

The following is a biography of Eliahu Goldenberg, once well known in Israel in the entertainment business. He also appeared often voluntarily in schools, reading from the works from the Yiddish, of men like Sholem Aleichem and Y.L. Peretz. And he taught diction to some of the best-known Israeli broadcasters. From such humble beginnings came a very self-educated man. [Ellen Stepak]

Jerusalem, Dec. 15, 1983

It is extremely difficult for me to get up, gather together material from some 70 years ago and write a biography of a person who is close to my heart, of a person who is dear to me, of a person with whom I traveled a long and difficult road. Especially our childhood, a childhood lacking everything, is dealt with in these pages; Eliahu of blessed memory. It is difficult for me to write of my brother without including myself, as we were connected heart and soul till his final days, which ended too early.

Eliahu Goldenberg was born in a remote town called Sosnivka in Russia on 9.9.1909 to poor parents, the sixth and the youngest. As we were a family blessed with many children, our parents did not have much time for each of us, to play with us, tell us stories, etc....So we as independents sought and found games to play outside: sand, stones, mud etc. were not lacking in the streets of the village, and there we spent our time.

Although we were 6 children and each one contributed his share in our lives, I will tell only the story of Eliahu in order to show up his own personality

When Eliahu was one year and a few months old, our mother passed away (and I was almost three). Of course we do not remember her (I haven't even have seen one photo of her to this day.).

Eliahu was a very cute child, I loved him deeply and began to watch over him, to play with him, and to take upon myself the role of his guardian. We always went together everywhere, we appeared to be twins, and we spent our time among the Christian children until the time came to go to "cheder" (school). There was no school in the village: a teacher would occasionally come for the older children, but no teacher wanted to come teach the younger ones, so Father decided to leave the village and move to the nearest town--Belozorka, a small town with a small number of Jews, on the border between Russia and Poland. Father took us to the cheder for the first time in our lives (we were not so young). There we were supposed to learn to read and write, but the "rebbe" (teacher) didn't know how to write, only to pray from the prayer book. Still, we remained with the teacher a whole "time". This was half a year, that was how they measured the school year in those days.

We remained with this "educated" teacher 6 whole months! We saw that geniuses we will not become here, and asked our father to find us another teacher, so that we went from teacher to teacher, none of whom knew more than the others, except that some sort of knew how to write, until one bright day a certified Hebrew teacher (named Butt) arrived, and all the town's children hurried to register for the newly opened school, the first in the history of the town. We also registered, the teacher was wonderful, we loved him, he saved us. I will never forget him; too bad that the great time I spent with him was cut short, because at age twelve I had to take on the role of housewife with all that entailed, and could not continue my studies. (All I've managed to learn over the years was on my own.)

Eliahu and myself were in the same class, and excelled in our studies. We were actually starved for a good teacher and regular studies. We swallowed every word that left his mouth, and every day of school was a holiday for us. The teacher was marvelous, he loved all his pupils but he had a special relationship with the "black two" (as we were called, because we were very slim and dark). The teacher especially loved Eliahu because he was an exceptionally diligent pupil and always helped pupils who weren't so successful at their studies. Everyone wanted to be in Eliahu's company, he loved to sing, and he taught all of them all that he knew.

He organized a group of amateurs among our friends and together we put on plays directed by Eliahu. The "Sale of Jacob", "David and Goliath" and other such plays were directed by Eliahu who played the main roles, always with great success. He was kind-hearted and was always ready to help, always modestly and quietly, so that the one helped would not feel he was being helped.

At a young age he began to look for ways of earning his own way. He invented wooden mousetraps and sold them. From rubber used for shoe soles he made all kinds of stamps, and anyone who needed a special rubber stamp applied to Eliahu who supplied the request. But all his work and successes did not satisfy Eliahu's desire to make progress in his life. At age twelve and a half he left town to go far away and seek new horizons. The place he chose to go to was Krakow, because there someone had promised him work. He took his modest baggage with him and left. In Krakow he rented a room and began to work at anything he was offered, among other jobs as a sales clerk. In his free hours he studied, painted and embroidered. On one of his towels we saw a view of Krakow which he embroidered as he sat in the store, of the view he saw through the window.

In 1929 Eliahu left Krakow for Warsaw but not before visiting us in Belozorka. When he'd left the house he had been a child, and there was no one to remember his 13th birthday; there had been no bar-mitzvah celebration. Eliahu grew up and was educated on his own without assistance, and when he returned from Krakow he was a handsome young man, with a lovely shiny shock of black hair, and black eyes full of life. He sang many new songs. Our house filled up with friends, acquaintances, everyone wanted to see him and to shake his hand. Especially crazy over him were my girlfriends, they surrounded him as flies do honey. It was a great honor for any girl when Eliahu invited her to dance or taught her a new song. They were envious of me for having such a brother. Among the visitors was a good friend of Father's, who once had been one of Eliahu's teachers. This man was extremely religious and "knew" that his religious student went every morning to pray at the synagogue even in the worst winter weather. And when I commented that one may pray at home, he answered me in anger: "If all the Jews were to pray at home, why did they build the synagogues?" And this Jew loved Eliahu very much and turned to him directly: "Tell me Eliahuneh, do you pray every morning and put on phylacteries properly?" Eliahu didn't think very much and on the spot answered: "No, I don't pray." That Jew didn't know how to respond to such insolence of his beloved pupil, got red as fire, and began to walk away on twisted legs as if a snake was crawling by him. Finally he turned again to Eliahu and with a gesture as if asking for pity, asked: "How is it that Eliahuneh you do not pray, and tell me so!" Eliahu again quietly and confidently and with grace responded: "because I don't want 2 sins: first--that I don't pray, and secondly--that I lie to my teacher". This time the Jew paled, became silent. After a few minutes he approached Eliahu, hugged and kissed him and then turned to Father and said to him: "Michals, du hast a groissen zohn" (Michael, you have a great son).

After a few weeks together at home, Eliahu went to Warsaw. In that same year I left Belozorka for Argentina, and I traveled via Warsaw to take my leave of my brother, who awaited me at the train and led me directly to his room. In the evening he gave me his bed and he himself slept on the floor, on his raincoat. He would not agree to accept a blanket in order to cover himself, for fear that I wouldn't be warm enough.

The following day Eliahu gave me a tiny package for the journey, I know that all his savings were [the equivalent of] 5 dollars and understood that what he was giving me had cost all those savings. So I asked him, why did he spend all he had on me? Then he replied in his perpetual charm:

"Sharaleh, it's a pity I haven't another 5 dollars, gladly would I spend them on you!" Such was my brother, always quiet and always smiling.

On April 4, 1934 between Tuesday and Wednesday, at 2:30 a.m. our father died. He had been lonely, and didn't want to come with me to Argentina. His neighbors had notified Eliahu of his illness, and within 20 hours Eliahu made it home (more rapid transportation didn't exist then), but he was too late. He arrived after the funeral, and all that remained was to visit the new grave of his father and also the grave of his mother, and cry. He saw to preparing gravestones, and wrote me, "I do not know what to do with all the energy and desire I'd come with to help Father. . . ."

After sitting shivah Eliahu disposed of the house and its contents for pennies and returned to Warsaw where he continued to work, study, and teach; and we continued corresponding as usual. According to an agreement between us, he always corrected my mistakes in Hebrew, which was idyllic...until the Nazis took over the world. Eliahu left Warsaw with one small suitcase, and we did not hear from him

and didn't know about him until Nov. 1, 1946, when there was a notice in the Yiddische Zeitung of Argentina that Eliahu Goldenberg was looking for his family. There was also a photo of his family: Lili, and their first-born son, David, today Dudu Topaz. Of course our joy was tremendous, the connection was renewed. By then Eliahu was in Israel, and his mailing address was: The Cultural Center of the Histadrut, Tel Aviv, POB 303, Palestine. The letter exchange resumed; meanwhile they had another son, Michael, today Miki Goldenberg.

The years passed, my own son Yehuda married and together with his wife Pupeh immigrated to Israel. A year later they had a son, Ilan. They invited me to come meet my first grandson.

The year was 1955 when I came as a tourist, and after many years of separation, I met my brother. There was no sign of that black shock of hair; white "snow" now covered his head. Years of suffering, concerns about making a living, attempts to study, escape from an enemy--all of these had left their mark on his beautiful face, but Eliahu never retreated. He continued as usual on his way, always seeking the truth. It pained him very much that our country was not as he had wished to find it. He did not like politics, he ran from it. He was a good husband and dedicated father. I knew him well, we were both adults, each with a great "package" of life experience. He used to appear all over the country, and I attended all his performances. He confided in me about everything and told me about his successes and less-than-successes. . . .

The final performances of his life were in Jerusalem, where I currently reside. By then he was already ill. But as usual he did not give in. He visited me, I asked him to stop working so hard, but he would not be dissuaded, and continued to work until the very end.

After the performances in Jerusalem he had a very serious operation, suffered very much, and again and again was hospitalized. It is interesting that the same fate which tied us at the beginning of our lives, accompanied us until the end. We both were hospitalized at the same time. While Eliahu was hospitalized in Tel Aviv, I was hospitalized in the Beer Sheva hospital for 6 weeks. At that time Eliahu was still able to write and he sent me a letter of "complaint": how come you're sick too? Couldn't you have waited another 20 years? (He was still in a mood to joke, so apparently he was unaware of the imminent end.)

In the next few weeks, I awaited Eliahu's visit. He did not come. His condition worsened; I wasn't told. However, the very fact that he did not appear to see me was a clear sign that something was wrong.

As I myself was in poor condition, and thought that probably I would not recover, I longed to see my brother for the last time. By that time, I had been staying with my son and his wife on the kibbutz, for a month and a half, and I began to nag them to take me to see Eliahu. They found all kinds of excuses not to take me, because I was not well enough for the journey, and also they did not want me to see Eliahu in that condition. . . . Eventually they gave in to my request and took me. By then Eliahu had been transferred to Beit Levinstein in Raanana. We began to search for him, when the elevator opened, and brought Eliahu on a wheelchair. To describe my state and my feelings at that moment I am unable, I barely stood on my feet. I restrained myself from crying out, and at that moment I heard a voice, a voice that resembled an echo, an echo coming from a tunnel. The voice issued from a sick and painful throat, the voice made a super-human effort to come forth despite the difficulties. And the voice released one word I had heard so many times from Eliahu: "Sharaleh! Why did you come?" (The word Sharaleh continues to echo in my mind.)

We stayed with him a short while. I noticed with much sorrow how my brother wanted to drink a little tea and was unable to swallow, wanted to exchange a few words with me and the voice--that same voice which one would drive my girlfriends "crazy"--this time that voice betrayed him. . . .

Still I hoped that his condition would improve and Eliahu would again stand up and return to his usual ways, but his luck decided otherwise. . . . I visited him on Oct. 19th, 1976 which was indeed the last time I saw my little brother. Two weeks later Eliahu was no longer among the living; he died on Nov. 4th, 1976. No one told me the bitter news, only the following day at 8:00 p.m. I heard on the radio: "The reader and director Eliahu Goldenberg is no more". How this report (I was alone in the house still very ill) affected me and what happened to me later on--no need to relate.

The funeral took place on Sunday 14 Heshvan, 5737 (Nov. 7th 1976) at 12:00 noon at the municipal funeral home. He was buried in the Holon Cemetery.

I accompanied my brother on his final journey with broken heart, and exhaustion. I returned home broken and worn out, and it took a long time till I recovered partially.Thus ends the short and sad story of my dear little brother Eli blessed be his memory.

Who will cause the earth to be light upon him, as he was light upon it. It is a pity that his tall gravestone is so far from Jerusalem, and I am unable to visit there very often--I simply haven't the energy.

His sister,

[Sarah]

translated from Hebrew by Ellen Stepak

ES: I recall visiting Eliahu in Ichilov Hospital--the same hospital which was to figure later on in so many of our family tragedies--Eliahu telling me that his sister was probably sicker than he. Sarah died about 1988.