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The *Exodus* Conspiracy

Exodus by Leon Uris must rank high on any list of the most influential books about the Middle East. The novel, published in 1958, popularized the story of Israel's birth among millions of American readers. The 1960 film, based on the book and starring Paul Newman as Ari Ben Canaan, reached many more millions. *Exodus* is still of interest, not for what it says about the creation of Israel (the commander of the ship *Exodus* said Uris "wrote a very good novel, but it had nothing to do with reality. *Exodus*, shmexodus"),¹ but for what it reveals about mid-twentieth-century America. So more inquiry into the American context of *Exodus* is welcome—provided you get the facts right.

In September 2010, Rashid Khalidi, the Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University,² offered his audiences an account of how Leon Uris came to write the book. In a speech at Brooklyn Law School, Khalidi made this claim:

This carefully crafted propaganda was the work of seasoned professionals. People like someone you probably never heard of, a man named Edward Gottlieb, for example. He's one of the founders of the modern public relations industry. There are books about him as a great advertiser.

In order to sell the great Israeli state to the American public many, many decades ago, Gottlieb commissioned a successful, young novelist. A man who was a committed Zionist, a fellow with the name of Leon Uris. He funded him and sent him off to Israel to write a book. This book was *Exodus: A Novel of Israel*. Gottlieb's gambit succeeded brilliantly. *Exodus* sold as many copies as *Gone With the Wind*, which up to that point was the greatest best-seller in U.S. history. *Exodus* was as good a melodrama and sold just as many copies.³

Khalidi made a similar assertion in another speech a few weeks later, this time at the Palestine Center in Washington:

Now, I think it's worth noting that this book was not the unaided fruit of the loins as it were, the intellectual loins of Leon Uris. He wrote

it, of course, but the book was commissioned by a renowned public relations professional, a man who was in fact considered by many to be the founder of public relations in the United States, a fellow by the name of Edward Gottlieb, who desired to improve Israel's image, and who chose Uris to write the novel after his successful first novel on World War II, and who secured the funding which paid for Uris's research and trip to Israel. Given that many of the basic ideas about Palestine and Israel held by generations of Americans find their origin either in this trite novel or the equally clichéd movie, Gottlieb's inspiration to send Leon Uris to Israel may have constituted one of the greatest advertising triumphs of the twentieth century. The man deserves his place in the public relations pantheon.⁴

A Myth Unravels

Khalidi warned his Brooklyn audience that Gottlieb would be "someone you probably never heard of." Quite right: I regard myself as reasonably informed about the history of American Zionism, and I had never heard of Edward Gottlieb. Khalidi claimed there were "books about him as a great advertiser," so I did a search, but I couldn't find one. When Gottlieb died in 1998, at the age of eighty-eight, no major newspaper ran an obituary. That seemed to me a rather scant trail for "the father of the American iteration of Zionism" and "the founder of public relations in the United States."

One reason for the thin record, I discovered, is that Edward Gottlieb wasn't the founder or even one of the founders of American public relations. He had been a journalist in the 1930s, and in 1940 joined the long-established public relations firm of a true founder, Carl Byoir.⁵ After Pearl Harbor, Gottlieb did radio and informational work for the war effort in the European theater of operations. In 1948 he opened his own shop, Edward Gottlieb and Associates, which grew into a respected mid-size firm, focused primarily on products. Most notably, Gottlieb popularized French champagne and cognac in the United States. When he sold his company in 1976 to a bigger competitor, it ranked sixteenth in size among PR firms in America. He seems to have been well-regarded, but he was not dominant in the business. If the *Encyclopedia of Public Relations* constitutes "the public relations pantheon," then Gottlieb is noticeable only by his absence.⁶

Gottlieb is likewise completely absent from works on American Zionism—there isn't a single reference. Moreover, his name does not appear in the two scholarly studies of Leon Uris: Matt Silver's *Our Exodus: Leon Uris and the Americanization of Israel's Founding Story*,⁷

and Ira Nadel's *Leon Uris: Life of a Best Seller*.⁸ I wrote to both authors, asking them whether they had encountered the name of Edward Gottlieb in Uris's personal papers, housed at the University of Texas and cited extensively in both studies. Silver wrote back that "I didn't see anything about Edward Gottlieb,"⁹ and Nadel answered that "I never came across G[ottlieb]'s name."¹⁰

Both biographers are in agreement that the idea for a novel on Israel originated with Uris (encouraged by Dore Schary, a Jewishly-active Hollywood executive); that Uris's agent Malcolm Stuart pushed him to realize his plan; that Uris successfully shopped the idea in Hollywood studios and New York publishing houses; and that his research trip to Israel in 1956 was financed by advances on the film rights and book from MGM and Random House. (United Artists and Doubleday subsequently acquired the rights.) The contracts and correspondence are preserved in Uris's papers. And the Gottlieb "commission"? Silver wrote to me that "my feeling is that this reference could be a complete canard."¹¹ Nadel wrote to me that "the story is a complete fabrication."¹²

Khalidi was trained as a historian, so I figured he would not have concocted the Gottlieb story out of whole cloth. He must have had a source. As it happens, the Gottlieb claim figures in three books that are classics in the Israel-bashing canon. In *Deliberate Deceptions* (1993), Paul Findley wrote that *Exodus* "was actually commissioned by the New York public relations firm of Edward Gottlieb."¹³ In *Fifty Years of Israel* (1998), Donald Neff wrote that Gottlieb "hit upon the idea of hiring a writer to go to Israel and write an heroic novel about the new country. The writer was Leon Uris."¹⁴ And in *Perceptions of Palestine* (1999), Kathleen Christison wrote that Gottlieb "selected Uris, and sent him to Israel" in an "astute public-relations scheme."¹⁵

And on what source did Findley, Neff, and Christison rely? All of them referenced a 1985 how-to book on public relations, *The Persuasion Explosion: Your Guide to the Power and Influence of Contemporary Public Relations* by Arthur Stevens, a public relations professional. This is a breezy advice book full of PR do's and don't's, which no one would mistake for a history of the business. (A typical chapter title: "Success DOES Smell Sweet.") Stevens in his book relates the Gottlieb story to illustrate a point:

The cleverest public relations in the world cannot successfully promote, for any length of time, a poor cause or a poor product. By contrast, skillful public relations can speed up the acceptance of a concept

whose time has come. A striking example of this involved eminent public relations consultant Edward Gottlieb. In the early 1950s, when the newly formed State of Israel was struggling for recognition in the court of world opinion, America was largely apathetic. Gottlieb, who at the time headed his own public relations firm, suddenly had a hunch about how to create a more sympathetic attitude toward Israel. He chose a writer and sent him to Israel with instructions to soak in the atmosphere of the country and create a novel about it. The book turned out to be *Exodus*, by Leon Uris.¹⁶

So this is the origin of the Gottlieb story: an example in a how-to book. Even so, I wondered how Stevens came to write this paragraph. Did he have a published source or documentary evidence? Was this part of the folklore of the business? So I tracked Stevens down and asked him. In an e-mailed reply, he told me that he had interviewed Gottlieb, “whom I knew well at the time,” around 1984:

The comments he made to me during my interview of him were those that went into the book. It wasn’t hearsay I made use of or the reporting of prevailing folklore floating through the public relations world at the time. What I reported is what he actually told me during my interview. Obviously, I cannot vouch for the accuracy or reliability of what he said.¹⁷

So this was not a claim based on any document or even part of PR lore. It was Gottlieb himself who told Stevens the story of how he supposedly chose Uris and sent him to Israel. “I didn’t get that information from any other source,” Stevens wrote me, “but directly from the horse’s mouth.”¹⁸ Ultimately, Gottlieb is the sole source of the Gottlieb story—told by him twenty-eight years after Uris set off for Israel.

Gottlieb and Israel

But this still left a question. Since Gottlieb doesn’t appear in any account of American Zionism, why would he expect such a claim to be credible? “Only Edward Gottlieb would know if what he told me was true,” Stevens wrote me. But that wasn’t so, because there was a living witness to Gottlieb’s own operations: Charlotte Klein, one of the first women to reach the top rungs of a public relations firm. Klein worked for Edward Gottlieb and Associates from 1951 to 1962, making vice president in 1955.

Klein had been the subject of a short academic study, and there I finally found evidence for some connection between Gottlieb and Israel. The Government of Israel became a Gottlieb client in 1955;

Charlotte Klein managed the account, and even traveled to Israel that year.¹⁹ This was about the time Uris began to take his book and film proposal around New York and Hollywood. Could the Gottlieb story still contain a grain of truth?

The study of Klein noted that she was still active at the age of eighty-eight and living in Manhattan. So I wrote to Klein informing her of Khalidi's claim that Gottlieb had commissioned Uris to write *Exodus*. I received this reply:

I was in charge of the Israel account at Edward Gottlieb and Associates and if Ed had ever talked to Uris about Israel I would have known it. As a matter of fact, Ed sought the Israel account because of me. I was one of his top employees and I told him that I was going to leave because I wanted to do work that was socially significant and would seek a job at the United Nations. He didn't want me to leave and called me from outside the office soon after and said "Is the Government of Israel socially significant enough?" I stayed with him and handled the account which we kept for several years. There was never a discussion about Uris or regarding a possible book about Israel.²⁰

When I told her that Stevens said he had heard the story from Gottlieb, she added this:

1984, of course, is a long time from 1955 and Ed may have met Uris and felt he influenced him. However, there never was money enough on the account for Ed to "commission" anyone to write a book. I am also pretty sure that Ed would have bragged about meeting and talking to Uris if this happened. He would have asked me to come up with some ideas of what Uris ought to cover. I would have had a meeting of my staff on the Israel account and would have drawn up a plan to include people in Israel for Uris to contact. As part of our work for Israel we did suggest mainly to media people to go to Israel to write about any special events going on there or to cover specific news that was happening there.²¹

So Charlotte Klein, who handled the Israel account for Gottlieb, was unequivocal: Gottlieb did not commission *Exodus*, and the name of Leon Uris never came up in the Israel work of the firm.

I could have stopped my pursuit here, but I decided to go one more lap. Perhaps there was some record of the Gottlieb-Israel relationship in official Israeli records? So I paid a visit to the Israel State Archives in Jerusalem, and found the Israeli foreign ministry files related to Gottlieb. These include contracts, reports, budgets, invoices, and press clippings, all awaiting a future historian.²²

The documents explain the relationship in detail. Gottlieb's firm had a subentity, Intercontinental Public Relations, Inc. (ICPR), with offices in Washington and New York. The subentity did work that required foreign agent registration. Israel's contracts with ICPR ran for two years (an initial year and one renewal), from February 1, 1955 through January 31, 1957. The relationship was handled on Israel's end by Harry (Yehuda) Levin, counselor at the Israeli embassy in Washington. The PR firm's biggest coups involved *Life* magazine. This included arranging a meeting between visiting Prime Minister Moshe Sharett and the top executives of *Life*, resulting in a *Life* editorial strongly critical of the Arab refusal to accept Israel.²³ This was the firm's biggest score, but Klein also worked to place Israel-related stories in magazines, newspapers, and trade journals.

The record shows that Israeli officials saw such outsourcing of PR as a (pricey) stopgap, until these tasks could be assumed by professionally-trained Israelis (and soon enough they were). The files make fascinating reading for anyone interested in the early history of Israeli public relations in America—but they do not contain a single mention of Leon Uris.

The Purpose of Myth

In sum, the Gottlieb “commission” never happened. Uris's biographers dismiss it, Gottlieb's most knowledgeable associate denies it, and no documents in Uris's papers or Israeli archives testify to it. It originated as a boast by Gottlieb to another PR man, made almost thirty years after the (non-)fact. And given its origin, it is precisely the sort of story a serious professional historian would never repeat as fact without first vetting it (as I did).

Yet it persists in the echo chamber of anti-Israel literature, where it has been copied over and over. In Kathleen Christison's book, it finally appeared under the imprimatur of a university press (California). In Khalidi's lectures, it acquired a baroque elaboration, in which Edward Gottlieb emerges as “the father of the American iteration of Zionism” and architect of “one of the greatest advertising triumphs of the twentieth century.”

What is the myth's appeal? Why is the truth about the genesis of *Exodus* so difficult to grasp? Why should Khalidi think the Gottlieb story is, in his coy phrase, “worth noting”?

Because if you believe in Zionist mind-control, you must always assume the existence of a secret mover who (as Khalidi said) “you probably

never heard of” and who must be a professional expert in deception. This “seasoned” salesman conceives of *Exodus* as a “gambit” (Khalidi) or a “scheme” (Christison). There is no studio or publisher’s advance, only a “commission,” which qualifies the book as “propaganda”—an “advertising triumph.” In Khalidi’s Brooklyn Law School talk, he added that “the process of selling Israel didn’t stop with Gottlieb. . . . It has continued unabated since then.” It was Khalidi’s purpose to cast *Exodus*, like the case for Israel itself, as a “carefully crafted” sales job by Madison Avenue “madmen.” Through their mediation, Israel has hoodwinked America.

In fact, the deception lies elsewhere. *Exodus*, novel and book, was universally understood to be a work of fiction. In contrast, Rashid Khalidi claimed to speak in the name of history—that is, carefully validated truth. “I’m a historian,” he once said. “What I can do best for the reader or audience is provide a background for which to see the present, not tell them about the present.”²⁴ Again: “I’m a historian and I try not to speculate about the future.”²⁵ And this: “I’m a historian, and I look at the way idealism has tended to operate, and it’s not a pretty picture.”²⁶ Once again: “I’m a historian, it’s not my job to attack or defend anybody.”²⁷

Khalidi insistently claimed the status of an objective historian—someone whose opinions rest on facts subjected to professional investigation. In the Gottlieb case, however, Khalidi showed himself as someone eager to repeat and embellish a story simply because of its political utility, without even a cursory check of its historical veracity. That is standard operating procedure for a PLO spokesman (Khalidi’s earlier vocation).²⁸ It is literary license in a novelist. It is malpractice in a historian.

Notes

1. Ruthie Blum Leibowitz, “Leon Uris ‘Exodus’ Novel Had Nothing to Do with Reality, Skipper Said,” *Jerusalem Post*, December 26, 2009.
2. See the favorable profile by Chris Hedges, “Casting Mideast Violence in Another Light,” *New York Times*, April 20, 2004.
3. Transcript of a lecture, by Rashid Khalidi, Brooklyn Law School, September 22, 2010, by Sherry Wolf, “Madmen for Israel: Selling Zionism,” *Sherry Talks Back* blog, archived at <http://web.archive.org/web/20101030060202/http://sherrytalksback.wordpress.com/2010/09/24/madmen-for-israel-selling-zionism/>.
4. Transcript of the 2010 Edward Said Memorial Lecture by Rashid Khalidi, October 7, 2010, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20101011123144/http://thejerusalemfund.org/ht/display/ContentDetails/i/16422>.
5. “Carl R. Byoir: A Retrospective,” The Museum of Public Relations website, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20150226085307/http://prvisionaries.com/byoir/cbintro.html>.

6. *Encyclopedia of Public Relations*, ed. Robert L. Heath (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004). This encyclopedia has fifty-five entries devoted to individual “practitioners.” Gottlieb is not among them.
7. Matt Silver, *Our Exodus: Leon Uris and the Americanization of Israel's Founding Story* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010).
8. Ira Nadel, *Leon Uris: Life of a Best Seller* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).
9. Email from Matt Silver to the author, November 11, 2010.
10. Email from Ira Nadel to the author, November 13, 2010.
11. Email from Matt Silver to the author, November 11, 2010.
12. Email from Ira Nadel to the author, November 13, 2010.
13. Paul Findley, *Deliberate Deceptions: Facing the Facts about the U.S.-Israeli Relationship* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993), xxv.
14. Donald Neff, *Fifty Years of Israel* (Washington, DC: American Educational Trust, 1998), 19.
15. Kathleen Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 103.
16. Arthur Stevens, *The Persuasion Explosion: Your Guide to the Power and Influence of Contemporary Public Relations* (Washington, DC: Acropolis Books, 1985), 105.
17. Email from Arthur Stevens to the author, November 27, 2010.
18. Ibid.
19. Diana Martinelli and Elizabeth Toth, “Lessons on the Big Idea and Public Relations: Reflections on the 50-Year Career of Charlotte Klein,” *Public Relations Journal* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 334–50.
20. Email from Charlotte Klein to the author, November 25, 2010.
21. Email from Charlotte Klein to the author, November 29, 2010.
22. The following four files in the Israel State Archives: ISA/RG93.8/MFA/397/2, ISA/RG93.8/MFA/397/3, ISA/RG93.8/MFA/397/4, and ISA/RG93.8/MFA/397/5.
23. “Israel Is Here to Stay: Unless the Arabs Accept This, There Can Be No Peace,” *Life Magazine*, March 19, 1956.
24. Quoted by Dana Al-Qadi, “Expert on Middle East Urges Change in U.S. Mindset,” *The Online Gargoyle*, April 8, 2007, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20111016093633/http://www.uni.illinois.edu/og/2007/04/rashid_khalidi_speaks_at_illin.htm.
25. Quoted by Jonathan Shainin, “Nation building,” *Salon.com*, December 18, 2006, archived at <http://web.archive.org/web/20121021122359/http://www.salon.com/2006/12/18/khalidi/>.
26. Quoted by Eyal Press, “The Left Gets Real,” *The Nation*, August 14, 2006.
27. Quoted by Joshua Steinman, “University Professors Labeled anti-Israeli by Campus Watch site,” *Chicago Maroon*, October 29, 2002.
28. Martin Kramer, “Khalidi of the PLO,” *Sandbox* blog, October 30, 2008, archived at <http://web.archive.org/web/20150922001709/http://martinkramer.org/sandbox/2008/10/khalidi-of-the-plo/>.