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The Suicide Bomber Took Malki's Life, But Not Our Convictions

By Lee Hockstader Sunday, August 19, 2001; Page B01

JERUSALEM

There is little in this city to suggest hope these days. The emotional aftershock of the terror attack Aug. 9, in which a Palestinian suicide bomber killed himself and 15 others in a Sbarro pizzeria, has left Jerusalem bitter and on edge. Fear of what might explode next has thinned out traffic and emptied stores and malls. Cafes and restaurants are posting security guards at the doors to deter the next bomber.

Almost no one expects peace or even believes it possible in the foreseeable future. A newspaper headline a few days ago said the army expects the violence to continue until 2006 and is planning accordingly. Whether it is well grounded or not, a rare consensus has formed among Israelis of almost every political stripe that the Palestinians have slipped the bonds of reason, spurned negotiations and embraced the way of blood.

When I interviewed Arnold Roth the other day, his modest apartment in northern Jerusalem was teeming with grieving visitors: Roth's teenage daughter Malki was among the victims of the pizzeria

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bombing. Roth is a 49-year-old lawyer who manages a pharmaceutical technology company, a thoughtful man whose dignity was as evident as his despair.

During the course of a 90-minute conversation, excerpts from which appear below, Roth discussed the tragedy not only in personal terms, but in the context of Jewish life and history. His wife, Frimet, who was in tears when I arrived, did not join us.

Do you see any historical precedent for what's happening in Israel today?

It's the endless nature of baseless hatred. I think there are very few Jews who don't feel what I'm about to say. That is, that the profound hatred that we encounter doesn't really have any basis to it. It's something that's really, from our perspective, an imponderable. Baseless hatred was at the root of the Holocaust, and baseless hatred is what you have to be possessed of in order to walk into a restaurant full of teenagers [and blow it up].

When you say baseless hatred, it's not necessarily baseless from the Palestinians' point of view.

I don't want to relate to that at all. What happened in that restaurant, I cannot see it as a political act. It has no connection to politics. It's an act of barbarism. There are some things that are so far outside the pale, they can't be discussed without giving them a degree of legitimacy. I'm not willing to do that.

How about yourselves? One has to continue living, but life can become quite circumscribed in a place so dangerous that restaurants can blow up.

That's the answer -- you can't live like that. And in a certain way that's conceding the field to the barbarians.

But how can you lead a non-circumscribed life when you think of some of the neighbors as "barbarians"?

There's a duality of thinking here and I think most Jews in Israel feel this way. On one side we certainly see a plague of barbarians around us. But at another level of our consciousness we know there are people here with real interests, with lives, with needs that are very similar to the needs that we have. What we see is a colossal, catastrophic failure of leadership on the part of our neighbors, and something which must change because it's inconceivable that it would continue for another minute. Of course, it is continuing, but it must change. No leadership can lead its people to such a historical catastrophe for long without the system rising up and reacting.

Now it's out of our control entirely. There's nothing we can do, I don't think. I'm not focused on the barbarians and I'm not focused on their leaders and I'm not focused on their needs. I really don't care how they resolve their problems. Of course I know that, ultimately, their problem is our problem and we'll need to come to terms with them. I'm quite convinced that there's no lack of will on our side to do that. [But] there's no dialogue with barbarians.

Roth's daughter Malki was 15 years old, tall and willowy, a gifted classical flutist and youth group leader blessed with a sunny disposition and dozens of friends. Her best friend and neighbor, Michal Raziell, went downtown with her for lunch at Sbarro that day. Now they are buried together, side by side.

When Malki's parents recovered her cell phone from the police, they were struck by two things: A nail from the bomb had shredded the leatherette case and, in small handwriting, Malki had written a reminder to herself by the mouthpiece -- "Speak no ill of others."

During the week-long shiva, or period of mourning, Roth was reluctant to discuss politics. He preferred to focus on Malki, her music and her deep involvement with disabled children that sprang from caring for her handicapped little sister, Haya, who is blind and severely brain-damaged. But Malki's life, and death, led him to broader topics, and I nudged him, too.

Tell me about Malki.

Malki had the sunniest disposition you'd ever meet in a child. She was amazingly optimistic and positive; it was very striking. Malki was a very outgoing, people-oriented person. She had a huge circle of friends.

She was an okay student; she was too busy to be a brilliant student -- busy with everything else outside of school. First of all, her music made tremendous demands on her. She was a very talented flutist and then taught herself piano and guitar and was extremely good at both of those. But it was her flute -- she could reduce me to tears any time just by playing the flute, and she did, she was wonderful.

There were two [other] major demands on her time. One was helping Frimet with the baby. The other was youth group activities. Malki had a group of girls that she led. If you go to her bedroom you'll see a mountain of little notes and tchotchkes that she prepared for her kids. What she was really doing was constantly giving expression to feelings of love. This girl radiated love, it's the most striking thing about her, you can see in pictures of her this girl had a face that shone with love. That was the essence of Malki.

You have a second son going into the army. In the context of this conflict, are you concerned that the experience of the army these days can be brutalizing, just as any war is brutalizing?

You're absolutely right. Pinhas, our oldest boy,

was chastised by one of his commanders for smiling repeatedly -- serial smiling -- at Arabs who were passing through a roadblock he was manning three years ago. There's a certain degree of humanity that we all have, and some people manage to camouflage it better than others. No doubt that the army and the entire experience of dealing with a hostile presence in the neighborhood is a brutalizing one. But it doesn't necessarily lead to brutalization, I don't think, inside our family nor among most of our friends.

The issue here is, where are your priorities? Our goal is definitely to be focused on the constructive. No one was more constructive than this beautiful girl [Malki]. Her life was an act of beauty -- all but the last few seconds of it.

Israel is a country of immigrants. Roth, who is Australian by birth, and his American-born wife, Frimet, 47, came to Israel from Melbourne in 1988, when Malki was 2. They were driven by the Zionist conviction that Jews should settle the biblical land of Israel. Now, in their grief, they are grappling with the implications of that decision, with the nature of the lethal conflict between Arabs and Jews and the resulting perils of daily life -- shopping, going to lunch, buying the groceries.

When you think back on your decision to come to Israel -- and you came during the first intifada -- did it give you pause to come to a place so conflicted?

It wasn't a career move and it wasn't a personal safety move. It was an imperative, wanting to be where Jewish life and Jewish destiny have always been determined, the natural place for Jews. Now I'm conscious that makes me sound like some kind of dinosaur, but that really is what compels both Frimet and me -- a strong sense of the rightness of being here, the naturalness of being here.

You've been here 13 years. Do you ever think about leaving?

Anyone who tells you they've never thought of cutting and running isn't being honest. At some level you think about running and hiding under the pillow in your bedroom. But it's [like] the feeling when you walk into a department store -- "I'd love to grab everything that I see and run out of the store without having to pay for it." But we have a lot at stake here. We have deep roots, we're raising children who absolutely love the land and love being here and never see themselves in any other framework.

Has Malki's death dented that conviction?

Please remember we are just grieving over a very, very open and fresh injury which is almost beyond bearing. Let me put my comments into a context that might surprise you.

My father was the youngest of 17 [children]. He was born in Poland before the war and ultimately was the only one of the family who stayed in Europe and survived -- went through Auschwitz, then came to Australia. He had one older brother, 20 years older, who had the insight to come to Palestine in the early 1930s, before the war. And his brother -- my uncle here in Palestine -- also survived and as a result I have a cousin who is a woman in her sixties. She went back to Poland a couple of years ago and went to Krakow.

While there, she managed to find in a museum a series of pages which gave me the first-ever look at my father as he looked before the war. This was a photograph on a German census form in the Krakow ghetto just prior to its liquidation by the Germans.

There were two other pages there that were tremendously significant: pictures of two of his sisters who were also living in the ghetto.

And one of them, Feiga, is the twin of Malki. Malki and I both went out of our minds when we saw that picture because there was a sense of the continuity of Jewish history, of Jewish existence. Malki saw herself and I saw her as being the continuation of this Feiga who died in the war, as the continuation of that generation which was cut off.

So when we talk about Jewish life and personal life after a tragedy like this, at one level it has to be understood as something more than a personal tragedy. It's part of Jewish life. Jewish life's had lots of tragedies and lots of achievements. Personally, I can't relate to what's happened without trying to put it into some kind of context of the family and of the people.

Lee Hockstader is The Post's Jerusalem bureau chief.

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