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WebMail - Tel Aviv & Back, Letter 33

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**URBAN RENEWAL**

Imagine! The Mougrabi Cinema burned down thirty years ago, and I never knew it. Even more amazing ~~that~~ is that nothing but a cheap parking lot marks the spot, an emblem of loss in downtown Tel Aviv. Amiram Selah fills me in. The then-Mayor designated the Mougrabi a landmark and wanted it rebuilt. The wealthy Mougrabis had other plans. So each time they submitted a new plan to City Hall, it was shot down, and each successive Mayor has held firm. At this point, you'd think someone would have noticed how horribly run down this part of town has become, that from Mougrabi Square down to the beach is akin to 42nd Street, catering to foreign workers and other transients. Even the Promenade could do with some fixing. Saddest of all is seeing the ruins of the Dolphinarium, where just last week the families of the bereaved marked the first anniversary of the slaughter. One mother still cannot walk into her daughter's empty room. But even in a country addicted to memorials, the beach front in Tel Aviv is resilient to sadness. Life goes on. Nearby, the drummers congregate every night. At Banana Beach, where we sit and order lemonade, the plastic chairs begin filling up from 10:30 Pm. Boy, do I feel middle aged, surrounded by so many young lovers, some of them demonstratively gay. As for the Dopphinarium, the property, such as it is, was bought by the City and will be turned into a park.

Just about every building could do with a face-lift. Many of the tenants are old, on fixed incomes, and indifferent. I ask Michal about the cinder block wall blocking the entrance to some apartment buildings. They were hastily built in 1956, she tells me, on the eve of the Suez Crisis, when Tel Aviv geared itself up for aerial attacks. You never know, she says, when they could come in handy, though even she admits that painting them psychedelic colors might liven things up.

Tonight, in honor of my leave-taking, we eat out. Michal has found a New Age restaurant in her neighborhood called Stamm-tisch [pronounced the German way]. Stamm-tisch combines health food with frumkayt. It reminds me of the House of Love and Prayer, especially when a rabbi sporting tsitis and a guitar walks in. I know times have changed, though, when I note the pistol strapped to his belt. He is this evening's cultural program, to be held upstairs, an evening of Carelbach songs for secular Israelis. Meanwhile, there's something else going on, a reading by novelist Mira Magen, one of sixteen events being held this week in various cafes of Tel Aviv in honor of my favorite Jewish holiday, Shavua Hasefer. Jerusalem, too, is

hosting such readings of Israeli poetry and prose, and maybe other big cities as well. This is a good thing, because it encourages people to frequent cafes again. They don't need encouragement to buy Hebrew books, as my sister Ruth, my niece Jo- and I are pleased to discover at the opening of Shavua Hasefer in Jerusalem, which, for security reasons, is being held on the grounds of the Israel Museum. Wonderful to see the children, the young couples, the secularists and pietists, coveting the books. I imagine that in Tel Aviv, the religious publishing houses (like Harav Kook) are not so heavily frequented, though I could be wrong.

Yes, the Jews have been transplanted, normalized, rendered productive, yet some behavior patterns refuse to die. One of them is sitting in cafes, which Herzl, in his utopian novel *Altneuland*, considered decadent and consigned to the dustbin of Diaspora. And the other is the Jewish passion for books. How fitting, then, that as a going away present, the students in Hana Neshet's course on American-Jewish literature present me with a coffee table anthology of Hebrew poetry and prose about cafes, and Inna, recently from Russia, stands up to give a little speech, in which she thanks me for my "unforgettable" singing, for opening up the lost culture of Yiddish, and for coming to Israel during such difficult times.

Jerusalem, June 11, 2002

David G. Roskies  
Department of Jewish Literature  
Jewish Theological Seminary  
3080 Broadway  
New York, NY 10027-4649  
daroskies@jtsa.edu

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