



Laying irrigation pipes in the kibbutz fields.

Arieh Paz

Arieh Paz, formerly Leon Gold, of Ocean Parkway, Brooklyn, considered himself in the jeep mirror. He fingered his moustache, pushed his *cova temble* kibbutz cap back on his head, opened his shirt another button and rolled his sleeves up one more fold on his thin arms. Only a year in the country, he thought proudly, and already I look like an Israeli. He put the jeep into first gear and drove out the gate of the kibbutz.

He drove the jeep carefully around the apple orchard and onto a dirt trail that led to the cotton field. As he drove, his eyes wandered repeatedly from the trail in front of him to the rear view mirror. He stopped the jeep and adjusted the mirror so that he could more easily look at his reflection as he drove. He watched himself surveying the plowed fields with a proprietary air. He looked up at the sky speculatively and sniffed the air for rain though it was August and he knew that it never rained in Israel in August.

As the jeep rounded a curve in the trail, he suddenly came upon a flock of sheep. He jammed on the brakes and got out of the jeep. The Bedouin boy who was with the flock looked at him uncertainly. Arieh waved to him and the boy waved back quickly, flashed him a quick smile and began driving the sheep off the trail.

Arieh returned to the jeep, lit a cigarette and watched the sheep scampering away as the boy heaved stones and clods of dirt at them. After they were off the trail, he drove on until he reached the crest of a hill and then impulsively wheeled the jeep sharply around so that he could look back at what he had just passed.

The plowed fields were brown and bare beneath him. The shepherd boy and the sheep grazing on the weeds at the edge of the *wadi* were the only living things for miles

around. He imagined how he must look up there on top of the rise, with the desert wind sweeping around him. He was pleased with the picture.

For a moment, he imagined himself a second Lawrence of Arabia, roaming the wild desert sands. Lawrence had his camel, thought Arie, and I've got the kibbutz jeep. He fondly patted the steering wheel. He decided to buy an Arab headdress, a *kefiyeh*, the next time he was in Jerusalem. He'd really look fine wearing that in the fields. He toyed with the idea of getting one of those curved Arab daggers to wear on his belt, but rejected the idea. If he wore it around the kibbutz, the kibbutzniks would probably laugh at him. Still, he could wear it *under* his shirt and that would be almost as good.

For the hundredth time he vowed to learn Arabic. After he had finally mastered Hebrew. And he would get himself one of those Bedouin dogs and he would learn to ride a horse. Then he would go riding over the desert visiting Arab sheikhs, maybe settling tribal disputes in his spare time, acclaimed far and wide for his wisdom. He pictured himself astride a white stallion, his *kefiyeh* blowing in the wind, his trusty dog following behind. That, he decided, would really be something.

He suddenly remembered why he had driven out to the fields and he broke off his reverie and turned the jeep around back on the trail. Several minutes' driving brought him to the cotton field.

Arie pulled the jeep up to the motor that drove the irrigation pump for the cotton field. The pump, he saw, wasn't working—the motor had stopped. He fleetingly considered pretending he hadn't seen the problem but decided against it. If no one else came out this way, and it was unlikely that anyone would, the cotton would miss a whole day's irrigation.

"Not worth it, *lo kidai*," he said to himself, in Hebrew and smiled to hear the words. He hitched up his belt and walked over to the motor. Everything that should have been rotating furiously, wasn't. He put one hand possessively on the motor and the other hand on his waist and looked closely at the elaborate array of dials and gauges.

"Hmm," he said.

The gauges meant nothing to him. He hesitantly pressed several buttons. Nothing happened. He took a rag from the back of the jeep, wiped his hands, and checked the oil level in the motor. Then he checked the gas and then the water.

"Now look, motor," he addressed the machine, "you've got plenty of everything, so why don't you work?"

He found himself whistling, "*I Got Plenty O' Nuttin*" as he examined everything once more.

He kicked the motor.

He returned to the jeep and reached in for the microphone of the two-way radio. The receiver was in the kitchen back on the kibbutz. He pressed the "speak" button. "*Mitbach kan sadeh*, Kitchen, this is the field, over," he said, and released the button.

There was no answer.

“Kitchen, this is the field—over.”

Again there was no answer.

“Kitchen, this is the field, over.” He remembered television shows he had watched in America and imagined himself a hard-boiled highway patrol cop calling headquarters to summon police cars, helicopters, riot squads. “And you better send an ambulance,” he thought. “Ten—four!”

“Kitchen, this is the field, kitchen this is the field, kitchen—field, kitchen—field, over damnit.”

The static-choked response came over the speaker, “Field, this is the kitchen. What’s the matter?”

He tuned out the static and pressing down the “speak” button, said: “The motor isn’t working.”

“What?” came the reply. “What motor? Who is this speaking?”

“Oh. Excuse me. Arie, uh, Arie is speaking. Is Dan in the dining room? Can I talk to him?”

“No. Dan isn’t here. What’s the matter? Which Arie are you?”

“I’m Ariel Gold . . . uh, Paz. Can you find Dan and tell him the motor of the pump for the irrigation in the cotton field in the north doesn’t work?” He was sweating from the strain of getting all of it out in Hebrew.

“What?” squawked the radio.

He repeated the message a second time, straining to say it all in grammatically correct Hebrew.

“Listen,” came the voice when he’d finished, “I don’t understand you. I don’t understand your Hebrew. Wait a minute. I’ll get someone from the dining room who speaks English.”

He ground his teeth.

In a moment he heard Esther’s voice. “Arie, what’s the matter? What do you want?”

He told her.

“Listen, Dan’s not here now. He finished eating a while ago. Maybe he’s in the garage. You better come back to the kibbutz and tell him what your problem is.”

“O.K. Thanks, Esther.”

She clicked off.

He drove back to the kibbutz and stopped at the garage. Shmuel was under a tractor holding a heavy sledgehammer. He looked up as Arie walked in. “Oh. Arie Paz is here,” he announced. “What did you break now, Arie Paz?”

“I didn’t break anything. The pump isn’t working. The motor stopped.”

“Oh? Well, guess we’ll just have to throw it away.” He slipped back under the tractor.

Nimrod came in from the metal shop. "Ah, Arie," he said, rubbing his hands in mock satisfaction. "What's the problem?"

Arie didn't answer.

"Nu? What's the problem?"

Shmuel's voice came from under the tractor, "He says the pump stopped."

"Why? What's the matter with it?" he asked Arie. "Did you check to see it has gas?"

"Yes. It's got gas."

"But you didn't see why it stopped?"

"No."

"Well, Dan's in the metal shop. Go in and tell him about the motor." Nimrod walked over, laughing, to Shmuel.

In the metal shop Dan was helping Yossi put a new blade on the cultivator. Arie began to tell him about the motor but Dan held up his hand. "I heard, I heard," he said not looking up. "Just wait a minute."

"Can I help you with that?" offered Arie.

"No. We're almost done."

Dan and Yossi wrestled with the cultivator blade while Arie stood and waited and looked at the wall calendar with the pictures of bikini-clad girls happily clutching monkey wrenches and wire cutters. He counted the drill bits on the walls and the hammers in their racks and the grease guns on their shelves. He picked up a colored brochure advertising John Deere tractors and began idly flipping through it. He read it though thoroughly nine times and then Dan was ready to go.

When they arrived at the pump, Arie stood watching while Dan checked the gas and the oil and the water. "Can I help you with something?" he offered.

"No, it's alright. The gas and oil and water are all right," said Dan looking speculatively at the motor. "Ah, that's it. The battery cable. It came loose. Bring me the big screwdriver from the jeep."

In a moment Dan had the pump going again. They drove along the edge of the cotton field, checking the irrigation lines. They found that three sprinklers were not working. Dan and Arie left the jeep and ran into the field, jumping over the irrigation pipes and getting liberally sprayed with water by the revolving sprinklers. They quickly cleared two of the clogged sprinklers with short pieces of stiff wire. They had to take the third sprinkler partially apart in order to remove the pebble that was blocking it. As they worked, the water spurted out at them from the sprinkler they were fixing. Each time a neighboring sprinkler completed a revolution they got sprayed from behind as well. Dan put the cleared sprinkler back in place and tightened it with a wrench. By the time they ran back to the jeep, they were both soaked through to the skin.

“Shit,” said Arie, and they both laughed. They stopped laughing after a moment and drove off with big grins on their faces. Arie wanted very much to say something friendly, something to express the feeling of camaraderie he was feeling for Dan at the moment. But he couldn’t think of anything. Their grins slowly faded. They drove on in silence to the field where Eli and Moshe were plowing, and Dan stopped the jeep and called to them to come in for lunch.

When Eli and Moshe got into the jeep they laughed at Dan and Arie in their sodden clothes.

“You’re supposed to take your clothes off before you go into the pool,” said Moshe.

“Look, Dan, it’s not fair,” said Eli gravely. “We have to work out there on those hot tractors while you two get to go swimming.”

Dan laughed. “Next time we’ll be sure to invite you along.”

Arie smiled amiably.

“Nu, Arie,” said Eli, “what’s happening?”

Arie shrugged his shoulders. “Nothing,” he said, stretching out his smile a little wider.

“ ‘Nothing’?” Eli repeated. “Alright, ‘nothing’.”

Arie listened as the three men talked and joked. With his weak Hebrew it was a struggle for him to follow their rapid conversation. He gave it up with a shrug and stared off at the hills.

On the crest of a far hill, silhouetted against the horizon, he noticed a figure. The jeep came closer to the hill and he saw that there were actually two figures there on the hilltop; one large and one small. He strained his eyes and was just barely able to distinguish the forms of an old, bent Bedouin woman and a camel. He smiled happily. This was Real, this was True Life. The Desert. Farming. Bedouin and camels. The essentials of existence without the superficial trappings of civilization. He had seen it and it was good.

Here he was, seated in an open jeep, bouncing over rough dirt trails, the desert wind ruffling his hair. A young farmer among other young farmers; working the soil, meeting nature on its own terms, thriving in the desert sands, in touch with the raw essentials of life.

Strange to think, he smiled to himself, that only a year before he had been someone called Leon Gold of Brooklyn, N.Y., perpetual college student. Now, by dint of a manly effort of will (and a change-of-name application provided by the Israeli Ministry of the Interior), he had transformed himself into Arie Paz—desert fox.

He settled his shoulders back against the seat and smiled smugly.

Dan, Eli and Moshe continued to talk and laugh as the jeep neared the kibbutz. Arie looked up at the hilltop again and saw that what he had taken for a Bedouin woman

leading her camel were really only two large piles of rocks, one about three times the size of the other. He didn't allow the realization to disturb his reverie. Instead, he turned his thoughts to the inherent dignity of being a farmer and, looking down at his hands, began to proudly examine his callouses.

The next morning after breakfast, Dan and Ariele drove in the jeep to the southernmost field of the kibbutz. Ariele watched the early morning sunlight slanting in the jeep window and illuminating Dan's features. He wished he had a movie camera. Maybe he could borrow one somewhere. The picturesque ridges and fields shot through the jeep window, with Dan's profile at the edge of the frame. . . . What a fantastic shot. Even as a still shot it would make a pretty impressive picture. Tomorrow he would have to remember to bring his camera.

They reached the field just as Moshe and Eli finished loading the last of the big, six-inch irrigation pipes onto the pipe wagon. There were over fifty of the heavy, twenty foot long aluminum pipes already loaded and the wagon sagged under their weight. The pipes were stacked so high that Moshe and Eli had to heave the last few pipes up in the air to get them onto the wagon.

"I wanted you to take those pipes in two trips, not one," Dan said, frowning. "The load is too heavy. The Massey isn't strong enough to haul such a heavy load."

The little red 35 horsepower Massey-Ferguson tractor was dwarfed by the high stack of pipes on the wagon.

"Ah, nonsense," said Eli. "Don't be a grandmother. Sure, the Massey can pull it. This little tractor has plenty of balls."

"I don't like it," Dan insisted.

"Don't be so stubborn, Dan," said Moshe. "It'll be alright."

"O.K.," Dan gave in reluctantly. "Come on and I'll take you in for breakfast. Ariele's already eaten. He'll drive the pipes home."

Ariele got out of the jeep and Eli and Moshe got in.

"Ariele," said Dan, "be very careful. That little Massey doesn't have much strength, even if Eli thinks it does."

"Ach!" snorted Eli.

"So take it easy. Make your turns wide. And don't try to stop suddenly. That load of pipes is too heavy. If you try and stop too suddenly, the wagon will keep pushing at the tractor and you'll lose control. So take it home, slowly, slowly. Don't hurry. Better you get home in one piece than spread all over the road. Understand?"

"Okay," said Ariele.

As Dan started to drive off, Ariele heard Moshe say, "He'll probably kill himself *and* wreck the tractor . . ." Then the jeep was gone.

He mounted the tractor. Behind him, aimed at his back, like so many big cannon barrels, he thought, were the gaping mouths of the irrigation pipes. The stack of pipes towered high above him. He felt important and very brave, entrusted with this dangerous

mission. For a moment he imagined himself to be a World War One fighter pilot. Ace Paz embarks on another death defying flight. "I'll bring her home safe, sir," he thought. "You can depend on me. Clear the runway! Flaps down! Ignition! Contact!"

He started the tractor and put it into first gear. He had to give it a lot of gas to get the heavy load moving. Slowly, he headed down the dirt road toward the kibbutz.

On the way, he pretended that the tractor's gear stick was the joystick of a plane. He pressed down on the knob at the top of the stick, sending imaginary bursts of machine gun fire into imaginary enemy planes all around him. Ace Paz wins through again!

An hour later he was almost home. There remained only a few steep rises in the road that would might give him trouble. Twice already, on curves, he had felt the wagon begin to push the tractor out of control. The feeling, he decided, was like being pushed from behind by a giant hand, while you were wearing roller skates. He had just managed to get the tractor and wagon under control both times but he was worried now about the last three hills on the way to the kibbutz. He didn't think the little Massey tractor would be able to tow the load up those hills. But he was more worried about coming down the other side of those steep hills with the weight of all those heavy pipes pushing from behind. And him on roller skates.

He had already decided which side of the tractor he was going to jump from if the wagon pushed him out of control on the way down. Bailing out, he thought, would be a splendidly dramatic gesture. It appealed to his romantic instincts. But it was dangerous and it would make a mess out of the tractor and wagon and the pipes when the whole thing came crashing down the hill. On second thought, he decided, if he saw it wasn't going to work, he would leave the wagon at the side of the road and go to the kibbutz garage for a bigger tractor.

Arieh reached the first of the three hills. He backed up the wagon to give himself more runway for a flying start. He put the tractor into fourth gear and gave it full gas. The momentum of his forward run carried him to the crest of the hill just before the drag of the wagon started to pull him back. He was able to apply the brakes at the summit and go slowly down the other side in first gear, praying all the while that the pipes and the wagon wouldn't come crashing down on his neck.

He repeated the process on the second hill and just barely cleared the top of the hill on the first try.

He backed up again, put the tractor in gear and headed up the last and steepest of the three hills. As he raced up the slope he felt the wagon pulling him back. He applied the brakes and slowly reversed back down to the base of the hill. He tried again and this time he just managed to race the tractor and wagon over the crest of the hill. But he felt the giant hand starting to push from behind and he realized that the downhill slope was too steep. The tractor would never be able to hold back the weight of the wagon on the

way down. The little tractor would be out of control, it could flip over, the wagon and pipes would come crashing down on top of it. And on top of him.

He managed to stop before he had picked up too much downward momentum and he slowly reversed again, back down to the base of the slope. It wasn't going to work. He would have to get a stronger tractor. He heard the sound of a motor and saw the jeep speeding towards him. Eli was driving. He stopped alongside Ariei.

"What's the problem?" Eli asked him.

"The tractor's too weak. It could just barely handle those first two hills. But it'll never make this last one without flipping over."

"Ach! Nonsense!" said Eli, getting out of the jeep. "Get down, I'll take it over the hill."

"Look, don't you think it's worth getting another tractor, a bigger tractor, instead? We're pretty close to home. It would only take a few minutes to make the switch. That heavy wagon is like a big hand, the way it pushes at the tractor. Really, let's get a bigger tractor." It was a long speech for him to make in his faltering Hebrew. He wasn't sure if it had come out right or not.

"A big hand?" laughed Eli. "Why not a big foot? Or a big nose? Come on, get down already. Let me have it."

Ariei got off the tractor and Eli mounted. He looked at the slope for a moment and then backed the wagon up further to increase his running start.

Ariei got in the jeep. He drove to the summit of the hill he had already cleared and positioned himself to watch.

"Son of a bitch'll probably get the damn thing over the hill just to spite me," he thought.

Eli gunned the tractor's engine, released the clutch and roared up the slope. He cleared the crest with momentum to spare and he was on his way down the other side. Suddenly Ariei saw him struggling with the wheel as the wagon began to run down the tractor. It was coming down the slope too fast and the little Massey was out of control, sliding downhill, sideways, pushed along by the weight of the wagon.

Ariei saw Eli stand up on the tractor and prepare to jump. He hesitated a moment, uncertain which side to jump from. Then the tractor jerked, pushed by the wagon's momentum and Eli went flying off, all flailing arms and legs, looking like a rag doll, as he hurtled through the air. He hit the ground at the side of the road. Then, as Ariei watched open-mouthed, the tractor skipped on a rock and rose in a slow arc and came crashing down on top of Eli.

"Oh, my God!" said Ariei. He was seized by a blind panic. His hands reached for the steering wheel and then for the two-way radio and then for the first-aid kit and then for the shovel in the back of the jeep. After a moment, the panic passed. He started the jeep and raced down to where Eli was pinned under the tractor, one of the rear wheels across his belly. He was groaning and hitting out at the wheel with his two hands.

Arieh stopped the jeep near the tractor and ran to him.

“Get it off me. Get it off me,” cried Eli. He reached out for Arieh.

The tractor’s engine was still running. Afraid of a fire, or an explosion, Arieh reached for the cut-off switch. Eli grabbed at his hand. “Get me out. Get it off me.”

Arieh had to violently knock Eli’s hands away from him in order to get at the cut-off switch. The tractor’s engine died. He sniffed and looked quickly for signs of a fire and, satisfied that there weren’t any, glanced quickly at the hitch of the wagon. It was badly cracked. At any moment the hitch could go and the wagon and the pipes would come crashing down on top of both of them. Though he knew it was useless, he tried to lift the tractor wheel up with his hands. The wagon lay jack-knifed, locking the tractor in place.

Arieh began to dig at the ground under Eli’s back. He had only just started when he realized that as he scooped out the sand from under Eli, he was also lowering the tractor down on top of him. He rolled a large stone over from the side of the road and wedged it between the wheel and the ground.

Eli clawed frantically at him again and Arieh once more vainly tried to raise the wheel.

Arieh ran to the jeep and jerked out the microphone of the two-way radio. He jabbed at the “speak” button.

“*Mitbach kan sadeh*, Kitchen this is the field, Kitchen this is the field, over.”

This time someone answered after a few seconds. He told them briefly what had happened. After a moment they told him that the ambulance with the kibbutz nurse and some men to help get Eli out were on the way.

In a few minutes there were a dozen men positioned around the tractor.

“That wagon may come down when we lift,” Dan cautioned them. “We’ll all lift and you, Moshe and Nimrod, pull him out. Pull him quickly and pull him far enough so that he’ll be out of the way of the wagon and the pipes if it does flip over. Moshe, as soon as you’ve pulled him far enough away, yell, so that the rest of us can let go and get out of the way. Okay?”

The men nodded.

“Okay, then,” said Dan. “One. Two. Three. Hey!”

The men strained their backs and the tractor wheel slowly rose. The hitch broke with a loud “crack” of tearing metal. Moshe and Nimrod dragged Eli free and Moshe yelled and they all let go of the wheel and ran. The wagon made a slow majestic flip over on its side and came down on the tractor with a deafening crash as the huge irrigation pipes rolled off the wagon and hit the tractor and the ground and went scattering and bouncing wildly over the field, making loud hollow “bonk” sounds.

Arieh helped put Eli onto a stretcher and hopped into the back of the ambulance with him. Eli held Arieh's hand all the way to the hospital, gripping it tightly and groaning that his back hurt, his back hurt.

At the hospital they brought him into the emergency room, placed him on a high operating table and drew the curtains. Ariah helped strip Eli's clothes off him.

"I have to pee, oh, I have to pee," cried Eli. "I have to pee but I can't."

A nurse quickly slipped a glass bottle around his penis. "Go ahead," she told him. "Go ahead and pee."

"I can't. I'm trying to, but I can't."

The doctor said something quickly to the nurse. She brought a thin rubber hose and began inserting it into Eli's penis. After a moment, urine began to flow through the rubber tube into the bottle.

Another nurse entered. "You'd better go now," she told Arieh.

He left.

It wasn't Eli's back that was injured. The pain was there but the damage was caused mostly by internal hemorrhaging. He was operated on that night, and then again two days later. At first his situation was critical, then it improved and then it turned critical again. Every day Arieh asked the kibbutz nurse for the hospital report on Eli's condition. He went to visit him in the hospital once but after Eli had slipped into a coma, they told him there was no point in coming. On the eighth day after the accident, Arieh asked the kibbutz nurse for the latest hospital report on Eli.

"*Hoo halach*," she told him in Hebrew, "He's gone."

Arieh was confused. "Gone where?" he asked.

"Gone. Just gone. Finished." She realized that he didn't understand. "He's dead."

Eli's death brought about a change in Arieh. He hadn't been close to Eli, hadn't really liked him much. But it suddenly became harder for him to slip into his fantasies. And soon he found that he didn't miss them. The world he was living in had become real enough for him, now that he had been exposed to the ultimate reality of death.

He forgot about bringing his camera to work and about buying a *kefiyeh* and about the dagger. He got a dog but it was a mongrel pup someone gave him. He learned to ride a horse and did occasionally visit the Bedouin where he drank endless cups of strong coffee. In time, he became fluent in Hebrew and his Arabic was adequate but he gave up the Lawrence of Arabia fantasy.

He did his work and got better at it and he still enjoyed driving the jeep around the fields. He never got tired of that. But he no longer set the jeep mirror to reflect his image back at himself. He kept it positioned to reflect the world outside.

He petitioned the Ministry of the Interior for permission to legally change his name back from Arieh Paz to Leon Gold. Permission was granted.

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