

FROM NORWAY TO THE NEGEV

How a Scandinavian grandmother is leaving a permanent footprint in the sands of Israel

• ANAV SILVERMAN PERETZ

When we first moved to Ashalim over one year ago, it seemed that we reached the end of the world. The quiet community, located about 40 minutes from the Egyptian border, has a minimarket, a synagogue, a little library, pool, youth center, preschool, as well as a huge solar power station standing 250 meters high nearby. Urban attractions such as supermarkets, movie theaters, museums, malls and restaurants can be found 40 minutes away in Beersheba.

Ashalim, which was founded back in 1976, originally as a cooperative village (*moshav shitufi*) on the eastern bank of the Besor River, one of the longest rivers in the Negev, has around 550 people. Most are young Israeli families but a few are the original veterans from over 30 years ago. Israel's Ayalim Student Association also has a student village called Adiel on the outskirts of Ashalim. Occasionally, one can hear snippets of Russian, Spanish and even French spoken in the community, among the mostly Hebrew speakers.

However, during several walks around the yishuv, a snow-white painted building with an unusual flag caught my eye.

Unlike the Israeli flags flying outside many of the sand-colored homes here in the yishuv, this flag was bright red with the indigo blue Scandinavian cross bordered by white lines – the flag of Norway.

Why is there a Norwegian flag flying alongside an Israeli flag in the heart of the Negev highlands south of Beersheba?

There are no international consulates or embassies out here.

And why can one occasionally hear Norwegian spoken around here?

Grethe Tangen Olsen from Bergen, Norway, is the person to ask. The energetic grandmother founded the nonprofit Exodus Nord in 1994 to support the Jewish people and Israel in a variety of ways, including extending support to Jews from eastern Ukraine and Russia. Made up of a group of mostly Norwegian Christian supporters, Exodus Nord has been especially focused on contributing to the development of the Negev for nearly two decades.

Ten years ago, Olsen established a Norwegian guesthouse in Ashalim. The snow-white painted building with the Norwegian and Israeli flags flying outside serves hundreds of Norwegian tourists who come to visit Israel throughout out the year and is run by Norwegian volunteers.

"The guesthouse is a great way to draw Norwegian tourists to the Negev," Olsen explained in a recent interview with the *Magazine* while she was visiting Ashalim.

"Many tourists from Norway visit the well-known cities and sites of Israel, but not many have reached this part of the country," she said, noting that the guesthouse just recently had a group of 24 visiting Norwegians.

"The visitors are always astonished by this part of the country. The Norwegian flag enables tourists to locate the guesthouse more easily," explains Olsen, who visits Israel four times each year.

"There's a lot to discover and explore in this part of Israel," she notes enthusiastically. The picturesque guesthouse is surrounded by an olive orchard that the organization planted, and a garden with oranges, pomegranates and other fruits and flowers, which Olsen is especially proudly of.

"Every year, I make a trip to a greenhouse in Beersheba where I purchase the plants and flowers for our garden in Ashalim. The greenhouse owners know me too well," she says with a smile. She gets up to offer me a pomegranate from a basket in the kitchen.

"It's so cold and icy in Norway this time of year. It's too slippery to walk around. I just love the desert weather and what I can grow here."

OLSEN FIRST visited Ashalim 16 years ago and formed a connection with the Ramat Hanegev Regional Council, to which Ashalim belongs, in addition to 14 other local communities. The mayor at that time, the late Shmuel Rifman, welcomed Olsen's support, and her organization has contributed funding to a wide variety of different projects in Ramat Hanegev, among them parks, schools, kindergartens, housing and more, including a children's pool in Ashalim. Exodus Nord also supports the Ya'ari Foundation, a joint fund managed by the Ramat Hanegev Regional Council and the Ya'ari family, which offers financial support to local families who have special medical needs.

Outside the headquarters of the Ramat Hanegev Regional Council, there are markers noting the distance to different cities around the world, and there is one with the name of Bergen, Norway.

"That is my hometown," says Olsen. "I love that the name of my city is here in the Negev."

The current mayor of the Ramat Hanegev Regional Council, Eran Doron, explained that Exodus Nord and Olsen's con-

tributions to the Ramat Hanegev region, whose entire population numbers 7,400 people, are invaluable.

"We have known Grethe for 20 years and she does excellent work in Ashalim and other yishuvim in Ramat HaNegev," Doron told the *Magazine*. "She is a great Zionist, as are the other members of Exodus Nord."

"The group contributes to so many facets of life here, including to families with special needs," he added.

To show appreciation for Olsen's work, Doron awarded Grethe with a special certificate of recognition two years ago for her work on behalf of the people of Ramat Hanegev.

"Grethe is a great friend of the Negev," he said.

Olsen was born and raised in a fishing village on an island in Fedje, located off western Norway in the North Sea, and spent summers on her father's fishing boat.

"My father was a fisherman, and so were most of the men of the village," recalled Olsen. "During WWII, my father helped protect Norwegian resistance fighters escaping from the Nazis, with his fishing boats. He also had a forbidden radio that he used to tune into London broadcasts during the war."

"My mother's family was also very supportive of the people of Israel – especially my grandfather, Wilhelm," explained Olsen. "My grandfather was a devoted reader of the Old Testament, the *Tanach*," said Olsen, using the Hebrew term for the Bible. "My grandfather, who was a school principal, often recited the verse that said that those who blessed Israel would be blessed."

In addition to growing up in a family that supported Israel and the Jewish people, Olsen's reading of Golda's Meir's autobiography, *My Life*, in her early 20s, impacted her perspective of the country.

"After I read *My Life*, I understood that the news I was receiving about Israel on the Norwegian television was very different from the reality that Golda Meir described in her book," said Olsen. "I started to study the history of the Jewish people and Israel, and comparing what I was reading, to what I was hearing in the news."

She began writing letters to Norwegian newspapers about Israel, pointing out the biased media coverage of the Jewish state and arguing against the misinformation constantly repeated about the country.

"There wasn't a week that I didn't write about Israel to a newspaper. I did this for nearly 20 years," she said. "I shared the truth and facts about Israel and tried to reach every newspaper in Norway with my viewpoints."

THE FIRST time Grethe visited Israel was in 1976, with a group of fellow Norwegians.

"It was a few days before Operation Entebbe," she recalls. "We visited the northern and central parts of the country but didn't make it to the South. It had always been my dream to see Israel."

Olsen's second visit to Israel took place thanks to a scholarship she received to study special education for gifted children in an academic program in Israel. She eventually worked as an educator for gifted and at-risk children in Norway for many years before retiring.

HONORING DEVOTED Exodus Nord supporter Birgitta Nilsson at Ashalim.



"I was always thinking about the situation in Israel during this time," she said. "The Jewish people and Israel have endured much suffering and hardship."

Her love of Israel also got her involved later with Norwegian politics, and she even went on to study international law in order to advance her understanding of Israel's rights to the land and the legal aspects of the country's conflict with its neighbors.

"Every country has the right to choose their own capital. Israel is no different," said Olsen. "In Norway, Oslo was chosen as the country's capital. In Israel, it is Yerushalayim," she said, using the Hebrew name for Jerusalem.

She believes that Israel "has many supporters among the average man on the street in Norway, unlike the top politicians in the Norwegian government."

One of Exodus Nord's devoted supporters was Birgitta Nilsson from Stockholm, who was part of the organization from its inception in 1994 and who served on the board. She visited Ashalim many times according to Olsen and had a great love for Israeli folk dancing.

Nilsson, a close friend of Olsen, died suddenly in an open square on a street in Stockholm on November 14, 2018, while she was speaking up for Israel. Although the cause of her death was not officially determined, Olsen believes that her friend was shot by an anti-Israel activist and died soon after.

"Birgitta was often at this square on Wednesday afternoons to speak in support of Israel," Olsen explained. "That November day when Birgitta was shot would be the last time that my friend would do this."

This past October during Sukkot, Exodus Nord honored the memory of Nilsson in a special ceremony held in Ashalim, to which local residents from the region were invited. A memorial stone was set up in the olive grove in Ashalim in Nilsson's memory.

Olsen says that her role as director of the Exodus Nord and her involvement with pro-Israel activities has drawn death threats from time to time back in Norway. She is not frightened however.

"I'm not afraid," said Olsen, mother of two. "I pray to God and that really helps me. I do not want to live my life afraid of what might happen and to waste my time thinking about the haters."

Olsen has been visiting Israel for more than 43 years. She has many Israeli friends and appreciates the freedom of religion here.

"I have secular and Orthodox Jewish friends here, all of whom have different perspectives on religion and faith, and that's a good thing."

Olsen concludes, saying the Negev desert is a very special place.

"There is so much life here in the desert. The hills of sand and rock are waiting for more people to settle here. I am happy to play a small part in helping out this region flourish." ■

The writer immigrated to Israel from Maine in 2004. She lives in Ashalim and works as an English teacher in Midreshet Ben-Gurion.



DISTANCE MARKERS at Ramat Hanegev Regional Council. Bergen, Norway, is just 2,400 miles away.

GRETHE TANGEN OLSEN in the Ashalim Guesthouse: A fan of the desert weather. (Photos: Anav Silverman Peretz)