

# Personal connection

## An Excerpt

› By Dr. Michael Gordon

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**W**hen I was about nine years old, I asked him what our name had been before it was changed to Gordon. Most of my friends knew that their names had been changed when their parents or grandparents came from Europe (from rather long names ending in ovich or owitz or osky).

“Gordon has always been our name. My great-grandfather was a Gordon, even in the old country.”

The chance to return to Israel came, oddly enough, during my final exams in June 1966. I entered the room for my viva (oral) in obstetrics and gynecology, not my best subject. The professor was my examiner. He was a large man and towered over most of us when he directed our examinations in his clinics.

He looked at me and said, “You’re the Yank, aren’t you? With a name like Gordon, surely you must be Scottish?”

The clock keeping the ten-minute oral examination time was moving along. With my eye on it, I answered, “Yes, I am the Yank, but my name, although Scottish, has Jewish Lithuanian roots. If you have a moment, I can explain.”

His already rose-colored face brightened and he replied, “Please do.”

I spun out the story of my heritage. Two more minutes passed as I spoke of the Czar, and another two as I emphasized General Gordon’s role. Explaining the shtetle and the taking of names took me to the beginning of the last minute.

The professor suddenly looked at his watch and said, “Oh dear, oh dear; time has flown. Give my three signs or symptoms of preeclampsia.”

I carefully and deliberately counted out the answers—“high blood pressure, swelling of the legs with rapid weight gain, and protein in the urine”—finishing just as the minute

hand crossed the ten-minute mark.

He stood up, beaming, and shook my hand. As I left the room, I heard him murmur to himself, “Very good. Very good.”

That “very good” resulted in my winning the five-hundred-pound prize in obstetrics and gynecology, much to the surprise of my classmates. Following my completion of a six-month stint as a house officer (intern) in medicine at Aberdeen City Hospital, I obtained permission from the professor to use the money to return to Haifa for an internship in obstetrics and gynecology (“Medicine” in European medicine is the equivalent of “general medicine” in the United States). I was now on my way to Israel, happy to re-visit Haifa’s Rambam Hospital for some months of training.

Toward the end of an extraordinary personal and clinical experience, I visited kibbutz Nir Oz on the Negev border, which abutted the Gaza strip in Egypt. There I met Indian troops who were serving with the United Nations. A week later, Egypt’s President Nasser unilaterally removed these troops, and I left Israel to visit my sister Diti, who was serving with the Peace Corps in Tunisia. It was in the small town of Hammam Sousse in Tunisia that I experienced the Six-Day War. For the first two and a half days, all I could hear on the battery-powered

shortwave radio were Arab-language reports and an English-language broadcast from Egypt. Diti could understand, and she translated the depressing news from the Arabic. The English broadcasts came every few

hours and were very clear in their details of the destruction of Israel. The BBC was scrambled, so there was no way of hearing any other information.

Incredibly, I managed to find batteries in a bicycle store, for there were none in all the electrical shops. To

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the surprise of the owner, I bought his whole supply. The next day's local newspapers were full of stories of Israel's destruction, as explained to Diti by those in her school who read the Arabic to her. The people who had become "my people" might disappear in the fire of war. On a visit to Sousse on the second day, we noticed many armed soldiers. A street vendor told Diti that they were Algerian troops on their way to the war "over there—far away." I ran the dial on the shortwave radio back and forth all night on the day the war broke out and again on the second day and night which was June 6. That night, as I was slowly moving the dial, I heard very distantly, a song, with guitar accompaniment, which I recognized as Hebrew.

The music stopped and a voice came on the air. My knowledge of the language was rudimentary, but the voice sounded calm. Then I recognized that it was the news being read, although I could not understand the details. I heard the word maot followed by the word migim, which I surmised was the Russian aircraft used by Egypt and Syria. I knew that, since mea was a hundred, maot must mean hundreds. This was followed by the word shtemeser, which I knew meant twelve, followed by the word, miragim, which I knew to be

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the Mirage, the Israeli fighter jet supplied by France. After the news, music started again, and the reception became distant and replete with static. I went to sleep hoping I had understood enough Hebrew to know that things could not be all that bad. The next morning, the BBC made it through and announced the clearer reporting of the war. Israel had not been destroyed, though the war was raging on at least two fronts—Egypt and Syria—and Israeli tanks seemed to be rushing towards the Suez Canal.

Two days later, I flew to Paris and then to London where Steve, my flatmate from medical school, lived. By this time it was known that Jordan had entered the war but had lost their stranglehold on Jerusalem, and the West Bank had been taken over by the Israelis. The last battle going on was for the Golan Heights, which was in full force by the time I arrived in London that Friday, June 9. The news was sketchy, but Israel clearly had survived so far. Steve and I tried vainly to get to Israel to volunteer. Then, suddenly, on the Saturday morning while we were walking through Hampstead Heath where a cricket game was being played, the war ended. I left the next day for the United States, and each of us vowed to meet again in Israel.

## Personal Connections...

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