

Chapter Five: Pioneering



So, there I was, the sole human inhabitant of Sha'ar Hagai. It was really the first time in my life that I had lived totally alone anywhere. As a city girl, I was accustomed to always having people nearby, but the closest neighbors now were several kilometers away and had no idea that I lived there. There was of course no phone, this being long before the days of cell phones; my only connection with the world was by car.

But surprisingly, I didn't feel lonely. For one thing, I had plenty of dogs to keep me company, and I certainly had plenty to do to keep myself busy.

The first thing to do was to make the house livable, and that was a major project that meant digging out the huge piles of rubble and sheep droppings, and thoroughly scrubbing everything. The house was built of 36-centimeter thick walls of steel-reinforced concrete. The British had built this place to withstand bombings, and it had; there were a few minor cracks in the walls showing where artillery hits had been made during the War of Independence in 1948. The windows were protected with steel bars that were inserted deeply into the walls, and the floor was comprised of gray concrete tiles. There was no electricity, of course, the lines had rotted away years ago. But Dvora was confident that we would soon be connected to power. Meanwhile, I had my first experiences with living by the light of candles and wind lanterns, which were definitely not as romantic as in the movies, but very conducive to an "early to bed" lifestyle.

Within a few days, I had the place scrubbed and clean, after dragging out innumerable bucket loads of rubble. I installed my meager

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possessions: my clothes, books, and saddle, a few food supplies that didn't require cooking, and a "sochnut" bed, a metal bed frame with a thin and traditionally striped ticking mattress, named after the "Sochnut," the Jewish Agency that provided this as part of the standard new immigrant's kit. I had my dogs to keep me company, but otherwise I was totally isolated—no electricity, no telephone, no neighbors—and soon, I discovered, no water!



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Apparently it had been a fluke that there had been water at all; there must have been some water left in the roof tanks, either from the rains of the previous year, or from some historical time in the past when the water pipes had been connected. However, this supply quickly fizzled out after a few days cleaning and residence and I then discovered that there were no water pipes, other than rotted-away remnants from the days of the British, and no connection to any water source. Perhaps my only luck in the situation was that I was never fond of drinking water, being addicted like many Americans to soft drinks, so I was probably saved from countless diseases that could have been conveyed by drinking from the limited water supply I had found.

Fortunately, I did have the use of a car. My parents, tolerant of their rebellious daughter as ever, and hopeful that perhaps I was now going to settle down and start living a normal life, had provided me with the funds to buy a car—my part of the investment in the Sha'ar Hagai Farm, the investment that would make me an equal partner, with the right to live there as well. I had purchased a Volkswagen van, very practical for a kennel vehicle, I thought. Of course, I had never driven a vehicle of that size, and never with a stick shift either, but those were minor problems that I knew could be overcome with practice. I did end up causing several traffic jams in the narrow Jerusalem streets, as the car frequently lurched and died when I tried to change gears. But for now, the major use of the car was bringing my daily water supply. Every day, I filled the car up with 20-liter jerry cans, and drove around to various friends and acquaintances to fill them up. I needed drinking water for the dogs, for washing (I usually showered at someone's house as well, saving water, of course), and for cleaning.

It took some time for anyone to notice that I lived up there on the hillside. One day, after about three weeks at my new home, I heard a car laboriously struggling up the dirt track. When I looked out of my barred windows, I saw that it was a police patrol car. They started to get out of the car to have a look around, when the dogs noticed them,

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and in a flash charged, barking hysterically. The police officers, not aware that the collies were simply excited to have visitors, leapt for the closest refuge, which happened to be my van, which luckily wasn't locked. It took me a few minutes to reassure them that it was perfectly safe for them to come out again.

They became regular visitors, stopping by for a cup of coffee on their rounds. They were fascinated by the idea of a woman living alone up on the hillside, and the whole idea of a dog kennel seemed very strange to them. Their initial idea had been that we were setting up some sort of house of ill repute in this isolated spot, and truthfully, I am not sure whether they were disappointed to learn that this was not the case.

Another evening, I took a bus to Tel Aviv, which was about an hour and a half from Sha'ar Hagai. Coming home I took a "sherut," the public taxis that follow the major bus routes, taking as many passengers going in the same direction as they can fit, whether they know each other or not. I asked the driver to stop for me at the entrance to the dirt road. He stopped automatically, and then suddenly noticed where we were.

"What do you want to stop here for?" he asked. "There is nothing here!"

No matter how I tried to explain that I lived there, and that there were indeed houses up on the hillside, he refused to believe it.

"I've been driving this route for 15 years, and I never saw any houses here," he declared. Supported by the other passengers, he refused to let me out of the taxi in the middle of nowhere in the dark of late evening and drove on, letting me off at the next settlement. Everyone was sure they had saved a poor and confused tourist from getting lost in the forest. I had to walk four kilometers to get back home.

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But after only a few weeks of total isolation, Israela and Dvora were ready to join me on the farm. Each took over one of the old buildings and began clean-up and repairs. Each woman, of course, was accompanied by another few dogs.

Our first and most important project was to obtain a steady supply of water. There was a limit to how long we could go around collecting jerry cans of water for our daily use. As none of us had the money for hiring the job out, we knew we had to buy water pipes and lay them ourselves. For someone like me, inexperienced in manual labor, digging trenches for water pipes was quite a revelation.

After a few days of serious labor, assisted by a few friends a bit more muscular than we were, the pipes were in, and we were ready to have the water turned on. The water line was still not connected to all the houses, but in celebration, we certainly felt that we all deserved a good shower in our own water supply, so a hose pipe was connected to the end of the pipe line, and we took turns showering each other in the relative privacy in the back of the van, away from the prying eyes of our police friends down on the road. The car needed a wash anyway. That was probably one of the most satisfying showers I ever had.

Life was not easy in those days. Living without water and electricity, in isolated and primitive conditions, with very little money, is an adventure when it is for a limited period, but as a permanent lifestyle, the excitement starts to fade. It appeared that all the hopes for quickly getting connected to the electric grid, and to the telephone lines were not about to be realized. I grew accustomed to lighting wind lanterns in the evening, going to bed early and getting up with the sun. After a while, I began to realize that these inconveniences did not bother me as much as I had expected.

Dvora was the most organized of us. She had grown up on a huge ranch in Texas, and spent a good part of her life in all sorts of fascinating adventures in remote parts of the globe, so these conditions

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were, for her, a piece of cake. She also was well established in Israel, with plenty of furniture and household accessories, and her house soon looked homey and welcoming. She was wonderful at taking the simplest bits of furniture or fabric and turning them into something attractive and welcoming.

Israella, on the other hand, was far from being an ideal homemaker. For her, housekeeping was the minimum effort one needed to expend to be able to find your way through the house without getting lost in the confusion. I fell rather in the middle. I didn't have very many things to take up space in my house; one trunk's worth doesn't go very far in filling up three rooms. I had very minimal furniture: a bed, a few chairs, an arrangement of bricks and orange crates for shelves, and a camping stove for cooking on, but for the time being it was adequate. It wasn't too hard to keep those limited possessions in reasonable order.

One problem that I quickly found myself coping with was laundry. In my past experience, the dirty laundry was dumped in the laundry basket, disappeared down to the washing machine, and was later returned to my room clean and neatly folded. Now, not only was this system missing the most important part, my mother, but there wasn't even a washing machine; I had to do my laundry by hand. There was, of course, no hot water, but there was a large selection of cold-water detergents, and I began to learn systems of soaking and scrubbing.

Another revelation were the sanitary facilities. My house contained what was known as a "Turkish toilet." This consisted of a hole in the floor with a flush tank attached. I found it very difficult to figure out the correct stance—or squat—for making use of this facility. The flush tank itself also seemed to date back to the days of the Turks; it made an astonishing roar when activated and seemed ready to shake itself off the wall, to the point where I frequently found it less intimidating to flush with a bucket of water.

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The sewer system was solid. Built by the British, like everything else they had left behind in Israel, it was made to last, and seemed to have been planned to service one of the large boroughs of London. There was a complicated system of manholes and pipes leading off into the wadi, or valley, where there was apparently a huge septic tank – of which we didn't know the exact location then. Some of the manholes were large enough to go down into, in case there was a need for doing any work on the system, and even had ladders inside.

In a system that had been left abandoned for twenty years, there were bound to be blockages, so I soon learned all about sewer cleaning. The greatest sewer adventure happened one day when Dvora, home alone, decided to go down into the manhole behind her house with the hosepipe to flush it out. She stripped off her clothes—it was much easier to wash yourself clean than to clean up clothes after a session with the sewer—and climbed down into the manhole in the buff. However, after having completed washing down the pipeline, she discovered that, although it had been no problem going down into the sewer, she couldn't get back up the ladder; she was a tall, large woman, and the space between the rungs and the walls wouldn't let her bend her knees enough to climb up. Dvora was not fit enough to start hauling herself up hand over hand, so she was stuck down there. She knew there was no one around to help, and resigned herself to waiting for one of us to get home. And then, surprise, surprise, she heard the voice of a friend calling her from in front of the house—a male friend, who had chosen just this time to come to visit!

Needless to say, Dvora remained quiet as a mouse until Israela and I got home and were able to help her get up out of the sewer.

Of course, buildings that had been empty as long as ours were bound to have collected other tenants over the years. I soon learned that being squeamish about spiders and other insects that wouldn't have dared set foot in my fastidious mother's domain was totally useless out here. The worst for me were the rats. I had never had experience

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with rats other than the white variety in the laboratory, but here, the huge field rats felt that they were rightful tenants and we were the intruders. For the most part I only saw a flash of movement in the gloom outside the perimeter of the wind lantern's illumination. I soon got into the habit of sending one of the collies into the room before me, with the command, "Dawn! Rats!" Dawn quickly got into the spirit of the game, dashing in and scouring the room as the rats fled in all directions. Once or twice she even managed to catch one, and then, to my disgust, she ate the beast - making me wonder if this was such a good idea after all.

Even before we built kennels, we took dogs in for boarding and training, as we were all desperate for some kind of income. The primitive conditions of those days would make me cringe today—dogs were kept in empty rooms of all the houses, and were even kept tied outside to convenient trees. Obviously it was urgent to build some proper kennels.

Of course, with money being very short, we couldn't just hire a builder to come and do the work for us; we were barely able to scrape together enough to buy the materials. But one of the things that most impressed me about Israel was the willingness of everyone I met to pitch in and work, even if the job to be done was something totally outside of their experience. So our work crew, composed of other partners in the farm, was extremely varied, including several guys who worked in various white-collar office jobs, our veterinarian, Dvora and Israela, of course, and me, whose only experience with construction work until moving to Israel was passing by a construction site.

The first job was laying a cement floor for the kennel. We had to clean and level the area—done by muscle power, with rakes, shovels and hoes. Then we had to lay down a layer of gravel and pour the cement on top of that.

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The cement also had to be mixed by hand because we had no possibility of bringing in a machine to do it, both due to the expense, and the fact that the access road was not something that anyone in his right mind would want to drive up with a cement mixer. The work was exhausting and dirty, and I am afraid that my contribution was not major. In the end, though, we had a cement floor, with nice convenient holes left at intervals for the pipes of the kennel framework. In order to leave holes for the pipes, old soft drink bottles were set into the wet cement at the required intervals, and pulled out after the cement dried. Since they were glass, they didn't stick, and left perfect holes in the cement for setting in the poles. My American habit of drinking soft drinks instead of water had come in handy again.

Next we built a framework of pipes that screwed together, and stretched a chain link fence over the whole framework. There were special techniques for this also, making use of a broom handle to stretch the wire to the poles; one of us held it steady while the others

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tied the wire in place. Finally the doors were made, also out of pipes and chain link fencing, and hung on the hinges that had been welded onto the pipes.

The whole project took days of exhausting labor, but finally, we stood back and looked at our brand new kennel, which was spacious, clean, and just waiting to be populated.

I found that there was nothing more satisfying than standing back to admire the work we had completed with our own hands, especially when we had no idea we could do it.

So now we were ready to officially open the Sha'ar Hagai Kennels for business.

Chapter Twenty Seven



One of the advantages of working on a research project that is based primarily on field work, aside from the great advantage of being able to spend my entire day outdoors and not in an office, was being provided with a jeep. Jeeps carry great status in Israel, since with the high cost of petrol, there weren't many private individuals who could afford to run them; those who could generally drove Mercedes.

Not being one of the affluent Israeli car owners, it was reassuring to know that the jeep was available for emergencies like traveling to Haifa to pick up a hyena.

The evening before we were due to make the trip to Haifa, my coworker Ilan and I were doing field work not far from Sha'ar Hagai. Ilan offered to drop me off at home before driving back to the university. Great, I thought, that would save a lot of bus travel time.

As we drove up the dirt road to the kennel (actually, calling it a road is much more than it deserves, but then this was a jeep), we heard a loud "clunk" and the jeep listed noticeably sideways. A spring had broken on one of the front wheels. There was no alternative; Ilan had to return to the university by bus, and I had to wait in the morning for the tow truck to come and haul the jeep away.

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By the time I finally got to Tel Aviv the next day, it was eleven a.m. The logical thing to do, of course, would have been to postpone the trip to Haifa for another day when the jeep was again available. But I didn't feel much like behaving logically; I wanted my hyena baby. So I set out for Haifa by bus.

Getting there was no problem, but I was worried about getting there in time. The trip from the university to the Haifa zoo, with the best of luck, was over two hours by public transportation. By the time I left Tel Aviv it was after twelve, and the zoo was scheduled to close at three.

Haifa is a city that is built on a good-sized hill (by Israeli standards, it is even a mountain), and the zoo is at the top. In order to get there on time, I took a taxi from the Central Bus Station at the bottom up Mt. Carmel to the vicinity of the zoo. I ran through the lovely park surrounding the zoo and by two-thirty I stood panting at the gates.

I was on tenterhooks while the zoo manager sat explaining to me the care and feeding of baby hyenas. I could hardly absorb what he said; I just wanted to see her. Finally, my little hyena was brought in.

She was a tiny ball of gray fluff, no larger than a good-sized kitten. Her baby fur was very soft, with none of the harshness it would develop as she grew older, and it was very symmetrically marked with neat black stripes on back, sides and legs.

She still had no teeth, but had enormous jet black eyes, full of expression that ranged from sleepy softness to pure devilishness. I could never understand how people were able to look her in the face and say she had no expression; to me, from the start, this animal's expressions were as varied and as easy to distinguish as those of a dog and were just as meaningful.

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Her ears were enormous and stood erect like antennae, swiveling around at every sound.

But her most outstanding feature was her voice. The sound she produced, very loud in proportion to her size, was something I was totally unprepared for. It was like a combination of a croak, a wail, and a clearing of the throat, or maybe like a rusty door hinge being sandpapered. I had no idea what it meant, not having yet become fluent in hyena language, but I was sure it didn't mean that she was happy. Since I was supposed to be the university-trained expert in animal behavior, I didn't want to ask Danny, the zoo manager, what her howl meant, but as I sat trying to hold her still as she squirmed about in my hands, protesting very vocally all the time, I wondered just how easy it was going to be to take her home on the bus.

In my rush to come and get the little beast, having been counting on the jeep, I had come without any box to carry her in. I had a large soft pouch bag that I had thought she would curl up in, but having now met my little hyena, I realized that her activity level was much greater than I had anticipated. It was unlikely that she was going to sleep quietly in my bag all the way home.

The first step of the journey was to take a local city bus down from the top of the Carmel to the port where the intercity transportation is located. I stood at the bus stop waiting with my hyena firmly clenched against me, trying to muffle her weird noises. People gave me strange looks as the sounds continued, but like most sophisticated city dwellers, they were not about to ask questions. When the bus arrived, however, the driver was very interested. He offered to adopt my "puppy" if I didn't really want it. Ha, I thought, you should only know.

The vocalization continued. I worried that it would go on for the next three hours until we got home. This baby was not the least

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bit interested in quietly going to sleep in my lap. She tried to climb in all directions. Her contortions, and mine, were highly entertaining to the other passengers. Heads turned to watch. One fellow got up from his seat and walked over to me.

“Excuse me,” he said, “but isn’t that a hyena?” After a moment’s hesitation, while the bus driver glanced reproachfully at me over his shoulder, I answered in the affirmative.

“I knew I recognized that voice,” he commented. He went on to explain that he had a friend just outside of Haifa, a former warden for the Nature Reserves Authority, who had raised three hyenas in his backyard as pets. Once having heard that distinctive hyena voice, who could fail to recognize it? I took down his name and phone number because it would certainly be of interest to get in touch with him and get some tips on raising hyenas.

When we arrived at the intercity bus station for the next stage of the journey, I decided to take a sherut, a communal taxi. I knew it would be faster than the bus, and probably more comfortable. There would also be fewer passengers to cope with since such a taxi only takes seven people plus the driver.

As I crossed the road to the taxi station, a car came to a skidding stop opposite me when the driver caught sight of me. I ignored the mini traffic jam I had unwittingly caused and asked the taxi dispatcher to order me a seat to Tel Aviv. After clarifying what the animal in my arms was, he called over the radio to one of his taxis to “save a seat for a passenger here at the station with a hyena.” The driver’s answer was unprintable.

The taxi arrived. The driver looked over at me, and said to his dispatcher in disbelief, “You were serious!” I climbed in, settling into the furthest back corner of the taxi to keep the baby away from as many of the other passengers as possible. Most of them were

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fairly blasé. After a few rather scornful glances, they settled down for the trip.

The passenger sitting next to me, however, seemed to fascinate my little hyena. She sniffed up and down his arm and licked him. A well-dressed man in his thirties, he was very tolerant.

“She likes the taste of blood,” he commented.

Blood?!! Apparently my expression indicated the need for an explanation; he was a surgeon, he said, and had just come from a day in the operating room. The explanation was not very reassuring.

There was a heavenly period of peace while the cub slept on my lap, lulled by the motion of the car. When she awoke, she reacted just as I, the expert in puppy raising, should have anticipated: she peed. It was a copious quantity for such a small animal, and, of course, was right in my lap. I sat with a poker face, hoping that none of the other passengers, and especially the driver, would notice, as my jeans soaked it up. Fortunately, as is common in public taxis, everyone was asleep but me, and the driver couldn't see me hunched down in the back corner.

I had a roll of toilet paper in my bag, standard equipment for traveling with animals. Surreptitiously I pulled it out and tried to soak up the flood. My jeans were more effective. Jeans are highly absorbent; however, they are certainly not very comfortable when wet.

We finally arrived in Tel Aviv. The hyena, refreshed by her nap, was in good spirits, but mine, like my pants, were rather dampened. I tied my sweater around my waist to hide the embarrassing stain and headed for the next taxi, to Jerusalem.

Taxis to Jerusalem tend to be crammed with very respectable and highly religious folk—women always immaculately dressed in

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hats and dresses of expensive-looking materials and men in long dark coats, long bushy beards, and often wearing lovely furry hats. Under the best of circumstances, these people do not tend to be fond of animals. As I approached the queue with my strange beast, again vocally protesting all this traveling, and with a rather interesting aroma hanging in the air around us, the crowd looked on the verge of rebellion.

Luck was with me, however. One of the drivers waiting to fill his taxi knew my animals and me, although the hyena stunned him for a minute, and he gave me a seat in his cab, despite the disapproving glares of the beards already inside. It was obvious that the driver was no great sympathizer with the ultra-orthodox, and found the whole situation very funny. I didn't find it so funny. I was rather tired and very wet, but the hyena, full of fresh energy, spent the trip squealing and trying to climb out of my lap to inspect the weird-smelling hairy people with the furry hats.

Finally, our stop came. Wet, smelly, and exhausted, I climbed out of the taxi to introduce my hyena to her new home.