

THREE HATS AND A BONUS

A few weeks ago I was honored at the Israel Independence Day Festival. There were kind words, plaques and resolutions. I was on stage with an impressive assortment of friendly politicians and community leaders. About 50,000 people had come that Sunday. (Apparently the crowd wasn't large enough to deserve any mention whatsoever by our beloved Los Angeles Times, but that's another topic for another time...)

I knew that I was going to be asked to say a few words but until I stepped up to the mike I really didn't have anything coherent in mind. I spoke, got a good hand – I might even say, modestly, an almost ovation - and that was that.

I thought nothing of it except for the business with the bonus and what a friend of mine – an important politician - told me at a meeting a few days later. “Quite a speech,” he said. “Great! It will go down in history as Frumkin's Three Hat speech. We discussed it at our meeting later that day – you made quite an impression.”

I don't have the actual text – I spoke from the heart, not notes – but here is what I tried to explain to the people who came to celebrate Israel's 58th birthday.

I wear three hats. I wear them with pride. Each hat is different and important – and I wear all three because I am a Jew.

The first hat is that of a Holocaust survivor. I was a 10-year old kid in 1940 Lithuania when I was sentenced to death. The sentence could be carried out at any time, without warning or notice. My death sentence was annulled when I was

14. American tanks rolled through the gate of my concentration camp and gave my life back to me. Since then I - and other survivors - have built new lives for ourselves, got an education, worked, raised children and did all those things that 6 million victims had not had a chance to do.

I am grateful. But there is more than just not being a little pile of fertilizer in Eastern Europe. I have an obligation. It is to do whatever I can to make sure that there are no more Holocausts – not only against Jews but also against any innocents who are threatened, for unfathomable and evil reasons, by cruel, fanatical and merciless human beings. I, like most survivors, have a sense of guilt – and gratitude - for having survived and I do what I can to meet the obligation that comes with it.

My second hat is that of a Soviet Jew. I was born in independent Lithuania which was annexed by the Soviets before being occupied by the Germans. Many years later, as an adult in California, I learned of the fate that would have been mine if I had been repatriated to the Soviet Union instead of eventually making my way to the U.S. I became involved in helping the Jews in the Soviet Union who were stuck, unable to leave that awful country for a better future elsewhere, anywhere, for themselves and their children. It took a while but we won. Against all odds we defeated the Soviet superpower and achieved emigration for the Jews. And almost two million former Soviet Jews now live in freedom.

My third hat is that of a proud American. Americans saved my life and the lives of millions of others. They rebuilt Europe from the devastation of the war. And then they kept Europe free from another tyranny that would have enslaved it.

They did it by going to war – and yes, war is often the only answer. They did it because historically, if America doesn't do it – no one else will, not Europe, not the U.N., no one! . And then Americans go home – without occupying and enslaving those they had liberated. Can you imagine what the world would be like if there was no America? I can. It wouldn't be a world you would want to live in – a world of oppression, of gulags, of prisons, of tyranny. America isn't perfect – no country is – but is there another country where a black, a woman, a Latino, a handicapped person, a homosexual or a senior citizen has the opportunities and privileges that America provides? And is there another country where Jews have achieved as much and are as accepted? And would there have been an Israel if there was no America? There are those who say that our foreign policy is based on oil; why then is the U.S. so constantly supportive of little Israel where there isn't a drop of oil and no other natural resources?

And so I say, God bless America and Am Israel Hai – and I wear my three hats proudly.

Oh yes, the bonus. I told the audience that I got a very real reward for my Soviet Jewry work – I found a Soviet Jew all my own, my lovely wife Ella who had come from Moscow just 13 years ago. I asked Ella to stand and take a bow – after all, what's the point of having a beautiful wife if you can't show her off – and then I said that she was my Soviet Jewry bonus. To judge by the applause, I had made the right choice. Later several people came up to Ella, smiled and said, "Hi bonus!"

I guess she is stuck with her new nickname.

