

# FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ISRAEL.

Words Dotan Brom

A serpentine road leads to Giv'at Ela, a town not too far from Nazareth. At its entrance, a bus station welcomes those who arrive or leave, although no buses travel this way. When my parents built their house here, they could choose from four fairly similar designs, all with white walls and red roofing tiles. It was a small place, no more than 400 similar homes, in which 400 similar families lived 400 similar lives. I was (or believed to be) the only exception: the only boy who liked boys in town. There were no gays in my school, except a persistent rumour about a guy in the year above me. It was a regional agricultural school - a peculiar combination of a rustic and elitist society, whose ideal of manhood included driving ATVs in the fields, acting tough, serving in elite combat units in the IDF, and of course chasing women. I did my best to stand up to this ideal. I watched the manliest guys in my class, imitated their posture, practised their body language, hoped I could immerse some of their essence in me, or at least pass as one of them.

I was a library kid, and books always fascinated me. We had a rather small library, but I nonetheless loved browsing through its books-covered corridors and getting lost in the fantasies they inhabited. I remember discovering the "hieros lokhos", the Sacred Band of Thebes, a troop in the ancient Theban army, that was comprised of 150 pairs of male lovers - a proof one can be manly and gay. I held to it like a drowning man to a buoy.

My gay identity developed alongside the history I read, and pride and resistance accompanied stories like these of Stonewall Riots in New York, Gay Liberation in the UK, Magnus Hirschfeld in Germany, and even the Wigstock Riots in Tel Aviv in 1998. Through these stories, I lived life by proxy. A life where my sexuality wasn't banned, hidden, or condemned. I found comfort in them, and eventually the strength to come out myself.

The stories lead me to study history at the University of Haifa. When I moved there, I met an effervescent, activist queer community. I joined the Haifa Rainbow, an association who fought a five year long successful campaign to open a city-funded gay centre, that was inaugurated a year ago under the name The Communities' House for Pride and Tolerance.

The queer community in Haifa had many things, but it lacked a story. It was stuck in the present, like a pawn in a game of draughts, that can move only forward, denied access to its past. The little history of Israel's LGBTQ folk was rarely told about a place outside of Tel Aviv. The community in Haifa, I included, lacked roots, and without them, it was difficult to grow tall.

Two years ago, together with Yoav Zaritsky and Adi Sadaka, I founded the Haifa Queer History Project, to research the history of queer lives and communities in our city. In the heart of it are video recorded interviews that we conduct with the community's elders. Through them, we try to revive a dormant history and give voice to silenced narratives. We want to provide our community with an opportunity to narrate its past and connect the different generations within it to form one strong chain. In response to the image of Tel Aviv as the gay heaven of the Middle East and its centrality in the Israeli gay mind, we want to prove that queer lives and activism are possible everywhere - then and now. But above all ideological motives, we like to hear remarkable stories and enjoy that our interviewees

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The English speaking world celebrates annually the LGBT History Month. This event is fueled by a recognition that surfacing the history of minority groups is a way to empower them and weave their story into the general society. In the same spirit, after assembling a rich historical record in over two years of research, we decided to hold Israel's very first queer history festival. Starting on 8 February with the opening of a month-long exhibition, the first Haifa Queer History Festival includes film screenings, lectures, and the first academic conference on the matter in Israel. It also offers guided walking tours, a dialogue between the Haifa branch of IGY (Israel Gay Youth) and the community's elders, and even a party. Among others, it tells the stories of the pioneering generation of trans people in Israel, namely Gila Goldstein, Zalman Shoshi and Nancy Schneider, who grew up in Haifa and became nationwide role models, while overcoming lives of poverty, prostitution and transphobia.

Another petrifying story is one of a series of murders of gay men in Haifa in 1994-1997. After dozens of gay men, who had nothing to do with the victims except for being gay, were summoned to be investigated by the Haifa police department, the gay community gathered that the police holds 'pink lists', comprised of names that officers assembled in homosexual cruising spots. This conclusion ignited a struggle that included media interviews, meetings with the police and the municipality, and even the recruitment of Knesset member Yael Dayan, who raised this issue in national politics. One more story to be showcased in the festival is the one of Marcia Friedman. Marcia established in the seventies, together with a group of women, the first women's shelter in Israel, which was open here, in Haifa. She later came to be the first Knesset member to be elected as a feminist. After completing her tenure, she came out as a lesbian and took part in creating the lesbian-feminist group Klaf.

These incredible stories, and many more, were utterly unknown to our generation and were unearthed solely due to our interest in the past. This interest, we are sure, is contagious. Through the festival, we hope to spread it to our entire community. I had to go through a rocky road to find inspiration and a sense of belonging in history. Hopefully, now Israeli youth will have easier access to it.