

# THE VANCOUVER SUN

FINAL EDITION [www.vancouversun.com](http://www.vancouversun.com)

SERIOUSLY WESTCOAST SINCE 1912

WEDNESDAY, MAY 7, 2008

## Three who don't regret decision to move to Israel

Canadians have lived in country for half of its 60 years and call it home

BY MATTHEW FISHER

JERUSALEM — Norman Slepkov, Jonathan Kaplan and Nancy Lewitt are Canadians who have each lived in Israel for more than half of its 60 years, which is being celebrated with a birthday bash on Thursday.

Although not uncritical of the Jewish state and concerned for its future, the trio, who like so many diaspora Jews got their first taste of Israel by coming here to work on a kibbutz, have never regretted the decision to make aliya — the Hebrew word for immigration to Israel.

"I didn't know what Zionism was. For me being Jewish meant summer camps where I met Jews from Toronto and Hamilton and learned Hebrew songs," said Slepkov, who arrived from St. Catharines, Ont., on a one-year scholarship that combined time on a kibbutz with study of Judaism, Jewish history and Zionism in the heady days after Israel's stunning triumph in the 1967 Six-Day War.

"After that lightning victory,

the whole country was on a high and I had the best year of my life."

Slepkov returned briefly to Canada, living for a short spell at Toronto's infamous Rochdale College, "where I was stoned most of the time," but he soon returned to Israel because "I missed the country, the terrain, the views, and the friends that I had made here."

Forty years later, Slepkov, who has three brothers in Canada, still lives a somewhat Bohemian life as an illustrating calligrapher with his American wife, whom he met while studying at a Jerusalem art school.

Jonathan Kaplan had been a member of the Young Judea movement while attending high school as a teenager in Saskatoon so "it was natural for me to come here" early in 1972.

"Canada is a warm, welcoming country and my father is a very committed Canadian who still lives there," said Kaplan, who also has a sister in Cornwall, Ont. "But it felt odd for me in high school to be part of a small minority where, for example, I had to explain to a teacher that I was taking Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) as a holiday.

"Being here I became part of a majority and that is a powerful feeling. In many ways, it felt like

I was coming home."

After nearly three years in the Israel Defence Forces, Kaplan married a Sabra (a native-born Israeli), studied Jewish history at Hebrew University and became an educator specializing in bringing computer learning to young Israelis living in less affluent communities.

Nancy Lewitt was known by her maiden name, Morris, when she was growing up in Winnipeg. After one year at the University of Manitoba, she came to Israel for six months on a kibbutz and had intended to spend six months in Europe — but she never made it that far.

"To this day my family, who never talked about living here, does not understand why I wanted to give up the good old life in Canada and make aliya, but they accepted my decision," said Lewitt who met and married a man whose family had emigrated from Europe. "What attracted me to stay was a chance to be part of something that was bigger than me in a place where I could express my Judaism in a modern world."

Like most secular Israelis, Lewitt has "absolutely no time" for the tens of thousands of religious Zionists who have settled in isolated communities across the West Bank, but her politics



MATTHEW FISHER/CNS

Illustrative calligrapher Norman Slepkov, formerly of St. Catharines, Ont., in his Jerusalem studio.

have gradually moved from the far left to the centre.

"As a result of terrorism, I have much less sympathy for the other side than I used to," she said. "I have been to too many funerals including my 17-year-old son's friend, who was killed by a bomb on a bus.

"I still feel compassion for those Palestinians who do not get the chance to live the life that they deserve, but from 2002 to 2005 we were afraid to go out of

our houses," a reference to the second intifadeh when suicide bombers killed scores of Israeli civilians.

Slepkov had made a similar personal journey.

"I am not a Zionist," the artist said during a conversation in his studio. "But when I go to a school where they read the names of those killed in terrorist attacks, it makes me become one. I know it is wrong to think this, but some days I hate Arabs.

Kaplan said that there were "moments when I am ashamed of Israel such as when I hear that one of my Palestinian students from Bethlehem, who has a valid permit to come from the West Bank to Israel, is allowed in one day and not the next. I have problems with the complete arbitrariness of this."

But "if there was no terrorism most Israelis would be happy to get rid of territories," he said.

Canwest News Service