

The story of Nadav

Nadav Vardi was one of the young victims of the Yom Kippur War. Still a student at Tel Aviv University, he was looking forward to a career in journalism.

In some ways, Nadav's story has much in common with that of other Israeli boys - young people whom nobody but friends their own age can really know, and concerning whom generalizations about the "sabra character" can be far from true.

In other ways, his story is very much his own. An only child (whose parents had wanted to have many children), he disliked intensely much of army life and what it stood for, yet insisted on serving in a combat unit.

Unlike many sabras, he had an outstanding command of both Hebrew and English, and he loved both languages. His professional aim was absolutely clear: journalism. A year ago, I arranged an interview for him at *The Jerusalem Post* about a possible part-time job while he studied at Tel Aviv University. Just before the interview, he changed his mind, and for a very characteristic reason: *"I'm not ready yet; I'm not good enough yet."*

In March, 1973, Nadav Vardi suddenly, and, as he strongly felt, unjustly, shot to fleeting fame as the boy whose voice interrupted Golda Meir's telephone conversation with Yitzhak Rabin, then Ambassador in Washington, in a way that indicated he had been listening in to it. As reported in the press, Nadav and another Tel Aviv University student, both working part-time on the international switchboard, were immediately fired from their jobs. A petition signed by 300 other student workers did not help.

Both boys, deeply hurt, felt they were treated unfairly; that they were properly fulfilling their duties by monitoring the conversation; that they were given no chance to explain their position; and that they were fired within hours *"only so that those in charge could show how efficient they were."*

As "mishaps" go, this one was certainly minor (important conversations were generally not conducted on the regular international line, 18), but both boys saw it as a grave injustice in principle. Nadav and his co-worker, Ephraim, drafted a letter to Prime Minister Meir asking for permission to be heard. They did not send it; the letter was found after his death among Nadav's remarkably well-organized personal papers, in one of four sealed envelopes. Nadav had mentioned the letter to his father, who advised him not to send it: *"You're terribly disappointed now by what has happened. You'll be even more disappointed because the letter will never get to Golda, only to some clerk who may or may not send you a reply."*

In the light of today, it is strange to recall the impact of the event on Nadav, who felt it as something of a personal affront from the Prime Minister - for whom he always felt a special admiration. Like boys his age before the October war, he had no particular interest in politics; but towards Golda he felt great warmth, and was greatly pleased by their one chance meeting.

It was in the fall of 1970, and it took place at a popular bakery, Wechsler's, in Tel Aviv. It was crowded, and Golda, who had come to buy some cakes, could hardly get in the door. Nadav's mother said to her friend the proprietor, *"Zippora, they're not letting Golda in!"*

Golda was then attended to, of course, and noticing the tall good-looking, red-haired boy in uniform said, *"Hello, soldier, where are you serving?"* Nadav, on leave from duty with his tank unit at the Canal during the War of Attrition, told the Prime Minister, who wished him good luck and a happy new year; he, in turn, wished Golda a pleasant successful trip to America.

Three Septembers later, the timetable went like this. On September 6, Nadav returned from a trip to Europe with a friend. On September 15, he left home, to live in a flat with another boy, two girls, and a dog. In today's style, the girls were "not girl friends"; the arrangement was made through a classified ad. But all became close friends in the short time that remained: the girls were finishing an occupational therapy course - and have been in uniform since the two boys were called up.

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September 18 was Nadav's 23rd birthday: He was born in Tel Aviv, according to the Jewish calendar, on Yom Kippur, 1950. On October 6, he was called up. He sent home three printed postcards, two short notes. He fell on October 16, at the "Chinese Farm", when his tank was hit and exploded. On October 31 he was "officially buried". On November 4, after a long series of intensive efforts to learn what had happened, he was reported missing. On November 6, he was reported dead.

Early on the morning of Remembrance Day, a modest ceremony was held at Nadav's elementary school, the A.D. Gordon School in Bat Yam.

*"We were dubious about going", Nadav's mother told me, "but the school had telephoned us the day before to remind us to come, so we went. It was for the 13 graduates of the school who have died in our wars - six in the last war, three of them from Nadav's class. The children behaved beautifully, even the little ones in Kita Aleph. All in white shirts, completely silent, knowing exactly what it was about and what was expected of them. It was very short, perfectly suited for children. The headmaster made a brief, dignified speech. One boy read Alterman's 'Silver Platter' - beautifully. The children's choir sang one song. Then 13 children, of different ages, lit 13 torches - and we went upstairs, to a corner where photographs of each of the 13 were displayed. All with their names exactly correct, and the right dates of their deaths." (This accuracy is a point on which bereaved families, following the errors of commission and omission which marked so many official communications, have become especially sensitive.)*

The evening before, a number of Nadav's friends - from kindergarten up through army and university, and *"including quite a few former girl friends"* - had organized a gathering at his parents' home. *"It wasn't really gloomy", his mother said. "We tried very hard to make it seem as though this were an evening which Nadav, for some reason or other, was unable to attend."*

He was a boy who loved girls, cars, clothes, good food, animals, flowers, small children. His interest in journalism, and problems of communication generally, was immensely serious; he frequently wrote letters on topical

issues to local columnists - Yonatan Gefen, for instance - but then did not send them, because, like so many young Israelis, he was really extremely shy. He greatly admired Haim Yavin, knew Kishon by heart, and was appalled by the low level of English used by some local interviewers. The last paper he wrote, in the English Literature Department of Tel Aviv University, was an analysis of "The Sexual Relationship between Troilus and Cressida."

His own excellent English came from three years in America, where his father attended post-graduate studies at Columbia. At his American high school, he was a top student in English and mathematics. He graduated at 17 and attended an American college for one year. His parents were anxious for him to finish there, but he refused point-blank, insisting on entering the army here with his friends, which he did in 1968. During his years in America, he came home alone for the summer. When he returned to New York he told his parents, *"If it weren't for you, I'd never have come back. I want to be in my own country."*

One of the letters of condolence which Nadav's mother answered immediately came from a young Arab girl in Bethlehem, whom Nadav's mother had helped in her efforts to study tourism, and whose family, who own one of the city's olive-wood firms, were also helped by Nadav's mother, with their marketing problems after the Six Day War. In her letter, the girl expressed her horror and shock at a situation in which young people such as Nadav must continue to be killed.

Nadav was a great believer in "educating" his parents. It was important to him that they should understand and know him. and understand and know the things that were vital to him and his friends. Such as pop music, for instance. He enjoyed his records; but, even more, he enjoyed pointing out to his mother and father *"the things we should listen for, so that we would know what it was all about."*

The following was written by Nadav the day after he left home to live with friends, exactly a month before his death on the Egyptian front on October 16, 1973. One of those friends gave it to his parents some time later.

In the normal course of events, they would never have known of it. The translation here is slightly shortened.

FAREWELL

Yesterday I cried. At night ...

I've left home. "So what?" they'd have said, if I'd mentioned it. Everybody leaves home sooner or later. It's important. A serious step toward maturity, toward independence, toward standing on one's feet without mother's apron strings. But this time it's different. It is not everybody else who's left home. Everybody left home long ago - Uri, Boas, Ian, Rivi, the other Rivi - everybody, everybody who counts. But this time I am the one who's leaving, and that is sad. Mainly because of them. Father, a precious man whom nobody really knows. Withdrawn. As I am, too. But he loved me, and he showed it. I'd like us to be friends. A pity ... And mother - open, loving, sometimes she gets furious.

He only had to give me a quick glance and he'd know. I'm in trouble again. He also knew that it was not in his power to do a thing. But at least he knew. And although we may not have talked, just the fact that he knew was sometimes enough. He knew when to be silent, when to be still. She - less.

She was wonderful, in her own way. Loving, always wanting to give, to accept, to feel. Sometimes with superfluous questions. But who else did I laugh with, who else would throw me a look that could fill me with quiet laughter inside? Purifying. I loved her, too.

Strange that I am writing in the past tense. There are still long years ahead for them. So I hope and pray. Except that from now on it's no longer the same thing. For the better? Perhaps. No longer the secure feeling that there is a mother who will always see to it that there's everything at home that I love. No longer, on the other side of the wall (why the wall?) the father who can always answer every question. With whom one can sit in the same room, throw

him a quick look, and that's enough. He knows. Even though he remains immersed in his book.

And now, what about them? Probably they say to each other, deep within themselves, "We've done our part. We married, had a child, a son, the only one. We raised our son, loved him, were proud of him. His pains were ours, his sufferings ours; and under our eyes he grew and became a man. Twenty years. More. And that's that ... Yesterday he left. To live alone. Now he no longer needs us. Independence is what he wants. And didn't we always give him everything?"

Still, they understand; understand, and know that from now on, all that is left is to sit and wait. I wish I were wrong.

Yesterday I cried; at night, alone. Alone in the dark.

(Article by Helga Dudman, published in the JERUSALEM POST)