Remembering Grandpa Dov — 10 October

Today, 10 October, is Grandpa Dov's birthday. He was born 110 years ago in Poland.

I feel that this man deserves a mention on the internet, even though it did not yet exist during his lifetime — so that he will be remembered for years, as he deserves. So here, briefly, is his story.

The story of his life is the story of Jewish life in the Diaspora, Zionism, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the founding of a remarkable family in Israel.

Most people do not leave very much behind. If they are fortunate, they leave a family that carries their name. Few are those whose influence on the people around them changes the wider reality over time — people without whom the world around them would genuinely have been different.

Grandpa Dov was such a person.

As a child, I knew him as a man of work and principles, sometimes strict, but also loving, smiling and quiet — a man whose heart and words were one.

When my brother and I stayed at the kibbutz, he would wake us to go and see the fields and avocado orchards at sunrise. Along the way he pointed out flowers and birds and taught us their names. He would pick corn in the field, peel it and let us taste it. In the palm of his large hand he showed us how to separate wheat kernels from the chaff. He taught us how to imitate animal sounds and how to make slingshots and bows from different kinds of wood.

He made wonderful wooden toys for us — something different each time: a horse, a car, sometimes a Hanukkah menorah. At times he took us to the metal workshop and showed us how welding was done or how to work a lathe. He would start the enormous tractor parked nearby and take us for a ride, with us standing beside him, leaning against the huge wheel arches.

Grandpa read constantly. He always had something written in his hand: the newspaper Davar, sacred texts that he knew thoroughly, history books, and much more. Even when television arrived at the kibbutz and one was placed in his room, he rarely watched it, although he did know how to switch it on. That is how I knew him: already an older man.

His life began in 1914 in the town of Disna. It had been part of the Russian Empire until 1921, when it was incorporated into Poland, remaining under Polish rule until 1939, when it was occupied again by the Russians.

From the summer of 1941 until the end of 1944, the town was under Nazi control. The Nazis established a ghetto there, concentrating Jews from other towns as well as refugees who had fled the fighting in western Poland. Conditions were terrible: hunger and disease. In July 1942, the Nazis and their Belarusian auxiliaries surrounded the ghetto and began shooting the Jews. The inhabitants resisted, throwing stones and pieces of wood that had been prepared in advance. They also set fire to their homes, allowing a small number of Jews to escape into the forests. Some found their way to other ghettos in the area, largely because of the hunger they suffered, while a few joined the partisans in the forests. Around 3,800 Jews of Disna died in the Holocaust.

The town was a typical Jewish shtetl of around 6,000 inhabitants. Most of its population was Jewish during Grandpa's childhood. Today only about 1,500 people live there, and it is considered the smallest city in Belarus. There were no great fortunes in the town; the overwhelming majority made their living through crafts, agriculture, trade and similar occupations.

Grandpa was educated in the town, and until the age of twelve his life was fairly ordinary for a boy growing up there.

When he was twelve, his father died after becoming ill as a result of beatings he had suffered while being held by the local Bolshevik police.

It was an event that changed Grandpa's life.

His mother was devastated and often crying, struggling to raise three boys: Shalom, aged fourteen; Berl — Dov — aged twelve; and little Ziska, only five and a half. The family moved from house to house, and despite many attempts, their mother found it extremely difficult to support herself and the children.

After his father's death, Grandpa Dov was therefore sent to Vilna to study at a yeshiva. He was supported by the local Jewish community, which distributed food to Torah scholars in return, as the saying went, for a guaranteed place in the Garden of Eden.

As a yeshiva student, Grandpa slept and lived in different places, including the synagogue and the library.

After several years, while continuing his yeshiva studies, he began studying mechanics at the ORT school in Vilna. He worked at many different jobs, some dangerous, for tiny wages that barely allowed him to survive.

During his studies he joined the Hanoar Hatzioni youth movement and went with the movement to a 'kibbutz' — the name then used for groups of young people undergoing training in preparation for immigration to the Land of Israel.

At this time Grandpa did every kind of hard work assigned to him at the training kibbutz, until he developed heart trouble and a doctor forbade him from doing heavy labour. His heart would remain an obstacle throughout his life.

He continued doing lighter work at the kibbutz until, after three years, he received a certificate permitting him to immigrate to Palestine, Eretz Israel.

There was not enough money for the journey, so a temporary partnership was arranged with another immigrant, Sarah Steier, because it was easier for a couple to obtain permission. Sarah came from a wealthy family that financed the journey. After they arrived in the Land of Israel, they separated and each went their own way.

Before immigrating, Dov returned to Disna to say goodbye to his family. On the way he passed through a kibbutz in Białystok, Poland, where for the first time he met the woman who would become his wife: Miriam, née Ochsenberg, from Lublin.

After several months of preparations in Disna, Grandpa set out. He was of military age for the Polish army and therefore had to leave before 1934 ended. And so, before midnight on 31 December 1934, he departed.

After arriving in the Land of Israel, he travelled to Kfar Saba and to Kibbutz 'Hamiflas' — the kibbutz where the group organised before establishing its permanent settlement. There he met Miriam, my grandmother, who had arrived before him.

They worked in the citrus orchards and prepared themselves to establish a permanent kibbutz in the country.

Grandma told me that Grandpa was a member of the Haganah and was appointed a regional commander. Because he liked her, he 'arranged' for them to be assigned guard duty together, allowing them to spend hours in one another's company.

In the middle of 1936, Grandpa Dov was called upon to help establish Kibbutz Kfar Etzion. He went there for a period to help the young kibbutz settle the land and become established. The settlement did not survive the disturbances of 1936 and was abandoned until the establishment of the Gush Etzion bloc in the 1940s.

Alongside his responsibilities in the country, Grandpa began working to bring his mother and younger brother to the Land of Israel.

His older brother, Shalom, immigrated independently in 1936 after completing his studies.

Grandpa and Shalom raised 22 Palestine pounds and arranged a certificate for their mother and younger brother, who was a minor when the document was signed. By the date of immigration, however, his brother had passed the age of fifteen and could no longer travel with his mother as a minor, so his name was removed from the certificate.

Ziska, the younger brother, begged his mother not to give up her opportunity to immigrate. She left him with relatives in the town, believing that within a few months he too would be able to come. But the World War broke out. Ziska was forced to flee deep into Russia and endured hardship and suffering before he too eventually succeeded in reaching the Land of Israel. His story is long and complicated; his courage and ability to withstand the suffering of the war eventually brought him to the country and reunited him with his family.

Eleven long years passed before Ziska reached the country and saw his mother and brothers again.

Grandpa's mother, Mary, arrived in October 1938. She lived in a tent in Kfar Saba, like the other immigrants, until December 1938, when a room was prepared for her at the new kibbutz.

Kibbutz Usha was established in the summer of 1937 by members of Hanoar Hatzioni, mainly from Poland. It was the movement's first kibbutz and was also one of the Tower and Stockade settlements. Grandpa Dov and Grandma Miriam were among its founders when it was established on the land.

During its early years the kibbutz was in dire financial condition. Agriculture could not support its residents, and Grandpa, like others, went outside to find work. Grandpa Dov worked as a porter at the Port of Haifa, loading oranges.

At the same time he remained active in the Haganah, serving as a regional commander and as a Jewish Settlement Policeman. He was sent on an officers' course as part of this work.

In 1939 and 1944, my father Tzvika and his younger brother Yishai were born. They were among the first children born on the kibbutz.

During the War of Independence, in April 1948, the group of kibbutzim in the Zevulun Valley was attacked by the Druze volunteer battalion under the command of Fawzi al-Qawuqji and the Arab Liberation Army. The members of the settlements had to defend themselves and drive the attacking forces away.

At this time Grandpa fought at a defensive position near the water reservoir at Ramat Yohanan. The attacking forces were scattered through the forests around Ramat Yohanan and did not capture the position. The fighting continued for about three days, during which there was no contact with Grandpa and his comrades there. Ammunition was so scarce that at times the defenders threw stones at the Druze fighters.

After preparations at Kibbutz Usha, an 'armoured vehicle' carrying a machine gun, ammunition and food set out. It passed through the Arab forces during the night and succeeded in reaching the isolated force near the water reservoir. The machine gun proved decisive in the fighting. Fortunately for the defenders, Qawuqji's forces suffered several defeats and withdrew, allowing our fighters to return to the kibbutz.

Following the battle of Ramat Yohanan, the Druze ceased fighting against the Jews and in effect entered into a non-belligerence agreement. After the war, some of the battalion's officers remained in Israel and became part of the foundation of the Druze fighting force within the Israel Defense Forces. Twenty-two of our fighters fell in the battles around the kibbutzim of the Zevulun Valley, including Zorik, the brother of Moshe Dayan.

In the 1950s Grandpa was sent to work for the agricultural field-crops organisation, where he inspected agricultural equipment arriving from abroad. In 1961 he travelled to Germany for an agricultural equipment exhibition.

During the 1970s and 1980s Grandpa worked in the kibbutz metal workshop. He used his enormous physical strength to create iron gates, signs and other works, some of which still decorate the kibbutz today. More generally, he was always ready to help solve any problem in any field.

Over the years Grandpa served as a member of the kibbutz secretariat and also on its cultural committee.

On Fridays Grandpa would put on a clean white shirt and accompany us to the dining hall. Grandpa was not religious, despite having studied at a yeshiva in Poland, but Judaism, tradition and the sacred texts were deeply important to him. He did not preach about religion, but he certainly expressed his views and often told us stories from the sacred texts — different lessons and teachings for life.

Grandpa was a special man who had a profound influence on those around him. He came from Poland, brought his family with him, and built something from nothing. Had he not caught the Zionist 'bug', his fate might have been that of the other Jews of Europe, and of the Jews of Disna in particular.

At the age of 51, in 1966, he suffered his first heart attack. Two more followed, one in 1973 and another in 1978. In 1982 Grandpa suffered a stroke, after which he required full-time care. He spent the remainder of his life bedridden in geriatric care until he died at the beginning of 1984.

We miss you!

Eran Zirlin