For his President’s Column published in the Winter 2020 issue of B’nai B’rith Magazine, Charles “Chuck” Kaufman brought his readers back to Israel in the 1970s, a time when he first experienced his life-changing trip, hair-raising plane ride and all, to and through the Jewish homeland. He issued a call to readers to share their own memories:

“As we approach Israel’s Diamond Jubilee in 2023, you are invited to tell us how and when you first connected with Eretz Yisrael.”

They all tell a good story:

Klaus Netter recalled his first visit 71 years ago. He was part of a pioneer intercollegiate Zionist group that coordinated the trip in the summer of 1949 through Hebrew University. He traveled the one-lane highway called the Burma Road. There was a shortage of drinking water from supply chains being damaged by Arab artillery fire in the War of Independence. Building entrances were protected by concrete walls. The YMCA’s in-house pool was available to naked men. A major event during Klaus's stay was reinterning Theodor Herzl's remains on a hill just outside the city.

Arlene Ludin’s husband was stationed in England with the U.S. Air Force. The Ludins had heard of a trip to Israel sponsored by the German Cultural Society. They flew from Frankfurt to Israel on the first German flight ever to land in Israel. The first sight in Israel was that of people holding pictures of loved ones thought lost in the Holocaust. It was the 10th anniversary of the State of Israel. The trip changed their lives and uniquely connected them to the Jewish community of South Jersey.

First memories of Israel for Bill Kogan, a past president of the Gideon Lodge of Albany, N.Y., go back to 1947. Kogan’s parents were ardent Zionists and whenever they got together with their friends, they spoke of Palestine and then Israel. There was always a blue box present as well. He remembered the late-night disappearances of his parents, which he later learned were associated with a clandestine operation of collecting surplus World War II military equipment to be shipped to the Hagenah. Visits to Israel were always supported with donations and Israel Bonds purchases.
Sandy Cohen of Connecticut has been a member of B’nai B’rith for more than 60 years. In 1959, wanted to spend a year in Israel before starting college. She and a friend applied for an institute for youth leaders from abroad through BBYO’s quota. They were accepted, two of three Americans representing B’nai B’rith. She made friends with contemporaries from Europe, North Africa and Australia. The friendships continue after six decades. Sandy remembered traveling in open trucks, traveling with armed soldiers. Letters home took about two weeks to arrive. The young leaders learned to speak Hebrew, studied, danced and sang Israeli songs — six months in Jerusalem and other spans of time on kibbutzim, including the B’nai B’rith moshav Shetufi. They worked long hours with others to work the moshav (settlement)-shetufi. On the trip, she met Dan Thursz, former B’nai B’rith executive director, who talked her into working for Camp B’nai B’rith during of summers. Sandy would marry Joel Meyers, who would come to work for B’nai B’rith as the organization’s number two.

Sandy’s friend was a B’nai B’rith Girls president from St. Joseph, Missouri — Linda Zidell (Makler). She and other Americans sailed from New York to Haifa on the SS Zion. The voyage took two weeks with stops in Gibraltar and Piraeus, Greece. After six weeks of Ulpan, the 17-year-old was able to converse in Hebrew. Her group consisted of about 96 Zionists from the U.S., France, Denmark, England, Holland, North Africa and Australia. She and others climbed Masada at 3 in the morning, swam in the Dead Sea, hiked Ein Gedi and ate falafel and halva. She picked carrots at Kibbutz Saad and spent a month teaching English to immigrants from Kurdistan. Her mother kept all of those letters that she refers to periodically. It was a memorable year, one that changed her life forever.

Sandra Towsner Liebowitz was international president of B’nai B’rith Girls in 1957. She didn’t grow up in a Zionist home. Her first impression was passing all of the historic Jerusalem stone used on all of the buildings. Israel needed farmers and soldiers in that year. She and other students could only contemplate taking a “short cut” into the city from behind the King David Hotel. It was a “no man’s land” with armed soldiers, both Israeli and Jordanian, on either side of barbed wire fences.

Sandy had spent hours preparing a speech to be given the same night David Ben Gurion would address the meeting, the first B’nai B’rith International gathering in the modern state of Israel. Philip Klutznick, the president of BBI, introduced her to Ben Gurion and his wife, Paula. Israel’s first prime minister asked her where she pictured herself in five years. He asked if she wanted to make Aliyah. She told him she was too spoiled to give up what luxuries she had, but she might change her mind at some time in the future. Sandy’s conversation with Ben Gurion struck her that this was a man who inspired the best in others. His strong convictions and love of Israel was apparent in everything he conveyed. He spoke of his country not only as a homeland for Jews but as a country that would lead the world to a better place. That Israel would be a moral compass for humanity. That Jews would have acceptance on the world stage.

When all the speeches were made, Mr. Klutznick came to thank those who made them. David Ben Gurion said to Klutznick, “I want her back here,” pointing to her. She would return to Israel the following year, built her friendship with the Ben Gurions and she might have made Aliyah had she not met her future husband. Her next trip to Israel was 25 years later. She and her husband visited the graves of David and Paula Ben Gurion at Kibbutz Sde-Boker in the Negev. Israel to her was and is a country of endless possibilities. ☛