

■ SPECIAL FEATURE

Eyeing History:

Leni Sonnenfeld's AMIT Photographs, 1950–1980

By Judah S. Harris

Walk this earth, and by definition you're a witness to history.

But some have more history to witness. They find themselves in the right places at the right time, or the wrong places at the wrong time as history has always offered up amounts of both. While there, these individuals observe, they record, even transmit, to their own generation and for subsequent ones, personal experiences and the collective experiences of a specific era, locale and situation.

The last century offered ample opportunity, good and bad, for all observers of history, and for observers of Jewish history, infinite material for volumes upon volumes of books and mountains of pictures.

Leni Sonnenfeld, the German-born photographer who, together with her husband, Herbert, immigrated to the

United States in 1939, stood a ways up that mountain. Photographed over a lifetime, the Sonnenfelds amassed some 200,000 negatives, representing thousands of rolls of film, which last October were donated by the couple's estate to Beth Hatefutsoth (The Museum of the Jewish Diaspora), located on the campus of Tel Aviv University.

Leni at first assisted her husband and soon filled in for him on assignments while he went to serve in the U.S. Army from 1943–48. For the most part, the Sonnenfelds photographed Jewish life. While still living in Germany, Herbert documented the pre-war years in Berlin, Jewish and Zionist-related events in other European countries, and Jewish, Arab and Bedouin life during three separate visits to Palestine. After fleeing Germany, Herbert established himself in the States and in the '40s was hired by Sam Hartstein, Yeshiva University's veteran PR man, to be that institution's first full-time photographer. Leni, during a career that spanned many decades, photographed in Iran, Morocco, Spain, Ireland, Gibraltar and extensively in Israel, often on assignment for AMIT and other organizations such as the UJA, ORT, Na'amat and Hadassah.

Leni traveled to AMIT schools throughout Israel, making repeated trips from 1950 through the '60s and '70s, and even a last visit to a number of



Girls Dancing in a Circle,
Bakka Settlement House 1960

the organization's programs in 1980. Then, already 73 years of age, she still felt compelled and able to tell the story of a country's development through her pictures, the building of individual members of society that she watched from her vantage point.

Leni continued to work until just a few years before her death in February 2004. That same year, Yale University Press published *Eyes of Memory: Photographs from the Archives of Herbert & Leni Sonnenfeld*. The book features some of the most iconic of their images, along with a text written by Leni, a reflection, or "looking back," as she says, on her life as a photographer. The book project came just in time, as Leni passed away while it was still in production. Rich Hendel, a noted book jacket designer who designed *Eyes of Memory*, laments that he never got a chance to actually speak with her. And still, this eloquent volume speaks for both Leni and Herbert (who died in 1972), and



Eggplant Harvest, Kfar Batya 1957

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provides a voice for all their subjects, the children and adults who wandered into the photographers' frame, though more likely it was the Sonnenfelds who wandered into theirs.

A large selection of Leni's work for AMIT has been published over the years in *AMIT Magazine* and in many more of the organization's publications. Hundreds of black and white prints, divided by lot number, are preserved in the archives on the fifth floor at AMIT's NYC offices. I visited on three separate occasions this past summer, exploring (and coaxing) the heavy and over-packed metal file cabinets, carefully selecting more than 70 photographs to be shared with a wider audience on the occasion of AMIT's 80th Anniversary.

Founded in 1925 as the Mizrachi Women's Organization of America, AMIT has responded continuously to the major events in the life of an emerging country, the reclamation of not land, but soul and spirit, the infusion of knowledge, the nurturing of religious and Zionist ideals, the development of technological prowess, and feelings of acceptance, self worth and sense of purpose. Leni Sonnenfeld saw all this and her photographs chronicle the changes over the years, the modernization of a country, of an organization, the all-too-obvious variations in the outward

appearances of her subjects, the dress and stance and expression worn by the youth that evolved from one decade to the next. But in all her photographs, the common need of children, no matter what period of time they live in, remained a constant theme. As the Jewish homeland matured and progressed and slowly found itself a place among all nations, many challenges were overcome. But, newer ones, "modern strains" emerged to confront Israeli society.

Leni's photographs are witness to Israel's success, and for tens of thousands of AMIT members across America, have provided overwhelming proof of how the organization's mission—its caring, its commitment and its vision—has addressed and eased the transition from child to young adult, then young adult to adult. For three decades, Leni made AMIT come alive. Her portrayals told the stories of the children and of the AMIT schools located in various parts of Israel.

Leni's photographs depict assorted situations, and many are semi-posed. In one casual moment, a young boy in a Superman T-shirt, two hands resting in the side pockets of his jeans, stands at ease in front of the entrance to an AMIT program in Motza. Another photograph digresses to a more rural, agricultural situation at the Mosad

Aliyah Children's Village in Petach Tikva, as a teenage boy and girl hold aloft freshly harvested eggplants, two in her hands and three in his. Standing alongside wooden crates packed with the vegetables, their sunny smiles mirror a sunny day, evidenced by the distinct shadows appearing in the photograph. Even when moving indoors, the smiles remained in the many environmental portraits that Leni crafted. One image shows three young women in baking class proudly displaying their wares, fruit cobblers or tarts, and a sugar-frosted cake, along with their creased but clean kitchen aprons, snow-white kerchiefs and, again, their smiles.

Leni writes in *Eyes of Memory*, that when she photographed people, she preferred when her eyes met theirs. She deemed eye contact that comes from an image and meets the eye of the viewer as "very powerful," remarkably expressive of a whole range of human emotions, the eyes being, as many would agree, the "mirror of the soul." She acknowledged that "some feel that such an image is too posed," but stated that for her, it was the opposite: "the averted glance of a person in an image is the posed one."

And still, Leni paid allegiance to the other viewpoint, photographing the candid moments when eye contact with the viewer was indeed absent but the eyes ever powerful, directed elsewhere, fixated and communicating with their surroundings. She was aware of the power of engagement in these narratives: three boys contemplating a mid-game chess move, two high school girls examining a typewritten line, a double quorum of boys immersed in prayer, a circle of young girls dancing in a courtyard, a girl surveying a world atlas, and an exchange between a boy and a tiny puppy in a picture replete with affection and even the requisite eye contact, but present this time between Leni's two subjects.

For certain, Leni saw in the many people she photographed in Israel, an



Instructor and Student with Machinery, Kfar Batya 1980



Weaving Class, Beersheva 1970

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Boys Minyan, Haifa 1960



Painting the View, Eisenberg H.S. 1980



Boy and Puppy, Jerusalem 1957



Children Singing, Mosad Aliyah 1953



Chess Game, Mosad Aliyah 1953



Girls at Typewriter, Jerusalem 1953

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Rabbi and Two Students Study Text on Jewish Festivals, Kfar Batya 1957



Three Smiling Faces, Mosad Aliyah 1970



"Superman", Motza 1980



Afternoon Basketball Game, Mosad Aliyah 1957



Construction of New Buildings, Mossad Aliyah 1957



Girls Walking, Kfar Batya 1980

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aspect of herself, her own struggle, her search for opportunity, for promise. She was an immigrant photographing immigrants. She and her husband had fled a former life, and exactly as the individuals in her photographs, she had attempted new skills, learned a new language, a new purpose, while seeking to reconnect with the continuum of Jewish history and the Jewish People.

Leni, in the '50s, photographed the "wandering Jews," now also called Israelis, as they arrived on the Haifa dock, gateway to an ancient land of new possibilities. She felt close to these people, she was moved and in her essay calls this experience "one of the strongest and most beautiful, and at the same time most dreadful, of my life." She felt privileged to have witnessed the "ingather-



Baking Class, Jerusalem 1960



Adjusting Microscope,
Kfar Batya 1980

ing of the exiles," to have been able to preserve a photographic record of these monumental times for others to see.

The "ingathering of the exiles" in its fullest sense covers many years. In recent Jewish history, it has been a process, not one event but a series of many that span the decades and reach out to many shores. Indeed, the ingathering continues and reaches broadly, even within Israel's borders, building strong communities and striving for a wholesome,

healthy - exemplary Jewish society. Leni Sonnenfeld's AMIT photographs share important chapters of this ongoing story. They record what she saw, what she understood and what she felt during her tenure. And they contribute invaluable as we attempt to understand our own times, contemplate their significance, and—

with resolve and patience—set out to confront and appreciate history. (*Additional research for this feature was contributed by Lauren Rosenfeld.*) ▲

Judah S. Harris is a photographer, filmmaker, speaker and writer and a grandson of Isabelle Harris who wrote for The American Mizrachi Woman in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s. Judah's diverse projects include The Bridges of Madison County, Morning Prayers on 185th Street, The NYC Subway Experience, At Home with Gerda Weissman Klein and Inside the United Nations, which was commissioned last summer by The Stanley Foundation. He travels extensively to Israel on behalf of many organizations. Visit www.judahsharris.com to see more of his work.

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