletter the name "Israel Steingarten, publisher and editor". The newsletter was published biweekly or monthly, depending on the available means at Israel's disposal. Israel wrote most articles in the newsletter.

Israel used to receive all the newspapers and magazines published at that time in the Land of Israel (Eretz Israel), soon to become the State of Israel. Although the material arrived about a week after publication date, it gave Israel all the information he needed to report to his readers about the situation at "home". In addition he reported on Jewish life in the various refugee camps maintained by the American army. The artistic sections of the newsletter were written or translated form Hebrew or other languages entirely by Israel from a variety of sources. One can find in one of the issues a wonderful translation to Yiddish of one of the most moving poems written at that time by Natan Alterman – a prominent Israeli poet. In order to create the illusion that the newsletter was written by a staff of journalists, Israel used a variety of pseudonyms.

Israel's full name appeared on a section of the newsletter which he named "The Bavarian Exile". Here he published short stories and brief summaries reflecting his thoughts and impressions of this crucial time in the history of the Jews. It is interesting to read today those wonderful and brilliant short pieces about the realities of Jewish existence in Europe after the war and about the future of the Jews in their homeland. Being so concise and direct, these pieces are a testimony to Israel's ability to express his feelings almost like a poet.

Israel put his mind and soul in this work. He used to write all night with no time limit. Early in the morning he would ride his bicycles to the newspaper office. At times he would show up at home for a lunch break and at times he would stay late asking Michaela by phone to take the tram to the office. Their room slowly filled up with Hebrew newspapers. He would not allow Michaela to throw anything, fearing he might need some information from one of the papers.

Life took on some form of normalcy. Israel received a German press card which allowed him to enter various news-worthy events as well as theatre shows. The Germans have recovered enough to try to revive the cultural life in Munich which had been very vibrant before the war. Some German groups of actors who had survived the war managed to restore limited theatrical activities.

Michaela used the time in Munich to learn German. The Drepler house contained a very rich library. The Drepler meticulously removed from the library all the books dealing with Hitler and the Nazi party. The books that remained were mostly by German and other classic writers – all in German of course. Being left all alone in the house for days Michaela started reading these books and slowly mastered the German language. She also listened to the radio and went with Israel to the theatre. That winter of 1946-1947 Michaela gained enough fluency in German to be able to read German without any difficulty.

When Israel asked Michaela to join him for an evening at the office while he was working, the travel from home to the office was a real adventure. The city tram started operating in spite of frequent power cuts because the city conserved electricity. Michaela had to leave home at a certain time and cross a completely ruined city block to take the tram which reached Israel's office. Other people who took the same way through the ruins created a narrow foot path. The path crossed a ruined church with no roof. A cross with the figure of Jesus was loosely hanging, head down, from the ruined ceiling. The cross and the hanging Jesus was swaying in the winter winds in the open church emitting strange creaky noises.

Michaela had to walk through that church in the dark. Initially it was really frightening but as time passed she became accustomed to the eerie sounds.

Every two or three weeks Israel used to travel to refugee camps to give a series of lectures. The subject of these lectures was always the situation in the land of Israel in those crucial times just after the war, and the future of the Jewish home in that land. Israel was the best source of information as he received an endless stream of printed material from Israel. In addition he met regularly with various people who came from Israel to Europe. Michaela used to join him for these trips and that allowed her also to meet with family and friends who survived the holocaust and lived in the refugee camps.

Countless Jewish refugees flocked to Germany at that time. Some emerged from partisan life in forests, some managed to survive in ghettos and death camps and some had lived for years under false Arian identity. They all had lost their homes and, in most cases, their families. They settled in camps in Germany and tried to return to normalcy as much as the conditions allowed. More than anything they wanted to raise a family to replace the one they have lost. Women married men they knew only for a short time and became pregnant soon after. It was amazing to see how people who have just emerged from inhuman conditions could attach themselves to strangers and bring children to the world.

In the age-old Jewish tradition, the refugees started immediately to organize life in the camps. Each camp had some sort of a cultural center and a meeting room, and Israel lectured there. A large crowd used to assemble from various organizations in addition to the Pechach. Michaela sat in the crowed and watched as Israel walked to and fro on the stage with excitement. He was at that time very slim and tall, with black hair and eager eyes. He mostly spoke Yiddish, as that was the language that most refugees understood, but on occasion he spoke Hebrew. Since as a teenager he had attended a Hebrew high school in his native town, his Hebrew was very good, as though it was his mother tongue.

Israel used to participate in the meetings of the general secretariat of the Pechach movement. His contribution centered on education and dissemination of information and culture to the refugees. He seemed to be in the prime of his life. He was always in good spirit and did not discuss with Michaela neither the war, the holocaust of the Jewish nation, nor the loss of his entire family and many friends and relatives. He seemed to have repressed all these feelings and memories not wanting to dwell on the terrible past. Similar behavior patterns were common among the Jewish refugees at that time and for many years after.

Three poets were among the visitors to Israel and Michaela's house. Abraham Sutzkever who had survived the Vilnius ghetto, used to come to their house to submit for publication in Israel's newsletter chapters from a diary he wrote about life in that ghetto. A partisan poet by the name of Shmerke Kaczerginski also published his poems in the newsletter. Meir Halperin, a poet form the Rovno region used to submit lyrical poems to the newsletter. It was difficult to understand how such lyrical poems could be written so soon after the catastrophic war. It seemed that such poems were also some sort of an escape from the terrible memories.

The first surviving members of Israel's family whom they located in Munich were David and Sonya Steingarten – distant cousins. They had wandered in Europe taking roughly the same

route that Israel and Michaela took. Along the way they have heard from people that they had seen another wandering Steingarten and were hoping to meet with him. The meeting was very emotional for both sides. David and Sonya passed Bergen-Belsen as refugees on the way to Munich. David's father had lived in the land of Israel and arranged for them to immigrate to Israel even before the state was officially established.

Another highly emotional meeting was with Michaela's best friend from Warsaw – Tola Schwartz. Tola and all her family remained in Warsaw. Her father's shoe factory was located in the Warsaw Ghetto and continued to operate under the supervision of a German woman. Tola, her parents and her two brothers, Mietek and Henry, were required to work in the factory in making the shoes. As factory employees they managed to eke out a living in the ghetto until 1943 when the ghetto uprising was being planned. The Germans started liquidating the ghetto, sending to Auschwitz even factory employees. Tola's father had become ill and died 6 months earlier as there were no medical services of any kind in the ghetto. In the beginning of the uprising Tola, her mother and her two brothers were sent on a transport to the Majdanek extermination camp near Lublin.

On the way Tola's younger brother, Henry, who was 16-17 years old, jumped off the train and went back to Warsaw. He approached the German woman who managed the shoe factory and then some friends asking for food and shelter. Rumors that the Russians were approaching circulated at that time, and he hoped to be able to hide until the Russians arrive. However nobody wanted to hide him. In his misery he climbed on the roof of the shoe factory and threw himself on the pavement.

In the Majdanek camp Tola's mother went first to her death in one of the "selections". Her remaining brother, 19 years old or so, was sent to his death shortly after that. Tola was moved from the Majdanek camp together with a group of young girls to a small Polish town to work in the military industry the Germans had developed. She stayed there until the Red Army approached the region and so her life was spared.

After the removal of the German occupation, Tola recovered somewhat. Luckily she had a good friend who accompanied her from then on. The Red Army needed labor force, so after recuperation the girls were assigned to a mobile army workshop which repaired tanks and army vehicles. As the Red Army progressed the girls found themselves on German soil in late 1945.

Tola together with her friend lived in one of the refugee camps established by the American army around Munich. There she started looking for friends or relatives, and so came across Michaela. She soon gave up on finding more relatives and friends and early in 1947 contacted the "Habricha" (Escape) organization which arranged for Jewish refugees to be smuggled across European borders and brought to the land of Israel. Together with her friend she arrived to southern France and boarded a ship which was supposed to bring them to the land of Israel. However, the British Empire forbade Jewish refugees to a detaining camp in Cyprus where she remained for over a year. Finally she managed to receive an official certification to go to the Land of Israel. Tola had family members in the land of Israel – her aunt and cousins on her father's side. She started a new life in Tel Aviv together with her husband, Jacob, whom she met there.

Israel was also actively searching for remaining relatives and friends. He found out that his uncle Jacob Steingarten and his family had survived and they all lived in a refugee camp in Italy. Israel, one of Jacob's sons, suddenly showed up in Munich in the summer of 1947. From a young age he was a member of the right-wing "Beitar" movement. The movement believed in actively resisting the British rule over the land of Israel. In line with that policy they attacked the British embassy in Rome. As he participated in that attack, Jacob's son had to escape Italy.

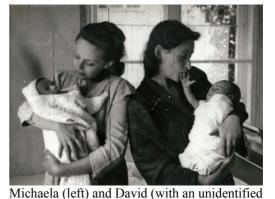
While in Germany, Jacob's son spent one night with Israel and Michaela. He told them various details about the ghetto in Ratno, Israel's hometown, and how he had escaped from the ghetto before all the Jews were executed. After he left, Israel and Michaela never discussed what they heard from him. That meeting forced Israel to reflect about his tragedy, and that left its mark on Israel and his health for years to come.

Learning from the experience of what had happened in Germany after the First World War, and motivated by the fear of a communist takeover of Germany, the Americans formulated in 1947 the "Marshal Plan" to help rebuild ruined Germany. The reorganization of the German economy, industry and commerce undertaken by the Americans struck fear in the hearts of the Jewish refugees. They expected that in retaliation for Hitler's dream of the "Thousand Year Reich" Germany will remain in ruins for a thousand years. The fast recovery of the German economy was thought to allow the German people to forget the disaster that Hitler's doctrines had brought upon them and their country.

Israel and Michaela's son, David, was born on June 12th, 1947. To help her during the last few weeks of pregnancy, Israel had arranged for her to stay in a nursing hospital (in St.

Ottilien D.A.) that had a small resting home where she could recuperate for 2-3 weeks after giving birth. This was very important as there were no family members to support her with the baby, and Israel had to go to work every morning.

So, towards the expected date, Israel and Michaela travelled 40 km away from Munich to the large Benedictine monastery of St. Ottilien. Michaela was given a bed in a twobed room together with another woman who was also expecting. Michaela used to take



roommate) in St. Ottilien, 1947

walks on the monastery grounds. The monks raised chicken and cattle, and the farm looked a bit like an Israeli Kibbutz, except that the farmers wore monk robes. In addition, the monastery housed a well managed boarding school for boys.

The monastery was very old and contained a beautiful old chapel, so the monks decided to add tourism to their sources of income. They chose among themselves a respectable old monk with long white beard extending down to his garment belt. Every Sunday he would host tourists and tell them the story of the St. Ottilien monastery.

The hospital at St. Ottilien had been set up already in 1945 to accept the surviving Jews from the Dachau extermination camp which was located only 30-40 km away. When Michaela was admitted in mid 1947 these patients had already left. One part of the hospital was designated as a maternity ward with an adjoining resting home, both sponsored by the Jewish agency, and another part served as a general hospital serving the region.

Israel was extremely happy when their son David was born. It seemed as though the little baby was the reincarnation of Israel's lost family. It almost seemed as though the Shekhina (the divine presence of God) descended upon him from above. He cared so much for the little baby that he totally ignored Michaela taking note of her only as the food provider for the baby.

The baby was named David after Israel's father who had perished in Ratno. Israel toyed with the name looking for a suitable nickname that will make the boy unique. He finally came up with the name Dodi which in Hebrew has various meanings such as "my uncle", "my loved one" and "my dearest one" – several meanings in one word.

Michaela and the baby remained in St. Ottilien for three weeks and Israel used to take a suburban train to visit them. By the fourth week Michaela felt that she had recuperated enough and she and the baby returned to Munich.

Israel was committed to publish the Pechach newsletter as long as there were refugees in camps on German soil. Nevertheless Israel began looking for ways to move his family to the land of Israel which he saw as his real home. Still they decided to wait until the baby grows up some more, and in the meantime they remained in Munich.

On November 1947 the UN approved a resolution to split the land of Israel between the Arabs and the Jews and allow the Jews to form their own sovereign state, the first independent Jewish state after 1900 years. The decision created an enormous emotional storm among the Jewish refugees. The great joy can still be appreciated from an article Israel wrote in his newsletter in November 1947.

The article was simply named "November the 29th". It read:

"This date will enter in letters of fire not only in the Jewish history books, but in the history books of the entire human race. This day the 33 nations that had voted for the formation of the State of Israel were rehabilitated, and God will remember this deed. It is not only a great victory for the Zionist idea, but a turning point in the story of the Jewish nation which had wandered and was being persecuted for 2000

years. It is a victory for justice, a tremor in the hearts of those nations which we thought had forgotten God. Still this is not the State of which we have dreamt of for 2000 years – the Messiah has not come yet. We are facing tough times, times of struggle. We know that a state is not given as a present; we will have to fight for it. Independence will not be achieved by relying on declarations.

Still, this is a very happy day and we should not dwell on the difficulties. Thirty three nations had voted to give us the right to have our own country among all other countries of the world. With bowed head above the graves of the anonymous millions, we will whisper – maybe your death was not in vain". (Rough translation from Yiddish).

Those words that Israel had written expressed but a fraction of the emotional turbulence the Jews felt late in 1947. They raised their head and stood tall. They looked at the world differently – as equals and not as eternal outcasts.

Young members of the Pechach organization began making plans to move to the land of Israel and help in the struggle which was soon to begin. On May 1948 the British mandate ended and the State of Israel came into existence. Immigration to Israel was now legal and possible, and a stream of young Pechach members soon arrived to Tel Aviv. Many of them participated in the Israeli War of Independence and quite a number perished in battle, especially the battle to free Jerusalem from the Arab blockade. These were Jews who had survived the Nazi occupation, many of them as partisans in the forests of Europe. Their loss was very painful to all.

In mid 1948 the evacuation of the "Bavarian Exile" (as Israel used to call it) was in full swing. Some studies show that of the 250,000 refugees whom the "Habricha" organization had helped transfer to Western Europe, about 150,000 immigrated to the State of Israel and the rest found home in various countries in Europe and America. Various sources quote other numbers.

Israel and Michaela were also preparing to immigrate to Israel. However it took quite some time to end issuing the Pechach newsletter and it was not until December 1948 that they left their home in Munich. Immigration was organized by the Jewish Agency. The agency chose Israel to lead a small group of refugees from Munich to Lion, France. There they waited for several weeks for a



Israel, Michaela and David, Munich, November 1948

ship to take them to Israel. There were not enough ships to take all the refugees to their new/old homeland. From Lion the group was relocated to a little town near Marseille called

Bandol where they again patiently waited for a ship for several weeks under harsh living conditions.

Eventually in February 1949 a ship was found. They boarded a ship called Negba. It was an old dilapidated freight ship which had been converted to a passenger ship. Its original capacity was 1000 passengers, but about 2000 refugees were packed on that little ship that day. The ride was rough as the Mediterranean Sea is rather stormy in February. Almost all passengers contracted sea sickness, including Israel and Michaela. All, except little David who was simply hungry.

The excitement had reached a new level when they finally docked in Haifa, Israel, on February 14, 1949. Israel descended the stairs to the shore with his son in his arms as though he was coming home. As he had full command of Hebrew he immediately started talking to people around him as though he has left the country just a week ago. Michaela, however, was a bit lost in this new strange country, knowing very little Hebrew.

Getting ready for a completely new life was not easy. However, Michaela was convinced that all Jews should live in Israel, and therefore this was her real home.

Epilogue

Michaela, Israel and little David settled in Jerusalem. In 1952 Michaela gave birth to a baby daughter whom they named Maya, after Israel's only sister who had been murdered by the Germans. Israel became a senior bank official and Michaela served as a nurse and later as a physical therapist in various medical facilities in Jerusalem. Israel died of a heart failure in 1974 and Michaela died of pneumonia complications in 2017. David Avnir is a Professor Emeritus of Chemistry in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He is married to Yehudit, and has a son, Yuval, and a daughter, Tamar, and he has three grandchildren, Noga, LeeOr and Gal. Maya is married to Hanan Yinnon and is a senior Speech Therapist in Haifa, Israel.

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