

Kav LaOved (Worker's Hotline) in Israel

By Avi Vardi

In November 2004, while on a three-month visit to Israel, I was looking for a volunteer opportunity and visited two organizations. I first visited the Mifkad Leumi headquarters, a project designed to sign Israelis and Palestinians on an agreement that envisions a peaceful two-state solution. The office was located in one of the most expensive office buildings in Tel Aviv and was loaded with state-of-the-art electronic equipment operated by a group of energetic young professionals.

The next day I visited the main office of Kav LaOved (Worker's Hotline) (KLO) in an old crumbling building in a Tel Aviv neighborhood that offers a variety of services for migrant workers. Kav LaOved gives legal help and advice to workers in Israel, mostly migrant workers.

I was invited to sit in the office of Adi, a staff worker, to hear some of the cases. A Filipino woman was brought to Israel to marry and take care of an invalid. After arriving in Israel and meeting her future husband she changed her mind. The family started to harass her and threatened to take her to the Immigration Police. Adi gave her his cell phone number and instructed her to contact him, day or night, if anything happened to her.

A young Orthodox Jewish man told Adi that a young Filipino migrant worker just gave birth to his child. "Do you plan to marry her? Is your family aware of your girlfriend?" "No." The young man needed advice how to extend her work permit. Adi instructed him to go to the Interior Ministry office and ask them which forms and documents were required. Adi warned him that he would get the "run-around" treatment and added a key piece of advice—to play dumb and ask them to write down the complete list of documents and forms that were required. The case would get dragged out, Adi said, for about three months but the young woman should eventually get a work permit—"Mazel Tov."

A young Filipino woman was hired to work for an elderly woman who died a few months after she arrived. The family only paid her half her wages. Adi told her that suing her ex-employer might take a long time and might not be practical in her case. The young woman was then hired to work for another elderly woman, but when she moved to her house she found that she had to care for two elderly women for the price

of one. She was working at least 12 hours a day on weekdays, a few hours on weekends, and was significantly underpaid. Adi advised her to stick to the new job for two months until the family became more dependent on her before asking them to properly compensate her, and to keep him in the picture.

While working at Kav LaOved Adi heard many stories of abuses of migrant workers in Israel, but on a private visit to the Philippines, when somebody at a vil-



lage he visited realized that he was from Israel, he was surrounded by villagers who asked him how to get a job in Israel. Apparently they were getting positive reports from friends and family members who had made it to Israel.

Outside Adi's office, a group of angry Hungarian construction workers were waiting for their turn, and in the corner was a shy young woman in a traditional Indian dress.

I was impressed with what I saw and decided to volunteer for Kav LaOved, mostly doing translations. Another thing that attracted me to Kav LaOved was that elderly members of my family in Israel were employing two young female caregivers from the Philippines, and I talked to these workers about problems migrant workers encounter in Israel, in particular their fear of the Immigration Police. Both female workers had left behind a daughter with their in-laws' families in the Philippines, and it was very sad to listen to their phone conversations with their daughters. Both women were sending large sums of money to their families. One of them managed to have her husband come to work in Israel after he "purchased" a new identity in the Philippines. (It is illegal for husband and wife to work in Israel at the same time.) The other worker had a new relationship, was not eager to reunite with her husband, and seemed to dread the day when her visa would expire. (Care givers are not allowed to switch employers after staying more than 63 months in Israel. Other migrant workers are limited to seven years.) These young ladies work six days a week and earn about \$600 U.S. a month (plus room and board). In their first year most of their income goes to repay loans taken in order to obtain these positions. These salaries are significantly higher than what they could earn in their home country.

I was introduced to Hanna Zohar, Kav LaOved's Director, in her small, cramped office with boxes of printed materials lying all around. A small woman with

continued on following page

AVI VARDI lives in Philadelphia and is an optimization consultant. He was born and raised in Tel Aviv, and frequently visits Israel. He has a PhD in Operations Research from Cornell University and began his career at NASA, then worked at Drexel University and later at the University of Pennsylvania. He is a son of two Holocaust survivors and is working on a book telling the story of his parents' families in Buchach, Galicia during World War II.

boundless energy, she talked with enthusiasm about Kav LaOved and the importance of volunteers. Hanna told me that Kav LaOved is an independent organization committed to defend workers' rights. KLO serves migrant workers (76% Asians, 19% East Europeans, 5% Africans), Palestinian workers and low-wage workers.

Kav LaOved provides legal advice and representation, using four in-house lawyers and a network of 50 experienced lawyers who charge a predetermined percentage of winnings. A 24-hour hotline is operated by volunteers. KLO responds to 25,000 e-mail and phone messages and conducts 15,000 office consultations a year. 4,000 complaints require pre-trial assistance (writing to employers and government institutions). 700 cases are submitted to courts, of which one third get settled. They mostly deal with wage disputes, layoff compensation, legal status, confiscation of passports, sexual harassment (a growing problem) and other types of abuses, social security issues (pregnancy and work-related accidents), health issues, and work safety issues. About 35 cases are filed at Administrative Court and the Supreme Court. These cases mostly deal with the right of workers to change employers (see below). The total gains awarded in court cases in 2006 was 7.5 million Shekels (\$2 million Cdn.) with each involved worker getting on average 10,000 Shekels. KLO works to improve laws to protect the rights of workers with a variety of activities intended for lawmakers.

KLO has 40,000 information pages written in ten languages. The Israeli media covers its court battles. KLO has two weekly newspaper columns. (All this is accomplished with merely 15 full-time employees.) It has branches in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa, Beer Sheva, Kalkilia and Jericho. (The last two branches are operated by Palestinian unions and serve Palestinians who work in Israel and in the settlements.) All branches heavily rely on volunteers. The offices are open to the public on a first-come-first-served basis. KLO operates on a yearly budget of \$560,000 U.S. that is contributed by Israeli, American and European foundations, as well as private corporations and individuals.

To provide a quick insight into the status of migrant workers in Israel it is best to quote Supreme Court Judge (now retired) Mishael Cheshin (Case no. 4542/02, March 30, 2006). Dr. Yuval Livnat, head of Kav LaOved's Legal Department, argued before the Supreme Court on behalf of an Indian worker against the regulation that migrant workers can only receive work visas with a specific employer stamped in their passport, and are then unable to change employers. The worker's employer, a disabled woman, demanded that the worker pay her for extending his visa! He refused to pay but continued to work for her. After his visa expired, the Immigration Police picked him up and ordered him to leave the country. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the worker and ordered the government to formulate new arrangements for foreign workers. In the decision Judge Cheshin said: "One must conclude—painfully and shamefully—that the migrant worker became the employer's serf; ... that binding workers to employers created a form of modern slavery. In this binding arrangement the state ... shackled the workers' hands and feet to the employer who

'imported' them—nothing less. The migrant worker turned from a subject of law—a person who has rights and obligations under the law—into an object of law, as if he were a piece of property. This arrangement infringed on the autonomy of workers, and practically denied them their liberty. According to the binding arrangement the workers became machines... slaves of olden days, like the people who built the pyramids or rowed Roman ships into war."

Trafficking of migrant workers to Israel is big business, generating high profits for personnel companies as well as for employers. The workers pay high fees (ranging from as low as \$2000 U.S. in Romania to as high as \$20,000 U.S. in China and averaging about \$5,000 U.S.) but when they arrive in Israel they often encounter problems of legal status, confinement, confiscation of documents, threats of deportations and occasionally, violence to coerce workers into accepting inhumane conditions. The authorities not only fail to take preventive measures to protect workers but also refuse to acknowledge the problem. Instead the authorities use the notorious "Immigration Police" to deport workers while allocating few resources to investigate exploitation by employers and traffickers.

Hanna told me of an ongoing project to hand migrant workers brochures on their legal rights in their native languages. In particular, Kav LaOved had specific information that Thai agricultural workers were being overworked, were not being properly paid and were not getting some basic services. A similar project to distribute brochures in Chinese to Chinese migrant workers proved to be successful. KLO prepared brochures in the Thai language, and located a volunteer who spoke Thai and a TV reporter who was interested in the subject. The office was collecting information on the whereabouts of Thai workers.

A week later my wife and I joined Hanna Zohar, the journalist, and the Thai-speaking person for an evening "operation". On the way to our destination, the Thai-speaking young man told me that he had spent three years in Thailand, met a young woman, and moved to live with her family in a beautiful village surrounded by streams, coconut trees and friendly people. Being religious, it was difficult for him to keep *kashrut*. He returned to Israel, but the young woman refused to leave the village. Now he has trouble readjusting to life in Israel and is thinking of returning to Thailand.

The journalist was driving very aggressively while juggling phone calls. We arrived at the Yatzitz village (near Ramle, south of Tel Aviv) and quickly found a farm that was suspected of employing Thai workers under difficult conditions. Behind an open gate we saw an old trailer home and a few people hanging laundry out to dry. Hanna jumped out first, entered the gate and started talking to the Thai workers in broken English and waving her hands. Within seconds, a car was speeding toward us from inside the farm and stopped abruptly a few centimeters from Hanna. The Thai workers ran into their trailer before Hanna had a chance to hand them the KLO brochures. A bitter exchange with the farmer took place and we left. We drove to a few nearby villages and asked people who

continued on page 39

LETTERS...
Continued from page 4

historic facts about this war are as follows.

In April 1967 Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol made statements threatening Syria with attacks on Damascus, and there were reports that the Israeli army was massing troops close to Syrian borders. Syria, having a mutual defence pact with Egypt and other Arab League states, called for military support. Egypt at the time was fighting a war in Yemen and President Nasser reluctantly moved a small part of his army from Yemen to the Sinai as a gesture of support. His call on UN troops to withdraw from the Egyptian-Israeli border came under pressure from other neighbouring Arab sources, chastising him for lack of genuine interest in taking any military action if Syria was attacked by Israel while UN troops were separating his troops from Israel.

Mr. Muraskin asks: "What diplomatic efforts did Nasser make to avert war?" In fact, Nasser was making desperate efforts to avert war, but these efforts were met by Israeli determination to wage war, as its leaders asserted. In response to UN debate on the issue and contacts with the U.S., Nasser was dispatching his vice president, Zakarieh Muhyie-Iddin, on Monday June 5 to Washington to meet with U.S. President Johnson to find a diplomatic solution to resolve the crisis. On the morning of June 5, the vice president was at Cairo airport waiting for his flight to Washington when the Israeli air force launched its massive bombing attack on Cairo and other Egyptian airports, as well as marching its army in its invasion of Sinai. That brought to an end any possibility of a diplomatic resolution of the conflict, which was clearly contrary to the declared objective of Israel's leaders, as confirmed by the statements by Yitzhak Rabin and Menachem Begin, amongst others, who planned to wage war.

These facts speak for themselves if anybody with an open mind is willing to see.

*Ismail Zayid, MD
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KAV LAOVED...
Continued from page 12

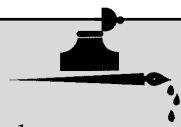
looked Asian where we could find Thai agricultural workers. We met another farmer who told us that in his village the Thai workers are "kings"—"they decide when to work, they mark their own timing cards, they do what they want...." A Thai worker whom we observed on his farm was dressed well and looked relaxed, but the farmer would not let us talk to his workers. On the way out of the village we met several Thai workers who were off work, gave them a few brochures and asked them to distribute them among their friends. They seemed to appreciate our efforts.

Since the beginning of the first Intifada twenty years ago, migrant workers have come in large numbers from poor countries to Israel to work at physically taxing jobs

under conditions and at wages that Israeli citizens would not tolerate. Now numbering close to 200,000, they play a major role in the Israeli economy. Their work benefits Israelis who get cheap labour, benefits the workers who make a higher income, benefits personnel companies who make large profits, and benefits the government which collects more taxes. However, migrant workers are the weakest group of workers in the Israeli labour market, are frequently taken advantage of, sometimes abused and are not given adequate protection by the government. Kav LaOved plays a most important role in fighting for their rights in what appears, at times, to be a David-and-Goliath fight. ♦

Kav LaOved's website provides a lot of additional information:
http://www.kavlaoved.org.il/default_eng.asp

Jottings by *Sylvia Friedman*



* It's always nice to be able to start things off with a *mazel tov*, so here goes—hearty congratulations to proud grandfather GEORGE OSTRY of Vancouver, on the birth of a new granddaughter, JULIE ANNE, born to son DAVID and his partner LESLIE. May the little one be the source of much *nakhes*—pride and joy—in your lives.

* We received word that one of our readers from Toronto has recently undergone successful surgery—GILDA KATZ, who has contributed to our pages in many ways. Our best wishes to Gilda for a continued speedy recovery.

* Sad news from Winnipeg on the passing of JACK WOLODARSKY. Among his many activities, he was the treasurer of the Winnipeg UJPO Branch, and an ardent supporter of *Outlook*. He was a warm, sweet, intelligent man—a real *mentsh*. We understand that 400 people attended Jack's funeral, which speaks volumes Our hearts go out to his wife Shirley, his son Garry and daughter Elaine, and their families, as well as to the entire Wolodarsky family.

* Last month we had a short, but pleasant and rewarding, visit from LYN CENTER of Hamilton. We discussed various ways of helping Lyn get the word about *Outlook* out in her area, and she had some great ideas, and of course we'll do our best to support her in her endeavours. We really need more people like her in our bailiwick.

And we were very pleased to welcome another visitor from down East, namely SHLOMIT SEGAL of Toronto. And I was fortunate enough to be able to spend a delightful five minutes or so with her darling baby daughter ZOHAR and husband LEV JAEGER.

* Whether the fact that the Canadian dollar has been spiraling upward is good or bad news can be disputed. But in any case, it forces *Outlook* to raise our U.S. and Foreign subscription rates to \$40.00 / \$70.00 for two years (U.S. funds). The new rate will take effect immediately. Sorry, folks!

Have a happy Summer!
Sylvia