

Notes from a Diary: October 1973

Second Week of the Yom Kippur War

My neighbor's request for underwear — tops and bottoms — did not take me by surprise. In times of emergency, nothing is unusual. She explained briefly and breathlessly, "So many of our boys dashed off so quickly that neither they nor the army have sufficient changes." Our telephone brigade swung into action. Key people were notified of the need of the day.

Other women are busily baking the cakes which represent the traditional Yiddishe mama's way of expressing love and affection. Yesterday, in one four-block radius, over four hundred cakes were baked, packed and sent off to bases and units.

Small children are still canvassing the neighborhood for transistors, games and detective stories and other light reading material — for use both at the front and for the wounded in the hospitals. Supervising these collections is the Soldiers Welfare Committee. These are the same people who are behind my underwear project.

As the war goes into its second week it seems as if we have been fighting for years. The main need for those of us at home is to keep busy, to keep occupied, to try and keep our minds from dwelling on the nightmare which is war — especially in a country as small as ours where no family lacks a military representative and where, for many, practically all the male members from age eighteen to forty-five are away.

My daughter Debby, recently released from the army, was not called back into reserve duty. "I haven't yet done my reserve training," she explained, "and thus haven't been assigned to a unit." She is working in an office and feels that she should be doing more, so tonight she is off to the post office to help in the round-the-clock sorting of mail that goes on there.

Like all of us, she is giving a month's salary to the Voluntary War Loan, for the war takes its toll not only in lives but in financial resources too. Many are buying bonds to the tune of a month's salary. Considering our excessive tax policy, this is really a heroic act, yet it all seems so little that one can do.

My younger son David is also involved in helping get the mail through. In this fair country of ours mail is never delivered at night; there have even been days when the mailman has neglected to come at all. However, now, with high school students practically running the postal operation, there are two and even three deliveries per day. Even at night the mail is being brought around, for there is nothing more precious than the scrawled postcard from a son at the front, and every effort is being made to see that it gets through as quickly as possible. Important also is mail going in the opposite direction and, on the Sabbath and holidays, specified post offices are open to receive the letters and parcels which families are sending to their soldiers.

It is almost unbelievable the way practically every civilian — regardless of age or linguistic ability — has found a way to help in our war effort. We have to. Not only are we keeping the wheels of our delicate economy from grinding to a halt, but it is also personal mental therapy. One cannot sit at home when — as my neighbor put it — “so many are dying and suffering for us.”

Impressive really are our youngsters, our teenagers. Moshe, my David's friend, just rang up to ask how he and we are. David is at a bakery tonight, an all-night stint which will exempt him from working at the post office tomorrow. “That's all right,” he assures me, “there are lines of kids waiting to take the mail.”

Actually some places have more volunteers than needs. Drivers with cars are permanently stationed at the hospitals — to ferry doctors and

nurses home, to take families of patients back home, to race for supplies. As one driver told me, "Since it's hard to anticipate the needs, many of us just sit and wait. So there may be a few too many of us sometimes. Most times we're pretty busy."

We try not to dwell on the losses. We realize, as the Defense Minister said, that we cannot — for the time being — give public expression to our sorrow. We must wait until the fighting is over, even though families have been informed and will be starting their shiva directly after Simchat Torah.

Carmela's husband, a flying doctor, breezed in this morning for a few hours. "Nice being in the Air Force," he informed her. "Without the service of being flown back I wouldn't have been able to come home." He reports high morale down on the front. She gives him back the same report about life in the home sector.

I wonder if we are all being wonderful actors, and yet it is all more than just a facade. We are managing to smile and joke our way through this most horrible of horrible periods. We have a wonderful talent for getting angry at the minor irritants of our life, and these are never lacking in a country where tempers are often as hot as the weather. But when a true test comes we rise to the occasion. Only why must we rise so often?

Notes from a Diary: Winter 1991

The Gulf War — "We'll Get Through This, Too"

In the weeks following the outbreak of the Gulf War, Israel, not a partner in the coalition against Saddam Hussein, became an innocent target. Those were weeks of incredible tension and fear, weeks in which time lost all meaning as we learned to live from one missile attack to another. Normally I don't keep a diary, but the events since the Gulf War erupted were so traumatic that I felt compelled to keep a record. The following are highlights from my diary.

Thursday, January 17. The unbelievable has happened. Saddam Hussein has made good his threat to attack Israel. Tel Aviv was hit in the early hours of the morning. From the technical point of view we were prepared. All of us had faithfully followed Civil Defense instructions to seal off one room in our homes, using masking tape and plastic sheets to cover our doors and windows. Gas masks had been distributed. Psychologically, however, the shock of that first attack was tremendous.

Sitting with my neighbors, the Steibels, in their sealed room, still wearing our gas masks and waiting for the radio to announce the all-clear, we were surprised to hear Rachel's mother Dolly on the line from Holland telling us of the missile attack in Tel Aviv. The immediacy of the media coverage in this modern age is most impressive. Dolly knew before we did what had happened. She had even seen the pictures we would see only much later.

Saturday, January 26. It's a raw, rainy morning. Radio reports snow on Mt. Hermon. Winter has finally arrived. Normally thousands of Israelis would be streaming to the slopes to ski, but not today. Israel may not be part of the coalition, but without a doubt we're part of the war. It's an odd sort of war for us, one in which civilians, not soldiers, are the targets and victims.

If my arithmetic is correct, this is the tenth day of the Gulf War. So much in our lives has changed, and so quickly. Time has lost all meaning. Yesterday seems years away. Many of my days are punctuated by catnaps — compensation for nights when sleep is fitful, as half of me seems to stay awake, one ear cocked for the sound of the siren. I think I'm getting about five or six hours of sleep in every twenty-four-hour period. Yet I'm seldom tired. I seem to be on a perpetual "high," my adrenaline pumping overtime. In contrast, other people report bouts of intense fatigue and apathy. As psychologists know, stress affects people differently.

Last night my aunt in Florida and her daughter called to find out how I was. They had heard that my town Ramat Gan (a suburb of Tel Aviv) had been hit and were worried. I assured them that my family and I are in good health and are holding up under the tension extremely well. I cannot even begin to fathom why and how I am so calm. Truthfully though, for me, as for many others, it's only a controlled kind of calmness, with an inner apprehension that dogs us night and day. We are so frightened of the possibility of a chemical warfare attack. We are grateful that the warheads have not contained poisonous gases, but we fear this situation may change momentarily. And it is the not knowing that is so difficult.

Not to sound morbid, but I have a feeling that I'm an unwilling player in a game of Russian roulette. Each missile attack – and, as of this writing, there have been five in Israel – has come closer and closer to my home. The fourth one was four miles away, but the one last night was less than a mile away. In that attack, one person was killed, three seriously wounded and sixty-four slightly wounded. Over one thousand homes were damaged here and up north in Haifa where fragments from the Scud missiles also fell.

Israel is a small country. After every all-clear, within minutes, people begin calling each other, checking on their families and friends. From these calls, it is easy to pinpoint the locations that have been hit. So last night we learned how close we had been to the action, even the name of the street. I called Zalman and Geula, close friends of mine, whose street had been one of those most severely affected. Zalman replied to my anxious query as to their welfare, "We're alive but the house isn't. The roof has been ripped off, walls are cracking, some windows and doors have been blown out, and we have been pumping water all night."

Later I called my brother-in-law and heard that all the windows in his neighbor's apartment had been shattered as a result of last night's attack. As she told him, "We came out of our sealed room after the all-clear and the debris in the living room was ghastly. But our priorities have changed.

No one was hurt and that's the only thing that counts. It took us over six hours to clean up the mess. So what. We still have our home, still have a place to live." She and I both know that, as of today, over four thousand people have been evacuated from damaged homes.

As a result of the hits being so close to my house, my phone has been ringing all day. People from all over the country are asking me to come and stay with them. I, however, am staying put — here in my house. I don't think that I am particularly brave, but perhaps I am a fatalist. What will be will be. The calls, however, warm my heart. We are all so nice to each other these days. It appears that when Israel is at its worst, its people are at their best.

My mother-in-law had a Yiddish expression which, roughly translated, says that it shouldn't have to be proved to what you can get used. So now we're getting used to living in what is, in effect, a perpetual state of anxiety. There are those who claim they are neither frightened nor apprehensive. Personally, I think that either they are lying or their denial system is working overtime. Geography also plays a part in how you feel. Many parts of the country, such as towns and settlements in the south, appear not to be in the line of fire, as we in the central part of the country are. For people there, the siren doesn't represent pain and destruction, while for us it does.

Sunday, January 27. Today the sun was shining brightly. I took a cab to visit my darlings, my granddaughters, whom I haven't seen for what seems like an eternity although it's been less than two weeks. "During the day we all seem to feel like lions," quipped a friend, "fearlessly going about our business as usual. Comes night, however, many of us become a little bit more apprehensive, not knowing what night will bring." Last night brought another attack, but this time the anti-missile Patriots evidently worked very well.