



(Israel on bike ltd)

A bike made for many

Disabled IDF vets bond with foreign cyclists: To keep your balance, you must keep moving

• BARRY DAVIS

People come to this beautiful yet beleaguered part of the world for all sorts of reasons. Some want to soak up some rays, others are drawn by the surprisingly varied offering of natural landscapes and historical sites, and there are those who are fired by ideological motives.

You could probably put the 110 tourists who took part in a charity bicycle ride from Jerusalem to Eilat last week in all three categories. The event was in aid of the Zahal Disabled Veterans Organization (ZDVO), which runs half a dozen facilities across the country – in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Beersheba, Ashdod and Nahariya. The centers, which are also known as Beit Halochem, provide rehabilitation, sports and social activities and physical and emotional support for the approximately 50,000 IDF vets who were wounded and disabled in the state's military campaigns.

The organization was founded in 1949 in the wake of the War of Independence, to address the recovery and rehabilitation needs of the then 6,000 disabled IDF veterans.

Almost all the aforementioned athletic visitors hailed from Canada under the aegis of the Toronto-based Canadian chapter of the ZDVO, Beit Halochem Canada: Aid to Disabled Veterans of Israel.

Moshe Shema, director the INZ – Zahal Disabled Veterans fund – said that the cycling event is “a wonderful

initiative by Beit Halochem Canada which held this important ride for a ninth year running. The commitment of Beit Halochem Canada and the Canadian supporters to IDF disabled veterans moves us afresh every time.”

The abled-bodied foreigners partly rode alongside the 100 or so Israeli cyclists, many of whom are unable to use regular bikes, and used hand-operated models or recumbents.

“It has been an amazing, incredible experience for all of us,” said Lisa Levy soon after the cyclists made it to our most southerly resort. “It was a magical mystery tour from Jerusalem to Eilat on bike.”

As the long-serving executive director of Beit Halochem Canada, 51-year-old South African-born Levy has been heavily involved in the event for many years, both in a managerial position and, more recently, also as a hands-on – actually feet-on – participant in the ride.

The riders, local and offshore, began their five-day odyssey in Jerusalem and took on routes of varying degrees of difficulty. The various categories included a 37- to 55-km. daily route ride, with non-Israelis riding together with the IDF vets, and an off-road class going up to the Extreme classification which took in 93 to 131 km. per day, spiced with an impressive accumulation of climbs.

Over the years – this was the ninth edition of the annual event – the ride has left Canadian participants

with some deep and enduring impressions.

“Riding 400 km. beside these courageous men and women inspired me. After all, how do you complain about sore thighs to a man with no legs?” Syd Hazan soberly observed a couple of years ago.

David Spiegel noted the added value of his cycling visit: “This trip gave me an opportunity to feel more connected than in all my previous trips to Israel.”

I also spoke to Barry Jacobs shortly after he arrived in Eilat, and he was suitably enthused and appreciative of the experiential educational baggage he accrued over the five days of riding.

“It was wonderful; it was a great experience,” he enthused. “Every day was a little different. We got to see different parts of Israel, at a pace at which you can stop and slow down and meet some of the local people, and see some of the landscapes and also enjoy the different parts of Israel.”

The 45-year-old Canadian has been cycling since he was a kid and has some significant familial heritage to back up his pedal power here.

“My wife’s grandfather, Bernie Weinstein, was the man who brought Beit Halochem to Canada. He was in Israel in the 1970s and he met some of the war veterans through someone who was involved with Beit Halochem in Israel. They said they wanted to open a Canadian chapter.”

Weinstein got straight down to work.

“He spoke to some of his friends in some of the syn-

agogues in Canada, and at first he brought some veterans over to Canada then, later, many people helped to contribute to opening Beit Halochem in Canada.”

So for Jacobs coming here to take part in the ZDVO cycling event was perfectly natural.

“Bernie – I think he’s 96 now – told me they had a ride and I thought it would warm his heart to hear that a member of his family came here and helped to support Israel.”

For Jacobs, joining IDF war veterans for five days of cycling around the country is also a way of connecting directly with the country, and seeing things through his own eyes, unimpacted by media hype.

“There are so many people who want to make Israel a better place, and help everybody,” he notes. “Many of the [IDF] people who are injured are very young, and they are just starting their lives. If we can help them to live a little better, then we are very happy to do it. We feel they are part of our bigger family. It brings happiness to everybody involved.”

Yitzhak [Tzahki] Sarig has been on board the ZDVO event for several years now. The 64-year-old partner in a hi-tech company was badly wounded 43 years ago in the run-up to the Yom Kippur War.

“We were on the front line on the Golan Heights, just before the war,” he recalls. He says he and various quarters of the IDF were aware that some form of military clash was imminent.

“On September 13, 1973, there was a large-scale aerial battle over the Golan Heights and the Galilee [with the Syrian Air Force] that ended with a score of 12 to 1 – we downed 12 Syrian MiGs and they got one Israeli jet. From that point the level of military alert was raised.”

Even so, no one was really cognizant of what was brewing.

“Of course, we were told there could be a flare-up, but not a large-scale war,” Sarig continues, adding that the new state of preparedness curtailed some fun he and his comrades were having at the time.

“We were on vacation in Acre, and from that point on we, the conscripts, were on five-minute alert. That means you never take your boots off, except for when you’re having a shower, and you sleep either in the tank or next to it.”

Sarig’s unit’s duties included patrol activity. During one of the patrols, five days after the Syrian-IAF dogfight, the driver of the command car in which Sarig was traveling lost control of the vehicle.

“The command car overturned and I was thrown out of it,” Sarig recalls. “Two of the soldiers in the car were killed outright. I was unconscious for three weeks.”

By the time he came around, the Yom Kippur War had started and he was unable to take any part in it. Sadly,

one of his brothers was killed in the war. Sarig learned of the tragedy only sometime after the incident.

“He had the honor of taking part in the war. I didn’t,” Sarig declares.

YOU DON’T need to be a psychology PhD to get the sense of guilt with which Sarig has lived for over four decades. That is compounded by the fact that he comes from an illustrious military family. His father was a commander in the Palmah fighting organization, and later in the IDF, and another sibling was a high-ranking army officer. Sarig was left with all sorts of physical injuries in addition to the emotional trauma, but eventually got on with his life. Besides establishing a highly successful hi-tech enterprise that develops software for educational institutions, he volunteered for reserve army duty, initial low medical profile and invalidity rating notwithstanding, and even took an officer’s course.

Cycling came into his life quite a while later – seven years ago to be precise.

“I got into cycling following an encounter with Ofer Eisenberg, who today runs the cycling activities at Beit Halochem in Tel Aviv, and he told me about cycling. I also heard about it from Anat Yahalom.” The latter also sustained serious wounds in the Yom Kippur and, like Sarig, operates a hand bike, and takes part in the annual ZDVO ride.

This was a momentous turn of events for Sarig.

“That changed my life,” he states. “I fly quite a lot for business and I would always ask for an assistance vehicle at the airports. I couldn’t even stand for a second at the passport control counter. My state of health has improved immeasurably since I started riding, and I have not been sick a single day since I began cycling. Before I got on a bike I felt like an invalid. Now I get up at 5:30 a.m. three times a week, to ride.”

Sarig has taken part in the ZDVO event since its second year and says that he also gets a lot out of the interaction with the members of the foreign contingent.

“We don’t all ride with them, but we meet up in the evenings and spend time with them in the mornings before we set off. They hear stories from the Israelis about how they got wounded and that sort of thing. There is really good chemistry between the Israelis and the non-Israelis. You feel their love of Israel, and their appreciation for what we do here.”

A STALWART of the ride since its inception, Yahalom, like Sarig, is an inspiring character. She sustained horrific injuries in the 1973 war, lost a foot, and the use of one leg. But instead of sinking into an emotional abyss, she has managed to achieve a sunny view of life and spends much of her waking hours disseminating messages of hope, partly through a lecture presenta-

tion which she calls The Right Mistakes.

“I am an optimist,” she declares. “One of the things that I tell people is to live the here and now. I tell them to stop dealing with the past, stop thinking about the future. Now is what matters. You made some improvement today. Great. You just cycled half a kilometer. That’s excellent. You have to build as you go.”

Yahalom’s life changer occurred 12 years ago.

“They brought hand bikes to Israel for the first time. I suddenly realized that I could transport myself from place to place by bike – something I hadn’t been able to do for 30 years, because of my injuries. It was a delightful throwback for her.

“I come from a kibbutz, and we’d ride everywhere by bike. We did a bike ride from the Dan River [in the Upper Galilee] to Eilat. That was, of course, on regular foot-powered bikes.”

All that was consigned to Yahalom’s memory banks in the Yom Kippur War.

“I really missed cycling,” she says. “I couldn’t undertake any physical activity at all after my injury. I couldn’t dance, which I loved, go hiking or swimming.”

Cycling addressed that, and more.

“There is no social rehabilitation for people with injuries,” she explains. “Through cycling, you get together with other people, and get great physical exercise. There is nothing like cycling.”

YEHUDA COHEN also enjoyed cycling before he was badly wounded in 1985 in the First Lebanon War. He was caught up in a suicide bomb attack in Southern Lebanon, which resulted in 12 IDF fatalities and put the now 50-year-old in hospital for 18 months.

Cohen took part in the Jerusalem-Eilat ride on a recumbent and says he is full of admiration for his Canadian fellow riders.

“They come here partly because they want to learn about Israel at ground level. They very much enjoy the ride, and we enjoy meeting them and riding with them.”

Cohen has been a member of the Tel Aviv Beit Halochem Cycling Cub for the past seven years, and tailored his recumbent to his physical needs.

“My bike gives me so much – on a physical and emotional level. I’d say I devote 20% of my life to work and 50% to cycling.”

In addition to enjoying cycling around the country for five days, Cohen, too, emphasizes how well the Israelis and non-Israelis get along with each other, and how both sides gain a lot out of the social interaction.

“We spend a lot of time together. They ask me how I got wounded, and we bond strongly. You can feel their empathy.”



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