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THE SATURDAY PROFILE SHIRA ISAKOV

Battery Survivor Challenges Israel's Views on Violence Against Women

By ISABEL KERSHNER

TEL AVIV — She lay in the hospital unconscious and bandaged like a mummy, having barely survived a brutal assault. Her husband of two years had bashed her head, face and body with dozens of blows from a rolling pin before throttling her and then stabbing her 20 times with a kitchen knife, all as their screaming toddler looked on.

A neighbor interrupted the attack, and Shira Isakov was flown by helicopter to the nearest hospital in southern Israel in critical condition, with doctors giving her a 20 percent chance of living through the night.

She made it through, surviving, as she put it, “against all the odds.”

Just 14 months later, Ms. Isakov, 33, a former account director at the Israeli branch of McCann, the international advertising firm, has emerged as a powerful force for legal and social change in the country, using her newfound voice and nationwide prominence to advance Israel's struggle to combat violence against women.

Activists in Israel have long criticized laws they say favor abusers over victims and point to a history of lax law enforcement and lenient sentencing, with many nonfatal cases ending in plea deals with little or no prison time.

The Israeli government had long “shut its eyes to domestic violence,” said Prof. Shalva Weil, an expert on violence against women at the Seymour Fox School of Education at Hebrew University and the founder of the Israel Observatory on Femicide, adding that the sentencing of offenders was often “very arbitrary and light.”

But since the attack, Ms. Isakov has become a household name in Israel, and a hero to many, not because she was a victim of horrific abuse but because of how her case, and her speaking out, have helped shift Israel's legal landscape — especially when it comes to the laws protecting abusers' parental rights and their ability to control decisions about a child's medical care and schooling from prison.

The assault on Ms. Isakov took place on the eve of the Jewish New Year in September 2020. She had been on the phone with her parents when it began, and they heard the blows and her cries in real time.

The viciousness of the attack made headlines across Israel, but what has made Ms. Isakov an agent of change was the decision she made to go public with her story as she regained consciousness after six days in intensive care.

Her brother Ofer had photographed her as she lay in her hospital bed, horribly disfigured. When she could speak again, he asked her permission — if she was not too embarrassed, he said — to publish the pictures and show the country what her husband, Aviad Moshe, had done.

“I told him ‘I'm not embarrassed, that's what happened to me, that's what I look like,’” she recounted last week in an interview at home, in the Tel Aviv apartment she had once shared with Mr. Moshe. “The shame is on him.”

She said she did not hesitate to make the decision and was willing to share the details to encourage other women not to ignore the warning signs of a dangerous relationship.

“For a woman who is usually well-groomed and presentable, it's not pleasant to be seen with your face full of stitches, bruised, with all the left side smashed, head shaved, and teeth knocked out,” she said, “But I refused to hide.”

The news media at first blurred the



PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMIT ELKAYAM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

‘I didn't choose what happened to me. But I have chosen my path forward in life.’

pictures of her purple, swollen face and scalp crisscrossed with angry red cuts and stab wounds. But after a nurse told her that the courts had acquiesced to the request of her husband to bar publication of his name, to protect his and his family's reputation, she insisted on being identified in the news media.

Her national prominence grew when

Ms. Isakov and her neighbor, Adi Guzi, who banged on the door during the assault and then pushed her way into the house at great personal risk, were among 14 Israelis honored for their contribution to society at Israel's annual Independence Day ceremony in April.

Until last year, Ms. Isakov had led a



Shira Isakov endured a harrowing attack by her then-husband in 2019. He is awaiting sentencing after being convicted in August of attempted murder.

largely ordinary, middle-class Israeli life. Her parents immigrated from the Soviet Union in the 1970s, and she was born and raised in Karmiel, a quiet town in the Galilee hills in Israel's north, moved to Tel Aviv at 19 and earned a degree in business administration from the Open University.

She married Mr. Moshe, an electrical engineer, soon after they met. Their son, Leon, was born in November 2018.

The first act of violence came during an argument the next summer. Ms. Isakov complained to the police that Mr. Moshe had shoved and kicked her. Mr. Moshe said that Ms. Isakov had attacked him first, and the file was closed for lack of evidence.

“We made up and decided to give our relationship another chance,” she said. But she told Mr. Moshe that “A second time, if there was one, would mean divorce.”

Two months later Mr. Moshe was offered a 12-month contract for work in Mitzpe Rimmon, a remote town in the Negev desert. The couple decided to move, leaving their small but stylish apartment near the coast in Tel Aviv for the arid south.

There they conceived a second child, but Ms. Isakov later miscarried, just two hours after a particularly heated argument. From that point on, she said, the tension in the household escalated and the atmosphere turned ugly.

Ten days later, on the eve of the Jewish holiday, Ms. Isakov phoned her parents to say she was coming with

Leon to spend the holiday in Karmiel. Mr. Moshe blocked her from leaving, and threw her to the floor. She told him the marriage was over and he began beating her.

Mr. Moshe, now her ex-husband, is in prison, convicted in August of attempted murder. He is awaiting a hearing on his sentencing and could spend 20 years or more locked up.

Ms. Isakov's personal struggle is far from over, with more surgery ahead.

But since the attack, her accomplishments in the legal arena have been substantial, and her advocacy is credited with having raised awareness among both politicians and the general public of some of the shortcomings in the way Israeli society has dealt with domestic abuse, and its aftermath.

One early legal victory came when the court also convicted Mr. Moshe of child abuse, although Leon, while deeply traumatized, was not physically hurt — a judicial precedent for Israel, according to Ben Maoz, Ms. Isakov's lawyer.

The next battle came when Ms. Isakov sought therapy for Leon and was told by the hospital that she needed to get the signature of the boy's father. Registering Leon at a new kindergarten and getting him routine inoculations also required Mr. Moshe's signature. Mr. Moshe refused to sign.

Ms. Isakov and her lawyer turned to a concerned member of Parliament, Oded Forer, who had visited her in the hospital as a member of the parliamentary committee on the Status of Women and Gender Equality and is now the minister of agriculture. Within months the government amended the law so as to automatically cancel the legal guardianship rights of a parent charged with the murder or attempted murder of the other parent or the sexual assault of a child.

Ms. Isakov now is seeking a similar amendment of the Names Law that would allow her to unilaterally change Leon's surname from Moshe to Isakov without having to fight her ex-husband in court. And she is pushing for sanctions on convicted abusers who refuse to attend treatment programs in prison.

Ms. Isakov has also become a source of support for other victims of violence and their families. She recently raised \$50,000 for gift cards for women in shelters. She is campaigning to raise the state grants paid to relatives who are bringing up the children of murdered women.

This month, she began lecturing around the country on an almost daily basis at the invitation of local councils and high-profile companies and is fully booked through the end of the year.

The determination of Ms. Isakov to increase attention on domestic violence and her ability “to speak beautifully and calmly about her trauma and to help others,” Professor Weil said, is helping Israel make noticeable progress.

Ms. Isakov's openness has been “very effective in decreasing the rate of severe domestic violence and in the end, preventing the next femicide,” Professor Weil said, noting that so far in 2021, the number of women killed has dropped by a quarter compared with the same period last year.

With the scars on her forehead faintly showing under her makeup, Ms. Isakov makes it a point to emphasize in her public speeches that she refused to pity herself.

“I didn't choose what happened to me,” she tells her audiences. “But I have chosen my path forward in life, what I do with myself and how I bring up my child.”

Boy, 6, Whose Parents Died in Crash, Returns to Italy From Israel After a Custody Battle

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO and RONEN BERGMAN

ROME — Nearly three months after he was spirited by his grandfather to Israel, setting off an international custody battle, a 6-year-old boy who was the sole survivor of an Italian cable car crash returned to Italy on Friday.

The boy, Eitan Biran, survived a tragic cable car crash in May that killed 14 people including his parents, and his return to Italy caps a monthslong legal clash in Israel over the boy's guardianship that will continue in the Italian courts.

He arrived late Friday on a flight to Milan, Italy, to return to the custody of his aunt.

Italian authorities are pursuing kidnapping charges against the boy's Israeli grandfather and an Israeli man described as a former operative for Blackwater Worldwide security company. They are accused of abducting the boy in “a strategic and preplanned operation,” according to an Italian arrest warrant.

The grandfather, Shmuel Peleg, picked Eitan up from the house of his aunt, Aya Biran, in Italy, in September for what was supposed to be a toy-shopping spree.

But instead of returning Eitan in time for dinner, as promised, the grandfather

drove the boy across the border to Switzerland and then took him to Israel on a private plane.

According to an Italian arrest warrant, Mr. Peleg had help from Gabriel Alon-Abutbul, who was described as a former “mercenary working for Blackwater.”

Blackwater Worldwide was a private security company, since sold and renamed, that became a symbol of the excesses of American military contractors after four of its guards killed 17 Iraqi civilians in 2007.

Mr. Peleg was summoned for questioning by the Israeli police, before the warrant was issued, and released on bail. Mr. Alon-Abutbul was arrested in Cyprus last month and released.

The alleged kidnapping turned the tragedy into an international custody battle that drew world attention, with relatives in Italy and Israel each claiming to be looking out for Eitan's best interests, and civil and criminal cases playing out in both countries.

The boy lost his parents, his 2-year-old brother and two great-grandparents on a sunny weekend afternoon in May when a cable snapped on a gondola they were riding up Mottarone mountain.

Eitan was injured but survived, and a court in Turin appointed Ms. Biran as his

legal guardian.

Ms. Biran, the sister of Eitan's father, an Israeli who was studying medicine in Italy, lives in a small town near Pavia, in northern Italy. Eitan had been living with his parents in a nearby town since he was two months old.

Mr. Peleg argued that Eitan's parents

Italian officials say an Israeli man abducted his grandson with the help of a former mercenary.

had always planned to return to Israel, where Eitan was born and had relatives.

However those questions were not at issue in Israeli family court, which considered only whether Mr. Peleg's taking the boy to Israel violated The Hague Convention's provisions on the international abduction of minors.

The court ruled in October that it did, and ordered that Eitan be returned to Italy. Mr. Peleg appealed to district court, which upheld the lower court's decision.

Israel's Supreme Court declined to hear the case last month, clearing the way for Eitan's flight on Friday.

The alleged involvement of Mr. Abutbul-Alon raises fresh questions about how Eitan was taken from Italy.

According to the Italian arrest warrant, planning for the abduction began in July, months before Mr. Peleg's flight to Israel with the boy. This was, according to the warrant, the beginning of “strategic planning on the part of Shmuel Peleg in partnership with Gabriel Abutbul-Alon” that would end with an abduction.

According to the warrant, Mr. Abutbul-Alon coordinated the rental of a private plane that flew Mr. Peleg and Eitan from Lugano, Switzerland, to Israel.

Mr. Peleg said in a text that he had received “legal advice in Italy” that no custody had been awarded and that he was free to take the child to Israel.

“Unfortunately, the court in Israel did not want to deal with the issue of the best interests of the child, did not agree to approve further medical treatment and did not ask to hear the child's wishes firsthand,” the text said. “The court once again tore Eitan out of his large and loving family in Israel, who might not be able to see him from now on.”

Italy is seeking Mr. Peleg's extradition from Israel.

Mr. Abutbul-Alon's lawyer in Israel, Uzi Pinhasi, said that Mr. Abutbul-Alon had “acted in accordance with the law in all his business activities.”

“Unfortunately his name is tarnished without any justification and after he committed no crime,” Mr. Pinhasi said in a text. “I am confident that upon completion of the investigative proceedings, the case against my client will be closed without any indictment being filed against him.”

The Israeli Justice Ministry declined to comment on Friday.

As he returned to Italy, lawyers cautioned the news media to respect the boy's privacy.

“The protagonist is a child and we should put his interests at the center” by dimming the media frenzy, said Sara Carsaniga, a lawyer for the Peleg family.

Shmuel Moran, a lawyer for Ms. Biran, said, “We are happy that an Israeli court has established the principle of zero tolerance for kidnappings of children.”

“We very much hope he will have some peace, at least from any more legal proceedings,” he added.

Eitan was expected to return to her home in northern Italy in time to celebrate the final days of Hanukkah with his family there.