

Bar Ilan University

Department of English

Research Proposal

For an M.A. Thesis

**Living on the Border of Fear: Stories From Sderot**

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### **Aims and General Description**

My aim in writing this work is to chronicle the early beginnings of my reporting career in Israel and how my initial experiences in Sderot impacted me both in my role as a journalist, but also personally. I will explore the meaning of terror and explore the way in which a war zone of daily rocket attacks impacts the way one sees the world. I also want to explore how empathy and understanding can develop in an environment of extreme stress and danger. I will explore the unexpected situations that I found myself in when I lived in this Gaza border city and the amazing people that I got to know and call my friends during my two years there. Most importantly, I will examine my need to write and capture the reality of people living in such a harsh environment through the power of words.

I envision that the genre of this piece of writing will be a journalistic memoir comprised of essays. I will also incorporate flashbacks contrasting my childhood in Maine to life in Sderot and will also flash forward to my more current work as a journalist and an English teacher in Jerusalem today and what role Sderot still plays in my life. The underlying theme unifying the various essays will be my exploration of how one can move forward beyond trauma, fear and that sense of helplessness, through the power of the written word.

## Conceptual Background

Everyone experiences fear at some point in their life. You can feel fear for a variety of reasons that usually seem to grow with age. But the belief that your life might end in a terror attack is one kind of fear that more and more people are feeling throughout the world in light of terrorist attacks that are occurring more frequently with each passing year. As David Reiff wrote in the New York Times following the attacks in Nice, France, "In the wake of the mass casualty attacks in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Orlando, Florida and Nice, France...it is simply a fact that no public space anywhere in the world can be considered safe."

However, experiencing the fear one feels when watching the news about a terror attack and then to actually be caught in the midst of one are two very different realities. Until I came to Sderot, I never experienced terror myself. Sderot was unique as a city because it had been the target of Gaza rockets on a daily basis for several years, which intensified following the 2005 Israeli Disengagement from the Gaza Strip. Every week, rockets were fired at Sderot, and fell indiscriminately on kindergartens, schools, backyards, neighborhoods, homes, shopping centers, and more. At the time I was living in Sderot, the plight of the city's residents was virtually unheard of in the international media and even the Israeli public was largely uninformed.

The experience of enduring rocket attacks in Sderot from 2007-2009 served as an impetus for myself as a writer. In order for me to accurately capture the feelings and reactions of Sderot residents to the rockets, I had to experience that fear myself. That fear gave me a greater depth in insight and understanding of the situation, which in turn gave my reporting a more human quality when I interviewed victims of rocket attacks. Instead of just coming in once in a while to interview people and file a story, I saw how the frequent rocket attacks siren alarms took a heavy toll on the way people behaved and their way of life. People adapted their way of life to a reality that called for changes like driving without seatbelts so as to leave more time to make it to a bomb shelter in case of a rocket alarm. While a few number of people were killed in these rocket attacks, the most damaging outcome resulted in physical injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) where residents were paralyzed with trauma and fear. My journalistic memoir will attempt to capture that side of life in Sderot – the trauma and fear that characterized life there at that time. But even more than that, I will also go into how that reality affected me as a writer and person. This piece

will give me the opportunity to present not only my observation of others, but observations of myself during my time reporting in Sderot.

Indeed, the kind of journalism that I aspired to write required that I be fully immersed in the story, in the city and with its people, so that I could accurately convey the subjects I interviewed with as much human detail as possible. Tom Wolfe writes in "The Birth of 'The New Journalism': Eyewitness Report, published in New York Magazine, about the new style of writing termed as New Journalism that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s," where journalism mixed with literary techniques were used to document events. Wolfe, who is credited as one of the writers that created the movement, believed journalists had to witness events first hand and to reconstruct them for the reader. "The crucial part of reporting plays in all story-telling, whether in novels, films, or non-fiction..." writes Wolfe. He writes about one particular journalist, who "made the discovery that it was feasible for a columnist to leave the building, go outside and do reporting on his own...to gather 'novelistic' details, the rings the perspiration, the jabs on the shoulder and he did it more skillfully than most novelists."

In order to capture the story of Sderot for the international press, I had to be there, I had live there, and I had to experience the terror and the fear like the residents themselves.

Why is the fear of a terror attack so powerful? I will explore the answer to this question in my memoir as that emotion became a dominant part of my experience of living in Sderot. As Harold Kushner writes in his book, *Conquering Fear: The Art of Living Boldly*, "The power of a terrorist act, the secret of its effectiveness lies in its randomness." There was a randomness to life in Sderot, a feeling that an unexpected tragedy could happen at any time. A rocket could fall anywhere at any point during the day – I would feel a lack of control in that kind of reality, that something else was governing my routine.

During those stressful days at work, I would come back to my apartment on Rakefetstreet in the evenings, looking forward to doing nothing – watch a movie and hang out with friends. I just wanted to forget the trauma I witnessed during the day – the woman shaking uncontrollably at the scene of the rocket attack, the tears of crying children, and the rocket explosions. As Chloe Angyal writes in *The Trauma of Writing About Trauma* "...journalists to whom I spoke told me that they had ways of dealing with the emotional cost of the work

they do... Watching mindless television, reading novels, and writing about unrelated topics (like MuggleQuidditch) were also popular ways of mitigating the effects of work."

The problem was that I could never escape work at home because in the middle of watching Seinfeld or drinking beer with friends, I would find myself racing to the bomb shelter as the Code Red siren, warning us of a rocket launch. I could never be completely "mindless" of the situation, not when I was in Sderot and not even when I was away from the city. The rocket alarms, the subsequent explosions, and that state of alertness, seemed to follow me at all hours. In this work, I will explore the state of mind I was in and the psychological impact that living with rockets had on me. I will also consult the writings of Leigh Gilmore, an American humanities educator who has also written about pain and trauma in her writings.

But as time went on, I also found that writing was a way for me to continue living my life, by not allowing the terror to stop me from doing my work on a professional level. I would see how many Sderot residents continued life, just by refusing to move away. Instead, they found ways to adapt to the situation as did I. Isabel Kershner and James Glanz recently wrote in an article for the New York Times, titled "To France From Israel: Lessons on Living With Terror," following the Nice attack in July 2016: "In Israel, ordinary citizens, security officials and experts feel they have seen it all and say they have adapted to a perennial, if ever-changing, threat. They speak of constantly staying alert, exercising caution and growing accustomed to what some may find to be intrusive levels of security, but essentially carrying on." That concept of "carrying on" was a prevalent characteristic that defined many people that I met in Sderot, which I will explore in my thesis.

While it was my job to write while working for Sderot Media Center, I can recall that I always had this visceral need to write everything that I saw and experienced on a weekly basis – especially the terror that I saw innocent civilians experience during countless rocket attacks. Writing eventually became an essential way for me to deal with the traumas that I was witnessing weekly as people struggled with the dangers and threats inflicted upon them. They were especially vulnerable because they had no way to respond to the rocket attacks, to the injustice of living under fire. All residents could do was run to the shelters, living life through 15 second increments, hoping to escape harm, injury, and even death. My accounts of Sderot life were fueled by this inner need to respond to these attacks in the only

way I knew how – through writing-- no matter if I was feeling exhausted or scared. I could not sleep at night if I didn't write what I had seen during the day, of the people I met, and of their stories. In Pearl S. Buck's book, *The Eternal Wonder*, she has a character in the story, Margie that places writers in two different categories. She describes the first type of writer as one that can be trained and that "knows" his craft and "word tools perfectly," but it is her description of the second category that really resonates with me. "The other type is one who is **haunted** by an idea or a situation in existence and who cannot rid himself of it until he puts it down on paper. He may only write the situation and present no solution, for there may not be one in existence."

For myself, I felt that I was that kind of reporter, inspired to some degree by the style of the New Journalism movement, documenting exactly what I saw, heard, smelled and sensed, creating a sense of place and a crafting a window so that others could see the suffering that I saw. I offered no solutions in my articles and reports of Sderot life; as a journalist I merely presented reality as I perceived it and reconstructed it for an audience both at home and abroad. However, when I would write articles and reports for our media center's website and for other international news publications about Sderot life, I found myself turning to the stories of particular residents – sharing their personal thoughts and feelings, in an effort to make them as human as possible to unfamiliar readers. As I wrote previously, I felt that I was "haunted" by real people and their experiences, as described by Buck.

Indeed, Buck describes her first category of writers, those who are perfectly trained as those who "can write news or advertisements or manuals, or not write at all, if he chooses." In my time in Sderot, and indeed in Israel in general, I feel that writing for me is something I am compelled to do. I have no choice but to write. I must write like I must breathe and eat – and when I lived in Sderot, that feeling was the driving force that kept me living there, even when I had had enough of the rockets and wanted to leave. Steven Millhauser in "A Voice in the Night," published in *The New Yorker*, writes of a "voice," that a young boy hears in the dark. "He doesn't want to hear the voice, but if he hears it he'll have to answer. You can't get out of it." There were times in Sderot, where I felt that way, that I had to answer this calling, answer the voices I was hearing in the people I interviewed and got to know, by writing the stories of trauma I encountered there. Even when it got difficult, when I myself started showing signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, I had to stay on, interview and write – it was hard to ignore that voice.

As Joan Didion writes "the impulse to write things down is a peculiarly compulsive one..." (On Keeping a Notebook). While Didion refers to the need of writing memories or observations down in a private notebook, her use of the words impulse and compulsive describes my need to write journalistically during my time in Sderot. "Why did I write it down? In order to remember of course..." writes Didion and for me, it was not only my need to remember what happened during that time, but to enable others to know and remember as well – those who lived outside the story.

In addition, my drive to write about Sderot correlates with the empathy that I continue to feel for the residents of the city. I believe that the residents of Sderot deserve empathy for the tragic decade of trauma and rocket attacks that they had to endure, and which continues to this today, albeit at a lesser frequency. As Gillian Whitlock writes in her book, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, "Empathy also shapes how news and trauma is constructed, and how it appeals to an implied audience." I would like to reach out to a larger audience through this memoir and continue to inspire empathy for Sderot.

Whitlock further expounds on the trauma that journalists encounter in their work reporting on war, "Recently journalist memoir has emerged as a genre of life narrative given to haunted and fragmented accounts of the professional self as it deals with testimony and trauma..." She refers to media correspondents in her book, including Anne Garrels, a senior NPR correspondent who covered the Iraq War (2003-2011). "These memoirs by the authorized witnesses to the war in Iraq tap into the powerful emotional and psychological responses to the war, and it is consolation the reporter can still find a place to stand, witness and emphasize."

In the process of writing this thesis, I hope to find my own personal space to stand and to reflect beyond my "professional self" and through the eyes of who I am today.



## **Shape of the Project**

### **Part I: My First Rocket Attack**

In the first part of this work, I will focus on the background of my story, setting the stage with how I initially came to be in Sderot and to work for Sderot Media Center. I will include flashbacks to my childhood in Maine and describe my acclimation to Israel thus far, having moved to the Jewish state right after I completed high school in my hometown of Calais, Maine. It was my third year in Israel, and my second year at college at Bar Ilan University as an English literature student when I began to work in Sderot one summer and decided to move there. In this part, I will also contrast between the different and relatively safe worlds that I knew until the point of moving to Sderot – that of Maine, where I grew up and Givat Shmuel where I was studying for my BA. (I also spent a year doing my National Service in Jerusalem, but that is less relevant in terms of content to the central theme of this work). I believe that it is important to establish a strong sense of place throughout Part I – capturing the essence of Sderot and the spirit of the people there, so there will also be some historical and cultural information given here.

#### **Possible Essay Titles:**

- 1) Discovering Sderot
- 2) Life Under Rocket Fire
- 3) Office Stress
- 4) The Americans and the Moroccans
- 5) New Friends
- 6) How to Make it in 15 Seconds to a Shelter
- 7) The Need to Write

### **Part II: Capturing the Story of Sderot**

In Part II of this work, I will look in depth at the people I met and wrote about in Sderot for foreign and local press and the impression their stories made on me and others. I will also write about my work as a media liaison for foreign press and some of the adventures that came along with that role working for Sderot Media Center. It is important for me to highlight the impact of the rocket attack and terror on the children living in Sderot and the surrounding area and recalling some of my experiences covering the psychological trauma among the youth. I will also highlight the different places and moments where the rocket attacks caught you in Sderot and the stress that we often had to deal with in the office and on the ground.

- 1) Meeting With a Sderot Psychologist
- 2) Foreign Press Encounters
- 3) When Barack Obama (And Others) Toured the City
- 4) Sleepless Kids in Sleepless City
- 5) Raising Money for a Bomb Shelter
- 6) PTSD at the Post Office
- 7) The Casualties
- 8) A Menorah, Designer Roses, and Other Bizarre Souvenirs Made Out of Gaza Rockets

### Part III: Finding my Voice

This will be the most personal part of this work of writing in terms of my own story in Sderot and where my experiences led me both on a personal and professional level. I will write about my experiences presenting the story of Sderot to the world and what those experiences were like. Those experiences include a letter exchange I had with Mona, an English literature student and translator from northern Gaza. In a related vein, I will also focus on my time as a tour guide and a lecturer on the Sderot rocket reality both in Israel and abroad. One of the scariest and most impactful periods for me living in Sderot was during Operation Cast Lead, when the city was hit by 81 rockets within a week. At the time, I was a university student, trying to get my papers done on time and catching up on *Wuthering Heights* and other pieces of work. I would like to explore this kind of double life I was living between trying to be a 'normal' college student and a reporter on the Gaza border.

- 1) My Pen Pal in Gaza – Writing to Mona
- 2) Reactions in Sderot and Around the World to My Media Work
- 3) Sharing Sderot With the Outside World
- 4) My First Rocket War – Operation Cast Lead
- 5) Sderot's Children Send Balloons to Gaza and Other Goodwill Gestures
- 6) Life Post Rockets

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