

A 'Case' of Love by David E. Kaplan

It was December 2023 and I was walking along Allenby Street in Tel Aviv. There had been air raid sirens earlier and there were the expectations of more. Allenby's animated atmosphere was one still of shopping, but its mood was one of war. I was thinking, "*Where to seek shelter?*" should the shrieking siren sound, when I raised my head and saw a sign. It was less of *looking up* and more of *looking back*, when I recognised the long-forgotten "HALPER'S BOOKS" with an arrow guiding me down a narrow alley to the tucked away charming second-hand English bookstore. Eighteen years earlier, I ran a story on its owner, a New Jersey native, Yossi Halper. I never would have believed the bookstore was still in existence, but there it was and I could not resist entering.

"*Surely a different owner after all these years*" I thought, but no, there was Yossi, like me, less hair on top, more anatomy below. We greeted each other with beaming smiles surrounded by books from floor to ceiling. Amidst the present war, our minds went back in time to another war and an ageless war romance - much like what must have been tucked between many of the book covers that surrounded us.

In 2006, a younger Yossi was riding to work on his bicycle when he noticed a decrepit old suitcase on the pavement in Allenby Street. Keen to stop and take it, he resisted the temptation and rode on to his bookstore. Unable to quench his insatiable curiosity, he went back, grabbed the discarded case and returned to his store.

What he unpacked were numerous romantic letters from the early 1940s from two young soldiers, written from their battlefronts to Ophra, a young pretty Tel Aviv girl with whom they were both madly in love. The one soldier was a local Jewish Palestinian serving in the Jewish Brigade, the other a Rhodesian, a lieutenant Haig Kaplan, serving with the Southern Rhodesian Armoured Car Regiment in East Africa. Haig had met Ophra while stationed with the Scottish Regiment in Palestine before being shunted off to confront Rommel's African Corps. From the letters, it is revealed that Ophra, the daughter of a Hebrew teacher at the nearby Herzliya Gymnasia on Herzl Street and somewhat of a socialite, had met the dashing Rhodesian in uniform at a tea party for Jewish soldiers hosted by a South African. At the time, Haig was 21 and Ophra 23. They dated for two years during the British Mandate period and wrote letters weekly but not necessarily received weekly due to the unpredictability of wartime transportation and military censorship.

With a wry smile, Yossi told me at the time of the 2006 interview that he surmised that young Ophra received only letters from Haig, while from the local lad, probably flowers as well. “*Home advantage*,” chuckled Yossi. In the end, Ophra made her choice, and a devastated Haig admits in a last letter to Ophra on learning that she had become engaged to his rival, to burning all her letters.

Not Ophra! She kept all the letters from her two suiters and in the early 1950s, handed over a suitcase containing all their correspondence to her sister. It also contained invitations to British balls, photographs and other mementos of Tel Aviv life from the early 1940s.

When the sister, who lived in an apartment in Allenby passed away in 2006, the suitcase was dumped outside on the pavement. Were it not for Yossi’s inquisitive nature, the story may have ended there - amongst a heap of discarded household wares on a grey Tel Aviv pavement.

Shifting gear from bookstore proprietor to sleuth, Yossi set out to discover who of this love triangle, were still alive. As fortune would have it, about a week after finding the suitcase and reading through most of the letters, a South African couple stopped by Halper’s shop, to whom Yossi could not resist asking:

“I know it’s a long shot but you would not happen to know of a Lieutenant Kaplan who served in Palestine prior to 1948?”

Jewish geography immediately kicked in with Jewish history as the reply came back:

“We know Haig’s brother; he lives in Rehovot.”

A city not far from Tel Aviv where many Jews from Southern Africa had settled, Yossi got in touch with the brother that led him to the long-jilted lover, who was living in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. “He was totally bowled over and very excited to speak with me about the letters,” said Halper. “He added a lot of information about his experiences including having a son who lived in Eilat.”

After serving in North Africa, Europe and East Africa and helping to bring World War II refugees to Palestine, Haig settled for the country life, founding together with fellow South Africans, Leib Golan, Monie Chemel and Harry Salber and other members of Southern African Habonim and *HaTnuah HaMe’uchedet*, kibbutz Ma’Ayan Baruch on Israel’s border with Lebanon. It was here he met his wife, a Holocaust survivor, and the couple later moved to Rhodesia, today, Zimbabwe.

Next up for the intrepid bookstore detective was the hunt for Ophra, who a local journalist helped locate. At 94, Ophra was living in Tel Aviv and was happy to welcome Yossi and her “*eyes lit up*” when he handed her the old love letters.

“She had the gentle bearing of an aristocratic woman,” said Yossi, “with beautifully coiffed hair, high heels and pearls.” He revealed that she had been born in Tel Aviv “to a fourth generation Israeli on her father’s side and a third generation Israeli on her mother’s side and had served in the air defense of the Civil Guard managed by the municipality of Tel Aviv during the War of Independence. She clearly recalled to Yossi the celebrations in the street outside Independence Hall after Israel proclaimed statehood on May 14, 1948. It was not too far from where I stood with Yossi at his bookstore now, during the current war with Gaza in 2024.

Back in 2006, Yossi and Ophra talked for over an hour about her memories of Tel Aviv during the 1930s and ’40s. “Her family, the Carsentys, were one of the early settlers of Rothschild Boulevard then considered to be the outskirts of the city.” Ophra spoke of the orange groves near the family home, which her parents built in 1928. She also recalled the Arab riots of 1929, and the Hagana outpost that was set up on the roof of the home to thwart Arab attacks. What has changed I thought as I ask Yossi, “where do we need to run to if the siren goes.”

Yossi’s mind returned to the earlier war of WWII and continued:

“Ophra told me that Haig used to come to Tel Aviv quite often, with or without leave.” Haig’s unit was primarily made up of the descendants of Scottish settlers living in then Rhodesia and the uniform was the Scottish kilt, which was frequently referred to in her letters with amusement. This came as little surprise after Yossi revealed that Ophra shyly related an occasion when Haig descended a ladder in a Tel Aviv bookstore in his Scottish apparel “showing her and her mother a bit more than they expected to see.”

When Ophra first clutched the letters given to her by Yossi, as if a discovered treasure trove, she remarked while journeying thoughtfully back in time:

“We were so young. We wrote about how we missed each other, how the days passed and when leave was expected.”

Haig had written many of his letters in his tent by candlelight and sealed them with wax. Others he wrote on scraps of paper or whatever else he could find to write on. One of the last letters

Ophra received explained that he had not been in touch “because I was too busy burning your letters” after she had informed him that she met someone else and was engaged to be married.

Over a half century later, with both Haig and Ophra having lost their spouses, their letter writing was resumed. This was after Yossi put them in touch with each other. Over the ensuing years, Yossi kept in touch with Ophra. “She revealed to me that Haig apologized for burning her letters and said he had done it on impulse.”

When Yossi asked Ophra why she decided to save her collection of letters, she replied:

“I think that a written word has value - it is different than a spoken word; it’s wrong to burn words when they are written with emotion and meaning.”

Then one day, a couple years later, their communication abruptly ended. Haig had died suddenly from a stroke. And so, their second session of letter writing came to an end. Through this all, they never saw each other again since the 1940s.

“Even now when I reread these letters, they touch me. I feel very connected,” Ophra told Yossi shortly before she too finally passed away ending a saga that was revealed in a discarded suitcase on Allenby Street in downtown Tel Aviv.

“Case finally closed,” mused Yossi.

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Written by David Kaplan in 2024

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