THE Jewish ARCHIVE

Being Jewish and critical of Israel can make you an outcast. I should know

An Australian Jewish writer details how his support for the Palestinian cause has made him a pariah in his own community

Simon Sakzewski
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Simon Sakzewski in Gaza (at right) with Palestinian and Israeli Jewish peace activists, Tel Aviv, 2018. (Courtesy)

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For 20 years, I've been called a Nazi collaborator. Traitor. Self-hating Jew. Israel supporter. Anti-Semite. "I would rather shake Hitler's hand than yours." Propaganda. Arab lover.

It's strange how familiar I've become with all these expressions of hatred from people I've neither met, nor spoken to, and yet I understand why – the stakes over Israel and Palestine couldn't be higher, nothing less than a matter of life and death for both.

The vicious comments started appearing as soon as I published my first major article in The Sydney Morning Herald. It was 2001, and I argued that many of the Israeli government's actions provoked appalled but pointless, that the treatment of Palestinians entered around a racial ideology. I was far from the first to write such things in a mainstream news outlet, but the response was explosive. I had learned a nerve that has followed me ever since.

At this point, in my late 20s, I'd never actually been to Israel or Palestine – that was all to change soon – but something in my reading and gut told me that what my fellow Jews were doing in the Middle East was wrong, that the control and occupation of millions of Palestinians from at the barrel of a gun was a crime on the Jewish people.

Much of the criticism I was to receive in subsequent years revolved around this central question: how could I, as a Jew, who had lost members of his family to the gas chambers of the Holocaust, not automatically side with a Jewish nation that had been born from this monstrous crime?

The answer was – and is – for him simple. Like all Jews, I carry the knowledge of anti-Semitism and its murderous consequences; I carry the fact that, ever since Israel's birth in May 1948, sections of the Muslim and Arab world have called for the country's annihilation.

To be Jewish is to be aware – and constantly fearful of – the harm that can befall one just for being Jewish. I am not immune to this fear, or to some sense of victimhood – tales of exile, wandering, exclusion, pogroms, annihilation – are deep, ancient and ever-present when the Jews come to form their own nation. Israel's Jewish Nobel Prize Winner, Elie Wiesel, the 1987 Central Nobelist, wrote of the "Jewish fear which recommended the creation of independent Arab and Jewish states."

This was Zionism's ultimate fulfilment, after centuries of persecution, the Jewish people's rights to a homeland in Palestine, to ancient Biblical land, had been realised. We had returned home to Zion, the "Kingdom of heaven", and Judaism had come to equal Zionism. To not believe in Israel was to somehow be against the Jewish people, Jews. Where can – after the horrors of Nazism – a Jew could have feel safe, if not?

Mind, I believe, Jeffrey Lancaster, who born in Melbourne on March 5, 1942, just as his maternal grandparents were being murdered in Auschwitz, the Nazi regime's most notorious death camp.

Lancaster's grandparents Fred and Irena in Dresden in 1939, just three months after their daughter Irena's birth in Melbourne. (Courtesy Jeffrey Lancaster)

Like millions of other Jews throughout Europe during the 1930s, my family had clung to the belief that Hitler's ascent to power in 1933 would be a brief aberration. How could a country that had given the world Bach, Beethoven, Goethe and Einstein be in the hands of an institute thug and his gang of criminals?

We don't practical Jewry from Dresden, the Russell city of Europe and excess architecture on the banks of the Elbe river that was almost completely destroyed by Allied firebombing in. Feel after many of the city's Jewish population had been deported, murdered or both. Seven years earlier, in September 1938, my grandparents, Fred and Irena, had hurried to a Dresden synagogue to what was to be its last such celebration before Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, when the Nazis burned the city's Jewish temple. Fred's relatives's cause of worship ceased to be a Jewish congregation.

The mass murder of Jews followed as part of an eradication program that would seek to rid Nazi-controlled Europe entirely of its Jewish population. Irena's parents, Lancaster's maternal grandfather, Fred, and Irena's maternal uncle, the cross of Jewish hatred had already caused great upheaval, forcing my family to move from Poland to Germany in 1933.

On my mother's side, the pressures were no less calamitous. My mother, Violet Preiss, had deep family ties to Austria, Hitler's birthplace, which the Nazis annexed in 1938, precipitating a cultural, social and economic boycott of Jewish businesses and institutions. Vienna was home to about 185,000 Jews. The majority of Jews who remained in 1941 were killed.

This is to my DNA, part of my history, to many as its members of my family perished at the hands of the Nazis, but both my maternal and paternal grandparents survived the Holocaust. Fred and Irena, Lancaster's parents, the lucky ones because, only a year earlier, Fred, Mina, Australia's mission for trade and customs, had set up intergovernmental conferences on Jewish refugees in France city "further privileged" needed the power to issue and non-British subjects who wanted admission into Australia, despite the profit this Jewish "to be born in real social problem, on set out destroys of importing one." So said. Australia did take in Jewish items after Kristallnacht, though but Fred enough to satisfy the need of escaping Jews.

Lancaster's 20 Aug 1942 aircraft with his crew, including Lancaster (second from left), in front of a Lancaster bomber.

In 2001, I visited Israel and Palestine for the first time and began to see what the occupation of a subjugated people looked like. Israeli soldiers screaming orders at Palestinians at militarised checkpoints. Women and children forced to queue for hours under a scorching sun. Farmers prevent from demolished by Israeli bulldozers. Fruit groves of daily life restricted and monitored by the state, and, of course, the relentless bombing of illegal Jewish settlements on land that – according to international law – was earmarked for a Palestinian state.

Such is the irrutentable and complex nature of this conflict, however, that the paragraph above this is enough to cause conniptions among many Jews. For them, there are no "illegal Jewish settlements" and there is no "occupation" of Palestinian land. Israel, they say, is the Jewish state, the only one in the world, and, as such, it has the customary execution of other Israeli young men by Jewish soldiers and intelligence officers. ("Pagan" armed that between 1947 and 1949, more than 400 Palestinian villages were destroyed and civilians killed or forcibly removed. This is the attempted obliteration of a people and culture that we Jews find almost impossible to discuss.

In 1962, Israel's one main state-ruled following the Six Day War when, over the course of its lightning days, the young country seized the West Bank (of the Jordan River), including East Jerusalem, from Jordan, the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt and the Golan Heights from Syrian control. Israel, the Jewish people the world over, this was a moment to savour. Israel had become a regional superpower. It had also become an occupying power, one that immediately constructed Israeli politicians such as then-education minister Zalman Aranne:

"I do not for one minute accept the idea that the world outside will look at the fact we're taking everything for ourselves and say 'Nice aquatic'." So said, in protest 1967 cabinet minutes released 30 years later. "After all, in another year or half a year the world will wake up, there's a world out there and it will ask questions."

Palestinians driven from their homes by Israeli forces and fleeing on the road, Ar Ram, 1948. (AP/Israel)

For the Palestinians, the 1967 war added hundreds of thousands more Palestinians to the refugee camps, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and, for many, the hope of a free or a viable state. The Palestinian plight was blamed on belligerent Arab leaders and the Israeli military's ability to accept the creation of a Jewish homeland in the Middle East.

And so, in turn, many Jewish hearts became closed. Claimed to the fact that for the next 30 years, Israel's Jewish leaders refused to talk about peace for Palestinians in the West Bank, now numbering 3 million, would be dictated by Israel, and, similarly, in Gaza where Palestinians, now at 2 million, would be resolved to what is regularly described as the world's largest open air prison.

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In other words, one independent and return as a people became another's people's catastrophe, which is why the Palestinians have always called for the return of the Jewish state the Nakba – the Catastrophe.

In 2006, my first book, *My Israel Question*, was published. My main arguments – then and today – was that Israel was brutally occupying the Palestinian people and that this occupation was buttressed by an unquestioning Jewish diaspora.

Its publication provoked a little changing event that drew barbs lines that were to this day. Shortly after its release, my parents received emails from four different Jewish couples, none of whom they'd known for more than 20 years. They'd blasted Passover meals, enjoyed holidays together and watched each other's children grow. The emails had been sent by the children of my parents and the message alternatively clear, none of them now wished to associate with my parents because of their views on Israel and support for my work, support which had only come after years of silence from debate. The more my parents had come to understand, the more their views had shifted – from an unquestioned pro-Israel position to one where it was possible to both support Israel's right to exist and the rights of Palestinians. They were not mutually exclusive.

The author and his dad, Ignatz, on Gaza's shoreline and further in occupied in 2018. (courtesy Simon Sakzewski)

Friend Jewish family friends – lawyers, accountants and businessmen, all solid members of the Jewish community – tried to pressure others to similarly cut ties with my parents. Soon afterwards, another Jewish couple whom my parents had known for decades ditched them without explanation.

My mother – a gentle and kind woman who would never raise her voice and cared deeply about helping the less fortunate – was incredulous. She couldn't fathom how friends could behave this way, particularly those with whom she'd shared so many of life's precious moments. That was in 2006. In 2011, she became gravely ill with a brain tumour and died. Over the years, I've spoken to many people who knew my mother, who, in her quiet, kind way, was the glue of sympathy and remembrance. "They were never friends," my father says now, reflecting on this dark period of our lives.

Soon after my book was released, the Israel lobby sought – unsuccessfully – to have my publisher, Melbourne University Press, pulp it. I was condemned by the Jewish community's peak body, the Australian Jewish Council, and, at times, I received praise from a number of sites and members of the public telling me that *My Israel Question* had given them the confidence to express their own disquiet with Israel behaviour. The book found a broad audience, and an international one.

That was before receiving another message expressing the hope that my parents and I would be at the front of the line being marched into the gas chambers.

Nonetheless, the demonisation travelled at my parents and her hurt. One family friend called my father a Jew-hater during a criticism Israel. I was accused of being a self-hater, of being a Holocaust denier, of being a Nazi, and warned by rings that we should be careful that. That was before receiving another message expressing the hope that my parents and I would be at the front of the line being marched into the gas chambers.

Perhaps the most arresting interactions occurred the year after publication, when I was invited to speak before of a leading member of the Jewish community to discuss Israel and my book with a group of self-described "left leaning" Jews. My parents joined me for what was turned into a concerted attack. I was accused of defaming Jews and wanting to see Israel destroyed.

Shortly afterwards, this same person told my parents that it was no longer in their interests to support me, strongly hinting that my father, a barrister, would cease step receiving briefs from Jewish solicitors.

So much for the love of debate.

In 2014, my non-Jewish partner Ali Sharon secured a senior job with Oxfam in East Jerusalem. I was initially reluctant to be in an area that had consumed so much of my professional life, but soon decided that it would be a unique opportunity to engage deep living based for a year together in our town South Sudan. All's commitment to human rights was one of the main reasons I had fallen in love with her.

The author and Ali. (courtesy of simon sakzewski)

We moved to the Palestinian neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah, two kilometres north of the ancient walled city of Jerusalem. It was – then and now – a place suffused with tension. Jewish settlers sought property from Palestinian with impunity, claiming ownership of their homes. Israeli police harassed the non-violent protests of the Palestinian residents, and, in turn, Israeli media communicates that here all the hallmarks of a 19th century Eastern European ghetto, including strict adherence to Jewish prayer, modest clothing for women and long, black coats and hats for the men.

This was a period when my aspiration to Israeli policies began to further harden. I would see what the occupation was doing and how it was becoming an immutable fact of life, and this drew me closer to my Palestinian friends rather than to the extremist Jews who wanted to expel them.

Today, the situation is far worse. In December last year, Israel's longest-serving prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, indicated he plans to annex the occupied Palestinian territories of the West Bank. Meanwhile, Netanyahu himself faces indictment on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, some members of his cabinet were convicted felons, including Aryeh Deri (civ. an extremist settler Israeli party in 2007 by a Jerusalem District Court of inciting racism and supporting a terrorist organisation.

Deri (civ is now Israel's national security minister, in charge of the country's police force.

Graffiti in the Gaza Strip. COURTESY OF ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN

Racism in Israel has begun to soar to new heights. In March this year, Israel's far-right Minister of Finance, Bezalel Smotrich, called for the Palestinian village of Huwara "to be wiped out" in the wake of a Palestinian gunman's killing of two Jewish settlers. Shortly after the killing, Huwara was subjected to one of the worst cases of mass Israeli settler violence in years when hundreds of Jews attacked the town, setting fire to Palestinian homes, torching cars and terrorising the local population. One Palestinian was killed and dozens more wounded while the Israeli army looked on. (Smotrich later called his remarks a "slip of the tongue in a storm of emotions".)

As a Jew, I see it as my duty to speak out against actions like these. Yes, anti-Semitism is a real and growing threat, but combating it requires an understanding of how unqualified Jewish support for Israeli behaviour sometimes contributes to it.

A key theme in my new book, *The Palestine Laboratory*, is how the Jewish state has spent decades developing the tools and technologies to oppress the Palestinians, and how it now exports these tools to well over 100 countries, including dictatorships such as Myanmar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The conflict in the Middle East is not a contest between two equal sides and that is not just my view. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, leading Israeli human rights groups such as B'Tselem and Palestinian civil society have all released reports in the last few years accusing Israel of committing the crime of apartheid and crimes against humanity.

This is not the Israel I care to support, and it's not the Israel that an increasing number of Jews – both inside and outside the country – feel willing to defend. To me, that is a rare sign of hope, as is the generational shift in thinking amongst Democrats and young Jews in the US. A Gallup poll this year found for the first time that US Democrats sympathise more now with Palestinians than Israeli Jews. Within the American Jewish community, there's a civil war-of-words over attitudes towards Israel. Barely a day passes without a synagogue finally allowing anti-Zionist views to be heard or Jewish youth groups insisting to their elders that Palestinian voices be listened to and respected.

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Antony Loewenstein

In Australia, the Jewish establishment remains resolutely Zionist, but cracks are beginning to appear. I've heard from a variety of Jewish contacts that many young Jews are voting for the Greens, undeterred by the party's well-known opposition to Israeli occupation, while at the same time Palestinians are forcefully challenging the Jewish community to view them as equals.

At the recent Adelaide Writers' Week, director Louise Adler invited at least half a dozen Palestinians to appear, despite outrage from sections of the Jewish establishment and the media. Incensed by inflammatory comments on social media by a Palestinian writer, they demanded more Jewish and Israeli perspectives. Adler – the daughter of "devout secular" immigrant Jews, steeped in Jewish culture herself – refused to back down, despite the withdrawal of some sponsors, and as a result, many Australians heard, perhaps for the first time, the unfiltered voices of Palestinians.

The author with Ali in Bethlehem in 2018. COURTESY OF ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN

My wish is to follow in the grand tradition of a hybrid, cosmopolitan Jewish identity. When I became a German citizen in 2011 – thanks to the German Basic Law restoring citizenship to descendants of those who'd had theirs removed by the Nazis – I cried as the consular official handed me my new passport. It felt like a final victory against Hitler, a victory against hate.

Even the rabbi who prepared me for my bar mitzvah – and has known my family for decades – has publicly decried his "eternal embarrassment" at being my Jewish teacher.

Daring to speak out against Israel's behaviour towards the Palestinians brings with it an endless amount of personal attack. Even the rabbi who prepared me for my bar mitzvah – and has known my family for decades – has publicly decried his "eternal embarrassment" at being my Jewish teacher.

Today, I have two young boys with Ali and we're intent on raising them with some knowledge of Jewish traditions and history. But it won't be the fairy-tale version of Israel that I was fed, because that's a version that seeks to erase the trauma and history of an entire Palestinian nation.

Writing this story has forced me to again consider the emotional cost of opposing Israeli actions. I'm not asking for sympathy; rather, for a better understanding from my fellow Jews that to criticise Israel is not to render oneself a lesser Jew or a traitorous Jew. It is to stand up for what is most noble in the Jewish traditions of enlightened, liberal humanism.

Antony Loewenstein's *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports The Technology Of Occupation Around The World* (Scribe, $35) is out May 30.

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