The little girl in the pink woolen hat gives a halfhearted smile, as though she knows she is one of the lucky ones. She has just arrived with some 40 men, women and children on a gray rubber dinghy meant for a dozen people. The next day, on a voyage along the same route, a boat would capsize, cutting short the dreams and lives of 37 passengers. But on this overcast winter morning, a group of Syrian and other refugees from the Middle East can breathe a sigh of relief, having made the short but perilous six-mile journey from the western coast of Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos.

A burly Israeli paramedic wearing a dark ski cap has been pacing nervously, waiting for the boat to reach the rocky shore of the island. Now, donning rubber boots, he rushes into the water and begins lifting children out of the dinghy and carrying them to the shore. Most are dazed, some are crying, a couple look curious.

The girl in the pink hat does not seem to have her mother with her. She clings to the barrel-chested man. He offers her a banana and carries her in his arms until there is no trace of fear left in her eyes.

Such encounters between Syrians and Israelis take place daily on Lesbos. The island is a lighthouse of hope for many, a watery grave for others and a setting for ironic twists of fate—like the one in which a 2-year-old from Syria is welcomed to European soil by a man from Israel.

For Molham Zreqe—who held the girl until her father reached the shore—coming to Lesbos was the natural thing to do.

“What should I sit at home watching the suffering of Syrians or

IsraAID paramedic Molham Zreqe with a 2-year-old Syrian girl.

(opposite page) A medic waits to receive refugees.
Encounters between Israelis and Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi refugees take place every day on an island in the Aegean Sea, part of an attempt to help these asylum seekers on their voyage to a new life.

Story and photos by Leora Eren Frucht
any other refugees on television when I can actually do something to help?” asks 22-year-old Zreqe, a Muslim Arab from the town of Kfar Kana, just outside Nazareth.

Zreqe is one of over 60 Israelis, most of them volunteers—both Jews and Arabs—who have come to Lesbos since September 2015 to help refugees under the auspices of IsraAID, an Israeli nongovernmental organization that provides emergency aid and long-term support to victims of natural and manmade disasters worldwide.

To address the current refugee crisis, the nonprofit organization—founded by a young Israeli, Shachar Zahavi, in 2001 and funded by UNICEF, various businesses, foundations, Jewish federations and individual donors—set up teams in a number of locations: Jordan, Iraq (Kurdistan), Northern France, mainland Greece, Lesbos and, most recently, Germany.

Naama Gorodischer, global programs director of IsraAID, arrived in Lesbos last September to see the situation firsthand. “It was sheer chaos. There were thousands of refugees arriving daily and everyone, including the mayor, was totally overwhelmed,” recalls Gorodischer. “There were many volunteers and a lot of good will, but very little strategy and no one spoke the language of the refugees. I knew we had a unique combination of skills: We have experience providing medical and psychosocial support in an emergency, and we could do that in the mother tongue of the refugees. We felt it was our duty to send a team.”

At any one time, about a dozen IsraAID volunteers with medical or social work skills are based on Lesbos, an island in the Aegean Sea that is home to some 85,000 Greeks. Over half a million refugees—about 50 percent from Syria, 30 percent from Afghanistan and roughly 15 percent from Iraq—have arrived in Lesbos since September alone. Even now, as various European countries take steps to close their gates, the refugees keep coming. In March, the tally ranged from 50 to 1,400 a day, fluctuating according to the weather conditions and whims of smugglers on the Turkish side. “We plan to keep a team on the island as long as we see the need,” says Gorodischer.

Most of the refugees stay on the island only a few days before heading off by ferry to the Athens port of Piraeus. From there they have until recently been heading to northern Europe, hoping to start new lives.
But by the time they get to this island, many are injured, traumatized or both. “The most common conditions you will encounter are panic, hypothermia and stab wounds,” says male nurse and team member Malek Abu Grara, 22, coaching two medical volunteers who have just arrived from Tel Aviv and Modi’in.

The stab wounds are often incurred during the journey through Turkey, the result of altercations with smugglers who charge from $1,200 to $2,200 a person for a place on a boat and will sometimes force refugees at gunpoint to board overcrowded, flimsy vessels.

“There are parents who arrive after having lost a child, or children who arrive having lost one or both parents—usually as a result of a shipwreck,” explains Warda Alkrenawy, 35, a social worker from the Bedouin town of Rahat in the Negev Desert. “I accompany refugees who have to identify the body of a family member—and then I stay with them, visiting them every day, crying with them and trying to help them regain their strength.”

Alkrenawy works mainly at two of the three refugee camps on the island and was one of the first Arabic-speaking volunteers there. She recalls one bereaved mother who would faint every few hours after losing her daughter at sea. “I stayed with her every day until the color returned to her face and she was able to tend to her other children,” says Alkrenawy.

I
sraAID team leader Manal Shehade, a Christian Arab from Nazareth fluent in English, Hebrew and Arabic, notes that the group from Israel brings especially relevant skills to the mission. “We understand how to handle trauma because we are a people—whether it’s Palestinians or Israelis—who have suffered trauma,” she explains. “As a people who come from an area of conflict, we know how to work in stressful situations.”

Like her, about half the team are native Arabic speakers. Several of the Jewish team members also speak Arabic. One—Inbal Baron, whose grandparents hail from Afghanistan—also speaks Farsi, enabling the 36-year-old to communicate with most of the Afghan refugees.

On a typical day, Baron can be found at the Moria refugee camp, which was set up by Greek authorities at a former army base near Mytilini, the capital of Lesbos. At the camp, Baron—who has a master’s degree in Middle East studies from Tel Aviv University—uses her language skills (English, too) to help refugees at the clinic, information booth and clothing tent.

Four sisters approach Baron with a question: One of
them has soaking wet shoes and they want to know if she can get replacements. Speaking in Farsi, Baron tells them when the clothing tent will open. The girls, ages 10 through 16, are from a remote region in Afghanistan. They are traveling with their brother, also 16; their parents have stayed behind in Afghanistan.

The girls have not been to school in four years, one of the reasons they left. As girls, they were not allowed to leave the house because of the Taliban insurgency in their area. When asked what they hope to do in Europe, the girls blurt out: “Madrasa” (school).

Twenty-six-year-old Amir Ali, from the Daykundi region of Afghanistan, also needs shoes. “Someone took mine when I went to the shower,” he tells Baron, pointing to the sandals he is wearing on a crisp winter day. He fought alongside American forces in Afghanistan and fled when the Americans pulled out troops. “The Taliban asked if I would join them—and I told them never,” he recounts.

Ali went into hiding but, he says, the Taliban came to his home and murdered his mother and young sister in revenge. Now he is traveling to Germany with one of two brothers—the other got lost “somewhere in Iran.” Baron will get him a pair of shoes for the journey.

The diversity of the IsraAID team—which includes Jews, Christians and Muslims, people who define themselves as Israeli or Palestinian or both as well as some Americans—makes the group unique, even among the dozens of aid workers from a host of countries. “We’re odd ducks compared to the other volunteers on the island, most of whom tend to be tall and blond,” quips Shehade, a small woman with a mane of dark black curls.

International organizations and volunteer groups, mainly from Europe, have set up a few medical clinics for refugees. The IsraAID team packs all its tools—from defibrillators and ventilators to oxygen masks and medications—into a vehicle, enabling them to treat refugees immediately when they arrive on shore, wherever that may be.

“We’re good at improvising,” says Dr. Richard Lapin, 49, a Jewish doctor who made aliyah from the United States five years ago. He is on his third tour of duty in Lesbos.

Dr. Lapin recalls a night in November 2015 when all the medical teams mobilized to receive a boat in distress at a main beach in the north of the island, where a clinic is located. Buffeted by strong winds, the boat instead arrived at a different beach, one with limited room for proper casualty triage and evacuation.

“IsraAID took charge, mobilized medical and nonmedical volunteers and effectively ran what was a mass-casualty incident, giving treatment to those in need. In the middle of this, another boat with more than 100 refugees made its way to an adjacent beach,” says Dr. Lapin. “We effectively divided the limited manpower and ran both sites simultaneously.” Many refugees were suffering from hypothermia, but everyone was treated on the beach, and no one required hospitalization, he adds.

The team offers aid to refugees at virtually every point in the life cycle. Abu Grara, the nurse, learned that for himself on October 16, a date he says is etched in his mind forever.

Abu Grara, a tall, rugged-looking man also from Rahat, fights back tears as he recalls how he performed CPR on a baby who had spent 40 minutes in the frigid sea before being plucked from the water. “All I could do was accompany the mother, who was all alone, to bury him several days later,” he says. Just hours after the burial, Abu Grara found himself cutting an umbilical cord while offering soothing words in Arabic to a new mother whose infant he helped deliver on the rocky beach. “It’s for moments like those that I’m here,” he says.

How do the predominantly Arab refugees respond to the outstretched hands of volunteers from, of all places, Israel?

Upon arrival, many are too exhausted to notice the Israeli volunteers, who wear a blue shirt or jacket with a clearly visible IsraAID emblem.
But sometimes the response is surprising.

“When I say I’m from Israel, many of the Syrians ask me if they can get asylum in Israel,” says Zreqe, the paramedic. Abu Grara says he, too, has encountered that reaction.

Shehade once found herself commiserating with a Palestinian man who had arrived from Syria and whose family was also from Nazareth. “We sat there on the beach of a Greek island looking over photos of Nazareth on my cellphone,” she recalls. “It was very emotional for both of us.”

The IsraAID volunteers say they have never encountered a negative response from a refugee about Israel.

In fact, they say, the only negative reactions—and those, too, have been isolated incidents—have come from other volunteers.

Dr. Lapin has been the target of a few such slights.

“Once an Irish professor stopped my car to say: ‘I find your presence here disgusting—it’s nothing but propaganda,’” relates Dr. Lapin. In another instance, a volunteer spat at a photographer accompanying him.

Perhaps the most bizarre encounter took place right inside the water as Dr. Lapin, who speaks Arabic as well as Hebrew and English, was helping refugees out of a boat. A member of a Muslim NGO—which has since left the island—said to the refugees, in Arabic: “Why are you letting those Jews help you?”

Other volunteers have kinder words. “I have the utmost respect for the Israelis who are here, especially the Jewish volunteers who are helping people whom they believe may be their enemies,” says Neda Kadri, an American volunteer from Detroit whose father is Palestinian and mother Syrian.

What in fact prompts the Jewish volunteers to join a team helping primarily Arab refugees?

“I grew up hearing the stories of my grandparents, who walked across Europe during the Holocaust and lived in a refugee camp in Austria for four years,” says Talya Feldman, 23, a research coordinator at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, who is spending several months volunteering at one of the refugee camps on Lesbos. “My grandparents would talk about their journey and how the kindness of people along the way really helped them. I raised funds to come here in their memory. And my uncle, who was born in a DP camp, is really proud of what I’m doing and says it would have made my grandparents very happy.”

Dr. Lapin, who lives in Tel Aviv, also volunteers at home with refugees, mainly from Eritrea and Sudan. “To me, volunteering is providing something that people have no other means of receiving, and for me that means refugees,” he says.

“These are people who have nothing—they have given everything for their freedom.”

As a young woman with a shock of blond hair, Feldman stands out in the camp, where she works mainly with Middle Eastern men. She says she has never been treated with anything but respect and gratitude—even extraordinary kindness, with refugees sharing the little they have with her.

Feldman is aware that many are raised on a diet of anti-Semitism, but she feels that that makes her presence at the camp even more important.

“Because my name is Talya, most people realize that I’m Jewish, and I don’t hide it,” says Feldman. “Most of them have probably never met a Jew before, so if I can be the first Jew that they meet and I can smile and say ‘Salaam, welcome to Europe, how can we help you?’—maybe that will be the image of Jews that they have instead of whatever propaganda they may have been fed.”

Leora Eren Frucht is a journalist who lives in Israel.
Easing a Brutal Journey

In a personal quest to understand the current plight of refugees and migrants, an activist finds Arizona to be a land of contradictions.

Story and photos by Roberta Elliott

The border crossing at Sasabe, Arizona, lacks the bustle and bling of the crossings at Nogales and Tijuana. It’s a United States border patrol station incongruously plopped in the middle of the Sonoran Desert, a harsh landscape that freely spills across international borders.

Sasabe is one of the most desolate and least-used of all the border patrol stations. In stark contrast to the gleaming white, 1990s-era structure on American land, the station on the Mexican side is a dilapidated affair, strewn with wind-battered trash and souped-up search jeeps, rendered useless by multiple flat tires.

Cattle used to wander freely in this southernmost corner of Pima County, whose capital seat is Tucson. You can still see the remains of an empty wooden pen that once guided the steers as they moved from one grazing area to another. No longer. Over the course of 2007 and 2008, the United States Department of Homeland Security built an iron fence designed to block all human traffic across these borders, part of the sporadic wall system that designates the 2,100-mile border between the United States and Mexico.

I am here because freedom of movement is something I know about. In the mid-19th century, my father’s family moved from Olomouc, Moravia, now the Czech Republic, to Vienna, the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. There they lived for nearly 100 years, decades as
The author (above) picks oranges in a church lot for a Tucson-based organization that brings together refugees and volunteers to harvest and distribute fruit (above). A single shoe sole (top) found in the desert raises questions about the fate of its owner. (Opposite page) Arizona as seen from the Mexican border.

loyal subjects of Emperor Franz Josef, who in 1867 gave the Jewish community full rights as citizens.

But in 1938, five months after Germany’s annexation of Austria, known as the Anschluss, my father, then 29 and a partner with his father in a margarine factory, learned that his family, the Engels of the Sixth District, were on the SS’s deportation list. As he told the story, my father, Franz Engel (who later became Francis Elliott), went into his room and didn’t come out until he had devised an escape plan. The next day, the family fled Vienna in the dark of night—my father, his parents and his sister—slipping over the borders to Italy, Switzerland and, finally, France. After being interned for two years in an alien camp in central France, my father once again collected his family, eventually shepherding them to Lisbon, where they embarked for the United States.

My father, a reserved and largely unknowable man, rarely spoke of the trauma of his expulsion and subsequent flight. But I’m certain he felt his story had a happy ending. He escaped the inferno and years of displacement, settled into America, met and married my mother, got an advanced education, established a career and had a daughter. For the more than 20 years since his death, I have physically retraced his steps through Europe.

For the last two years, since my retirement, I have shifted my explorations to today’s displaced. Last October, I spent a week in Vienna volunteering on the frontlines of the current refugee crisis—meeting, greeting and helping in any way I could the vast wave of humanity flooding Europe from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. Now, at the age of 66, as I winter in Tucson, I am seeking out every possible migrant and refugee encounter. Wanting to help, wanting to understand, wanting to get to the heart of the matter.
It turns out that Arizona, a land of contrasts, is the ideal place for this journey. In many ways, Arizona is still the Wild West—stores and restaurants regularly display a picture of a gun with a slash through it, messaging “Don’t pack if you’re coming inside.” But one of the ironies in this state that started as a land grab from Native Americans is what seems to be profound respect for the rule of law. While most citizens here reject illegal migrants, Arizona has a long tradition of welcoming people fleeing crises in other parts of the world.

After Texas, California and New York, Arizona receives more refugees than any other state. According to the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, of the close to 70,000 refugees allowed into the country in fiscal year 2014-2015 from Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Myanmar, Bhutan and elsewhere, 2,960 refugees were settled in Arizona, 598 of them in Tucson. Adding to the flow this year will be a trickle of Syrians.

The extremes of the Sonoran Desert have a dominant and prevailing influence over southern Arizona. It is not a picture-perfect, sand-duned desert, but more like the wilderness the Israelites sojourned through for 40 years after the Exodus from Egypt. There is scrub vegetation with lots of dirt, rocks and craggy mountains. Temperatures can dip way below freezing at night and soar into the 80s by day—and that’s just in winter. The biggest enemy of life in this wilderness are the elements. Those traveling by foot regularly die of dehydration, hypothermia/hyperthermia, sepsis from frostbite or infected, gangrenous foot blisters.

The Tucson sector of the United States-Mexican border is only 262 miles long. Still, it comprises the highest concentration of border patrol agents—with some 4,000, according to just-released figures from the United States government for last year. In addition, the area witnesses 20 percent of the total apprehensions of more than 63,000 illegal migrants and the second greatest number of desert deaths after the Rio Grande Valley sector in Texas. Fatalities in this part of the desert are so high—2,570 migrants died between January 1998 and May 2015, according to the most recent United States Customs and Border Protection Report—that record keepers use the abbreviation RHR, recovered human remains, to document the deaths.

During this same period, the population attempting to get over the border has changed. Initially, it was predominantly Mexicans seeking economic advantage in the United States; then it was Mexicans escaping gang violence and drug cartels. Most recently, Central Americans fleeing conflict—including unaccompanied minors—have been added to the mix. The one thing they all have in common is that they are entering the country illegally.

Horrified by the growing number of deaths in the desert, local activists, mostly church-based and veterans of the 1980s sanctuary movement—which gave safe haven to Central American refugees fleeing civil unrest—came together in the early 2000s to try to save lives. The Samaritans, a project of a local Presbyterian church, is one of the groups that formed at the time. Today, their members walk desert trails on a daily basis, looking for migrants in crisis. They leave water, food and blankets at predetermined GPS points, place commemorative crosses at spots where human remains are found and keep careful records so as to analyze migration trends and border patrol activity.
training that carefully laid out the legal framework by which we are able to carry out our mission. We learned that we are able to provide humanitarian aid—food, water and medical assistance—but are forbidden to abet an illegal in reaching his or her American destination.

I soon learn that the protocols for encountering illegals are mostly irrelevant, because they are nowhere in sight. This is a mixed bag. We are there to help, but how can we help those hidden from the naked eye? And if we do find some migrants, what will their condition be?

What we do end up finding that day is a spot where an illegal most likely came to the end of his journey. Strewn over a bush and nearby surroundings are men’s clothing, water bottles, a blanket and a pile of human excrement.

The blanket tips off my more experienced companions that there had been a border patrol apprehension and the person apprehended had most likely tossed aside his blanket knowing he wouldn’t need it in the detention center or back in Mexico. I am unsettled when I surmise that his loss of continence likely means he had been scared out of his mind.

When I recount the experience to a close friend who has lived in Arizona forever, she starts screaming: “Of course he was apprehended—he was an illegal!” I counter with, “When my father crossed the border from Austria to Italy, he was an illegal.” Empathy softens her features, but my argument fails to convince. Another friend, who moved here from the East, confesses that before coming here she had never felt the need to own a gun; now she and her husband keep one in their house. “We’re in a border state now,” she explains. “Things are different, and I’m scared.”
Borders are something legal refugees know about, too. To be a refugee in the United States, you have to have fled your homeland for a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, ethnic background and/or political views. If you are among the fortunate few accepted in the program by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, you undergo security and other vetting that can take 18 to 24 months—after which you can enter the United States.

Despite the daily influx of refugees in Tucson, I have personally encountered no deep-seated opposition to their presence. In fact, what the general population seems to lack in empathy for illegals contrasts starkly with the general welcome provided to the refugees. With so many individuals eager to volunteer, it can sometimes take weeks of waiting to mentor a refugee at one of the three resettlement agencies here. In addition, local churches have “adopted” entire families, providing everything from material aid to legal support.

One of the most creative models of support can be found at an organization that intersects food justice with refugee assistance. In the early 2000s, Barbara Eiswerth, an environmental scientist and activist troubled by the thousands of citrus trees groaning with unused fruit in private backyards, at public institutions and in empty lots, got the brilliant idea to put refugees to work to help other refugees. She had them map the locations of the unattended citrus, olive and date palm trees, and then harvest the fruit.

Her nonprofit, Iskashitaa, which derives its name from the Somali Bantu word for “working cooperatively together,” was born. Over the years, the refugees have shared their knowledge of food sources through Iskashitaa workshops, where they demonstrate recipes from their native lands.

Today, refugees and locals harvest and glean together twice weekly. “Using food-based programming engages the refugees in the community,” Eiswerth tells me, “It’s so important for them to feel that they are contributing members of society while they are on their path to citizenship. The gift we get back from the refugees is that they bring other refugees to us.”

What began modestly 13 years ago has turned into a yearly avalanche of 50 tons of harvested citrus and other fruits and vegetables. On a late winter day, eight of us are dispatched to a retirement community north of Tucson, where we are assigned to harvest four orange trees. In less than an hour, with our long-handled harvesting tools, we contribute almost 60 pounds of oranges to this month’s harvest of five tons. The initial distribution goes to refugees, and the remainder is sent to food banks.

My partner is Alaa Al-Ani, 71, an Iraqi who arrived as a refugee in Tucson three years ago. Although our life experiences are worlds apart, there is an instant connection between us. A non-practicing Muslim, he is proud that his family came from a small Iraqi town called Ana that boasts one of the Near East’s oldest synagogues. He tells me with obvious pleasure that his father even knew a few words of Hebrew from the many Jewish friends he had as a child.

A highly educated retired civil engineer, he takes credit for introducing the traffic light and highway numbering system to Iraq. For much of his career, he was a consultant to American companies. In 1991, he was brought to Detroit by General Motors to help set up a GM plant in Iraq. That project was abruptly cut short by the outbreak of the first Gulf War. In the early 2000s, while consulting with an American high-tech company, he received death threats. Not wanting to become another statistic among the thousands murdered by radical elements, he tells me in halting English, he and his family escaped to Bahrain. Eight years later, they arrived in southern Arizona.

An extrovert with a sly sense of humor, he says that his favorite
things in life are making friends, fishing and gardening. In Iraq, he had a large house, four cars and an expansive garden. Here, he lives with his wife and two of his unmarried sons in a house owned by his daughter and son-in-law, a difficult situation, he says, for a man not used to being dependent on others. He cultivates a small garden with a fig tree and other plants that remind him of home. “The first week I was here, I found Iskashitaa, and I have been volunteering ever since,” he says, explaining that gardening and harvesting have helped him put down roots in his new home.

That late winter morning, my harvesting partner and I are lucky. The sun is warm but not too hot, the air is fresh from recent rains and we have plenty of water to hydrate our bodies. As we reach for our bright orange targets, I can’t help but worry about the migrants not being found in the desert that day.

In one of my trainings with the Samaritans, I learned that humans living in desert environs metabolize more than 12 quarts of water a day. For those crossing the border from Mexico, there is at least a five-day journey by foot ahead of them—with no possible way to carry that kind of water. Every illegal migrant is in trouble before he or she even sets out. I also continue to wrestle with the distinction people in these parts make between legal refugees and illegal migrants.

For me, there is no difference between them—on the face of it, they are all motivated by fear. Like the Israelites leaving Egypt, humans today do not abandon the land of their birth, cross the desert or attempt to reach the Promised Land unless they believe it is their only option for survival.

The legal differences between migrants and refugees should not govern compassion, especially for us Jews, who are repeatedly commanded to be kind to the stranger, because we were once strangers in Egypt.

The daughter of a refugee, I know the heart of the stranger better than most. But my own heart yearns to explore and understand not only my family’s path, but to own the ties that bind us all to the unknowable that sets individuals and peoples in danger on journeys to freedom.

Robert Elliott is a former vice president for communications at HIAS, the Jewish refugee agency, and also served as the national public affairs director of Hadassah.
During World War II, thousands of refugee Jews, Frenchmen and Allied pilots shot down in enemy territory fled from Nazi-dominated France to Spain over the treacherous Pyrenees mountain range. Today, Freedom Trail treks commemorate both escapees and the guides who saved them.

By Patricia Giniger Snyder
It was June 1944 when 19-year-old Ruth Usrad, née Schütz, arrived in the Pyrenees mountain village of Quillan in France. She had been on the run from the Nazis for over four years. Her flight had begun in Berlin after she bullied her and her sister’s way onto a Kindertransport to Brussels and continued in the French countryside, where they were hidden with 99 other children. When the youngsters’ whereabouts were betrayed to the authorities, Usrad was imprisoned in an internment camp, then miraculously freed. She then became part of the French underground, and after she was put on a Gestapo blacklist, the Armée Juive (Jewish Army), an armed Zionist guerilla group of about 2,000, made arrangements for her passage to freedom over the Pyrenees.

“When I got off the train in Quillan, I saw the husky man wearing a black Basque beret, the sign I had been told to look for,” recalled Usrad.
“He was standing at the end of the platform, gesturing to follow. I found myself with eight other people as he led us through woods and thick bushes to rendezvous with our Spanish guide. I had no idea the difficult path that lay ahead.”

From the early 1940s until the end of the war, thousands of Jewish refugees escaped by foot over the Pyrenees, a mountain range that forms a natural 305-mile border between France and Spain. Jews were not the only ones using the remote mountain passes. Frenchmen hiked the mountain passes trying to reach Charles de Gaulle’s Free French Forces, and British and American pilots shot down in enemy territory fled over them into Spain. The Pyrenees had dangerous, unpredictable weather and rugged, snowy terrain. But there was an equally perilous threat: immediate death or deportation to labor or extermination camps if discovered by the Nazis or French Vichy police.

Today, a handful of tour operators have organized treks of varying difficulty that follow different Pyrenees escape routes (see box, page 34). Some begin in France, others in Spain; some last a few hours, others take several days.

The most established trail was blazed and organized in 1993. Le Chemin de la Liberté, The Freedom Trail, is a four-day commemorative hike that takes place every July; there were 87 participants last year. The trail reaches an altitude of 8,500 feet, and trekkers are expected to train beforehand. Many hikers are families and friends of Allied war veterans. One of the trek’s organizers, Scott Goodall, has hiked it 15 times. “The first two days are mainly through woods and valleys,” explained Goodall, 80. “But days three and four are bloody hard, which is why I stopped doing it in 2006.”

Suranga Gail Yizhaky, owner of Astha & Suranga, a boutique tour operator in Tel Aviv, organized an inaugural trip for 19 Israeli women, ages 33 to 70, in October 2014. The four-hour hike began in a remote area in the Pyrenees and ended in Tavascan, Spain, one of the mountain villages Jewish refugees passed through. “I felt humbled during the entire hike,” said Yizhaky. “With every step on this trail, I knew I was connecting to an important part of our Jewish history.” Astha & Suranga is leading treks over the Pyrenees in August and October.

During the war, some refugees traveled alone, but most were led by paid guides, passeurs in French, pasadors in Catalan or Spanish. The guides ranged from former Republican soldiers on the losing side of the Spanish Civil War to local farmers, smugglers, other Jewish refugees or members of the underground. Some did it for the cause, others for the money. Some were honest, some not. The number of people who attempted to cross but never made it will never be known.

Usrad remembered how she walked nonstop up a small incline during her nearly weeklong trek. “My backpack was heavy and my legs were not yet accustomed to my new shoes,” she said. “When we finally rested, I sank down and wondered if I’d have the energy to get to Spain when I was already so tired.”

The quickest route was near the
Mediterranean coast, where the elevation was more manageable but the pass was heavily guarded. As the Nazis tightened the borders, the guides had to find new escape routes, taking refugees into waist-deep snow or sleeping in caves after getting caught in blizzards.

That happened to Michel Margosis, who was 14 when he crossed with his two older siblings and his mother in November 1942. “I was a teenager, so at first it was an adventure,” recalled Margosis, who was born in Brussels (his family was originally from Odessa). “But that changed after we heard barking dogs and a German voice shouting commands. We froze in our tracks. Our guides quickly changed direction and we continued on a much more difficult climb.”

Brothers Fred and Gus Manasse were just 9 and 13, respectively, when they were led to freedom by the underground during the winter of 1944. Though born in Frankfurt into a family whose roots in Germany went back 500 years, their flight took them to Brussels before the Kindertransport brought them to the foot of the Pyrenees. “In our trek, we only had rags for boots and layers of clothes for winter coats,” said Fred Manasse. “During the day, we huddled together in the deep snow ditches we had dug and stayed there until nightfall. All we ate was snow, until we made it to a safe house in Spain. The potato frittata there was manna from heaven!”

Joan Salter had no memory of her trek with her mother and half-sister, as she was only 3 years old. “When we crossed we had no food,” said Salter, born in Brussels in 1940 to Jewish parents from Poland. Before crossing the Pyrenees, the family had been in Paris, then were smuggled into a small village outside Lyon, where they hid until the winter of 1942-1943. “I was so small and the hunger and cold must’ve really gotten to me because I couldn’t stop crying. Years later my mother told me that our guide threatened to suffocate me if I didn’t quiet down. So she and the others carried me in their arms.”

Today, at the beginning and end of The Freedom Trail climb, there is a ceremony honoring both the escapees and their guides. In 2013, at the age of 72, Salter attended the ceremony on the French side of the Pyrenees. “I looked up at the vastness of the mountains and wondered how my fragile, petite mother could have undertaken such a perilous journey and posthumously thanked her and those who helped carry me,” she said.

Local and regional governments in both France and Spain have developed educational initiatives about the mountain passes. The French village of Saint-Girons, for example, has a museum called La Maison du Chemin de la Liberté. Historical information is provided about the passeurs, the crossing points, hiding places and what happened to the escapees once they reached Spain.

In Spain, the Diputació de Lleida (the council of deputies), in the Lleida province in Catalonia, has opened five designated routes complete with trail markers. The council also provides tourist information about the hikes and sponsors exhibits such as the one in the village jail in the town of Sort, where many refugees were tempo-
rarely incarcerated after being arrested by the Spanish police, known as the Guardia Civil.

“Our project is called Perseguits I Salvats,” explains Joan Reñé Huguet, president of the Diputació de Lleida. “We are very proud of the role the Catalan people played in helping Jewish refugees and want today’s generation to have the opportunity to walk in their footsteps.”

S
pain, of course, was the haven refugees aimed for. Once there, the obstacles were far from over, but on their side were relief groups, the key player being the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, also known as the JDC or the Joint, based in Lisbon.

“The JDC created a massive, state-of-the-art, people-moving operation,” explained Linda Levi, the JDC’s assistant executive vice president for global archives. “It required persistence, diplomatic negotiations, time, money and, most of all, creativity to find countries that would accept Jewish refugees and the transportation to get them there.”

The JDC’s Barcelona bureau, headed by brothers Samuel and Joel Sequerra, faced intense pressure. Each day, dozens of refugees lined up at its doorstep. Many had been told by their passeurs or by other Jews to “get to the Joint!” To do so, some purposely got themselves arrested by the Guardia Civil, because in prison they hoped to be visited and saved by the JDC. Local citizens were paid by the JDC to notify the Sequerra brothers when Jews were jailed and someone would be sent to free them. From there they would be moved to safe locations.

Jewish men ages 18 to 40 without official papers had a particularly difficult time. If arrested, they were transferred to large detention camps. The most notorious camp was Miranda de Ebro in northern Spain. The JDC, other nongovernmental agencies and international officials worked tirelessly to free Jews from the camps.

“My family was caught at night by the Guardia Civil as we walked toward Barcelona,” Margosis said. “My mother and sister were sent to a women’s jail in the city of Girona, and my brother to a men’s prison, but he was quickly transferred to Miranda. I was the youngest and put in an orphanage.”

A few days later, Margosis was reunited with his mother, Schendel, and sister, Anna, at a JDC-operated residence for women and children in a Catalan village, and they were soon moved to a safe house. Months later, his brother, Willy, was able to join them. Their father, Isaac, a journalist, had fled alone to Portugal in 1940.

Spain was merely a stopover for most refugees. The Manasse brothers lived for a short while in a JDC-run group home for unaccompanied children, which Fred Manasse remembers as being filled with laughter, food and fun. “We finally felt safe,” he said.

The Manasse and Margosis families were sponsored by relatives in the United States and eventually immigrated there. In the States, Michel Margosis enlisted in the Army and fought in the Korean War. He received a master’s degree in chemistry and worked at the United States Atomic Energy Commission and, later, at the United States Food and Drug Administration. Today, he lives in Springfield, Virginia, and volunteers at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

Fred Manasse, whose parents and sister were killed in Auschwitz, lived with foster families in New York. He earned a Ph.D. in physics, became an electrical engineer and ran a solar energy business. He lives in Waltham, Mass., and is now a full-time artist. He said his prize-winning sculpture, My Diaspora, is about his family losses in the Holocaust. Like Margosis, Manasse lectures on his Holocaust experiences, as does Salter.

Both Salter’s mother, Bronia, and Schendel Margosis had visa issues and made the painful decision to send their children alone to safer shores. In the United States, Salter was brought up by a foster family before being reunited with her family in England in 1947.
Strongly influenced by the Zionist movement, Ruth Usrad immigrated to Palestine. In June 2014, 70 years after she began her escape over the mountains, her son, Hovav, retraced her steps. He went to the Pyrenees with his son, Arad, and niece, Tamar, both in their twenties. “I had a vision ever since I was young to try and follow her escape route,” said Hovav Usrad. “Because we will never know exactly how and where she went, I mapped out a logical route using Google maps.”

Most of the 49-mile trail was in the wilderness, but every 12 miles or so, there were sections that crossed mountain roads. Tamar Usrad hiked with her uncle while his son waited in a car at predetermined meeting points with water, food and a change of clothes.

They began their trek at 2 A.M., Hovav Usrad related, to understand “what it was like to walk into the unknown in the middle of the night.” They took their first steps at the railroad station where Ruth Usrad had first met the man with the black Basque beret, then continued into the backcountry. As they trekked, Usrad left yellow trail markers in case they lost their way. Tamar hiked 31 miles; her uncle finished the last 18 miles on his own. It took him 13 hours to walk the entire route from Quillan to Andorra, the principality where his mother went before entering Spain.

“I practiced for a year,” Usrad explained. “Still, it was not easy. It’s unbelievable what my mother did, nothing short of amazing.”

Ruth Usrad died last October, living long enough to know her son and grandchildren had honored her by following in her footsteps. 

Patricia Giniger Snyder is a producer, director and writer at Rembrandt Films in Pound Ridge, N.Y.
My journey to Sosúa began with an email. It was from a travel service, inviting me to “Visit Sosúa! Discover this paradise founded by European Jews!”

The story of Sosúa—the large oceanside town where the Dominican Republic government provided Jewish refugees with land and resources—is unique, even among the annals of Holocaust history. The message felt customized just for me—a daughter of two Holocaust survivors, a writer looking for a new subject, a Spanish-speaker and infrequent yet devoted fan of Caribbean beaches.

Between 1940 and 1942, several hundred German and Austrian Jews landed on the shores of La Republica Dominicana, the Dominican Republic. The refugees had been in transit for years, in refugee, detention and labor camps and training centers. Most of them had never even heard of the island before and would certainly never have chosen it, even as a temporary home, except no other country was willing to admit them.

While recent years have seen a documentary on Dominicans and Jews that includes mention of the Jewish history of Sosúa; a virtual Sosúa museum, sosuamuseum.org; and a few news articles, the Jewish history of Sosúa is still one of the lesser-known sagas of World War II.

“The Jews brought the world to us,” says Don Luis Hernandez, a 90-year-old resident of the Sosúa neighborhood of Los Charamicos, spreading his hands wide. The refugees transformed this part of the island, building a medical clinic, paving roads and creating a kibbutz cooperative of around 50 farms that helped Sosúa become the cheese and dairy capital of the country.

I had the opportunity to see some of those transformations myself, or at least the remnants of them.

Within months of that email, I embarked on an adventure, fueled by lifelong questions about those who, like my parents, found a way to escape the conflagration in Europe. My questions were now focused on a sliver of Holocaust history set in the tropics. Along with a swimsuit and sunscreen, I carried my version of beach reading—Tropical Zion: General Trujillo, FDR, and the Jews of Sosúa (Duke University Press), Allen Wells’s comprehensive and insightful text. The book, along with the excellent Dominican Haven: The Jewish Refugee Settlement in Sosúa, 1940-1945 (Museum of Jewish Heritage) by Marion Kaplan, which I read after returning from my trip, became an invaluable reference library.

In addition to the language, culture and climate, Wells explains, there was a great deal that the émigrés didn’t understand about the Dominican Republic (often called the DR). The refugees were in their twenties and thirties and in good health; most were single and men outnumbered women.
bered women. They had all been interviewed and screened by the newly formed Dominican Republic Settlement Association (DORSA), created with the assistance of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and chosen for their stamina, adaptability, social skills and youth. What they encountered was probably more exotic than they had imagined. In addition, many of the Jews were city folk; given the chance to escape from Nazi-dominated Europe, they had exaggerated their farming know-how. The irony of the settlers’ value to the Generalissimo of the DR, Rafael Trujillo, was, in fact, their white skin.

These least desirable noncitizens of the Reich were now wanted because of their potential for mixing with what Trujillo thought of as a “too-dark” populace. A brutal dictator, Trujillo was responsible for the massacre of Haitians in October 1937 (estimates of the number slaughtered range between 10,000 and 20,000), his atrocity an echo of Hitler’s plan to exterminate the Jews. Trujillo wished to promote greater “Europeanism” and a kind of racial upgrading of his country as well as to rehabilitate his dismal international reputation. At the Évian Conference in July 1938, convened by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to discuss solutions to the Jewish refugee crisis, Héctor Trujillo, the Generalissimo’s brother, extended a welcome to “as many as 100,000 political refugees.” Due to bureaucratic complications, only 500 families were able to benefit from the offer. (Indirectly, about 4,000 Jews received visas to enter the DR, enabling them to leave Europe for other destinations.)

Trujillo gave DORSA a 26,000-acre tract that once belonged to the United Fruit Company. However, DORSA, together with the JDC, insisted on paying Trujillo for the land. When the Jewish homesteaders discovered that only a relatively small area was suitable for agriculture, they developed cattle ranches. Within a few years, they built an export business for salami and sausages as well as a thriving dairy factory, all under the name Productos Sosúa. The company is still in existence today, but no longer manufactures meat products.

One reason for the settlers’ success can be attributed to Arthur “Don Arturo” Kirchheimer. He recognized that the island’s feeble pigs suffered from prolonged inbreeding. With the introduction of sturdier animals from neighboring islands, Kirchheimer rejuvenated the pig population, impressing the locals.

The refugees built a medical clinic, paved roads and created a kibbutz cooperative of around 50 farms.

Rene Kirchheimer, born in Sosúa in 1942, is the only son of Arthur and his wife, Ilona. I meet him almost by accident on my second day in Sosúa, having followed the shaded path beside the beach in the direction of the place formerly called El Batey, where there is a synagogue and an adjacent museum. Bathed in sweat by the time I get there, I am discouraged to find the entrance gate locked, despite an “open” sign at the Museo Judío Sosúa.

A taxi driver shouts from across the street, warning me off the property. “Closed today!” he yells in English. Grateful for my Spanish, I explain that I am a writer looking for information about “los Judíos”; suddenly I am being led two blocks to the house of one of the few remaining Judíos—Rene Kirchheimer.

Kirchheimer is the son of an interfaith marriage (Ilona, a Lutheran, fled Germany with her husband). Deeply tanned with jet-black hair and bright green running shoes, he is a semiretired singer fluent in Spanish, German and English. Recalling his “wild” youth—pristine beaches and open countryside, school hours from 8 to 12 followed by playtime all afternoon—Kirchheimer says that as a 14-year-old he was sent to New York to live with his non-Jewish half-sister. “A reaction to the uncertainties of the Trujillo regime and my own rebelliousness,” he explains. He visited Sosúa each summer, coming back to settle on the island a few times before returning permanently in 1991. With a grown son and daughter who both live in the United States, he is, for the second time, married to a Dominican woman.

With a few rare exceptions, most of the Jewish refugees-cum-pioneers departed from the DR within a few years of the end of the war. Among those who remained, some, as Trujillo hoped, married Dominicans; several who became disillusioned by homesteading or never wanted to be farmers moved to larger cities in the DR, such as Santo Domingo, then called Ciudad Trujillo. Once it became clear that nearly all of their extended families and friends in Europe had perished, the majority of the settlers left for the United States, where the cultural and socioeconomic environment felt more familiar. By the time Trujillo was assassinated in 1961, there were only about 150 Jews left in Sosúa.

On the grass in front of the synagogue, a stone plaque is dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the arrival of the Jews in Sosúa, dated April 2015. I learn that there is to be a reunion of the Sosuanners, but it will commence two days after my departure. Meanwhile, Kirchheimer is eager
to share his documents, photos and transcripts of interviews with his now-deceased father.

On my final day, with a plan to enter the museum at last, I find four Jewish women—all of them in their sixties and Sosúa-born—perched on the wooden steps of the synagogue. The women, who live in the United States, huddle in the shade, waiting for the caretaker to arrive and open its doors so they can prepare the synagogue for the reunion.

Two of them are sisters, Jeanette Cohnen and Eva Cohnen-Brown, who live in Miami and Anchorage, respectively. Once the synagogue is open, the group clean and air out the sanctuary and replace the blue velvet curtain covering the Ark with a richly embroidered white one that was donated for the 50th anniversary back in 1990.

In contrast to Kirchheimer’s enthusiasm, these women are reticent. “We are tired of interviews,” Jeanette Cohnen says, recalling news articles about the documentary that mentioned Sosúa. “Suddenly everyone is discovering us. And we’ve been misquoted.”

Near the conclusion of Tropical Zion, Wells writes that Sosúa’s post-war Jewish generation both do and do not identify comfortably within one cohesive community. They grew up speaking both the Spanish of their native country and the German of their parents’ countries, and had paler skin and higher status than many of their Dominican peers. Yet many of those who left for America still consider themselves Dominicanas. The Cohnen sisters, redheaded and freckled, express irritation when questioned about their ties to Sosúa. If someone says that they do not recognize that the Cohnen name is both Jewish and Dominican, says Eva Cohnen-Brown, “I tell them they don’t really know the history of this place.”

It is hard to say if Sosúa’s Jewish legacy will last another generation. The synagogue is well tended if underused; the pictures in the museum displays are fading on the walls.

There is not that much left for Jewish tourists to explore in this unusual experiment in Jewish pioneering. There is a street named after DORSA leader Dr. Joseph A. Rosen, but the gorgeous beach closest to El Batey now mostly hosts a resort. Down the street, you can see a burned-out building that once housed the original store for Productos Sosúa, and at one end of Sosúa Bay are ghostly vestiges of the United Fruit Company’s ramp to the sea.

Yet the city seal bears a Star of David. And at the Gregorio Luperón International Airport in Puerto Plata, I am astonished and touched to see that the departure lobby features several large photographs of Jewish settlers newly arriving in the DR, receiving a cool drink and a fresh banana. They are smiling and so very hopeful.

Elizabeth Rosner is working on a new novel called Survivor Café.