

AN OLD LOVE STORY

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He studied social work but found himself continuing his education at Palazzo Spinelli in Florence, in the antique furniture restoration department. • In his workshop, tucked away in a hanger in the middle of an orange grove on Moshav Batsra in the Sharon, he restores antique furniture and gives it the dignity it deserves. • Israel has many painting restorers but very few deal with furniture restoration and Jeremy Zetland is one of the select few. • “In Italy I fell in love with antique wood furniture. To live in Florence is to live in art,” he relates and fervently hopes that in Israel too the antique furniture culture will become more than just legitimate. • Meanwhile there's work, knock on wood.

Everyone who lives around antique wood furniture bought at a fire sale or inherited from parents, uncles or a doting grandmother, talks about the irresistible urge to stroke the wood every time they walk by the piece. Antique furniture is a good beginning to a never-ending love story. It's like a pearl or a diamond stuck casually in the lapel of a jacket, not to dazzle but, rather, the maven will recognize and appreciate it.

Unfortunately, until a piece of antique furniture gets to our home, it looks like it has been ravaged by a century of disasters: the legs are wobbly and crooked, the upholstery has settled into hills and valleys, pieces of the original wood inlay disappeared somewhere long ago, the door is hanging by a thread, and the whole piece is crying out for restoration and rehabilitation to restore its lost dignity.

The big question is who to turn to? The term restoration (rehabilitation) is not exactly a common one in Israel. Restorers of antique furniture adorn every nook and cranny in countries of Europe, where one finds antique furniture not only in commercial quarters but also in the homes of wealthy urbanites. Indeed, one can find gems of antique furniture in every little farmhouse in Provence, and antique hunters know exactly where to look for them. Here, the size of the market in antique furniture just about matches that of the community of furniture restorers. In other words: small to miniscule. The historic explanation is that our pioneer forefathers immigrated to The Land with a pack on their back, to build and to be rebuilt. And a Louis XIV chest did not exactly fit that pioneering spirit. Only a few very wealthy families, mainly from the Sephardic Aliyah and later from the large German Aliyah, brought with them antique furniture. But, like many things that change, the number of admirers of antique furniture is growing. Israelis travel, live abroad for years and come back with rich experience in browsing flea markets and even some pieces of antique furniture, or maybe just old pieces.

One of the new young people in the restoration profession is Jeremy Zetland, 31 years old, who operates his business from a hanger planted in an orange grove on Moshav Batsra in the Sharon. The profession was not passed down to him from his father. His father is a PR man in a computer company, his mother is a scientific editor in English. His sister makes documentary films. True, he has an American carpenter uncle, but he doesn't have a lot of close contact with him. His parents made aliyah from the United States 32 years ago and he was born in Israel, in Tel Aviv. He completed military service, traveled to the Far East, returned to Israel and earned a Bachelor's degree in Social Work. When he began to work in

the field he realized very quickly that emotionally he was not up to the rigors of the profession, and remembering the art courses he had taken as a youngster in painting, sketching, sculpture, and printmaking, decided to explore a career in applied art. Jeremy took a course in artistic painting on wood and during that year a mutual enthusiasm developed between him and his teacher.

But it wasn't enough and he was driven to search further. An old dream ran around in his head — to go to Italy and study — and he decided to pursue it. He didn't know exactly what and where he wanted to study, vacillating between design and restoration, and between Sienna and Milan, until he found the perfect place at Palazzo Spinelli School of Restoration in Florence.

He describes his year in Florence as “a year of love from all directions. I made trips home for love, and fell in love with antique wood furniture and the work we were doing, and I met an Italian friend, Mikele Tadesko, who has become like a brother to me. We keep in touch and he supplies me with materials I'm lacking in Israel. He sends me material for treating woodworms, gesso-oro, the gold plaster used for preparing and repairing gilding, and vaseline oil. He came to Florence from southern Italy and his temperament fit perfectly with my Israeli one.

“Florence is a city of tourists and students. In my class there was only one student from Florence. The rest were from Poland, Belgium, Israel and other cities in Italy. Mikele and I had instant rapport and we would study together, eat together, and go out in the evenings together. Through the Jewish community I met a Jewish family from the suburb of San Dominico and I lived with them on the ground floor of their home. They treated me like a son, inviting me for meals and holiday celebrations. I'm in touch with them to today. So, I was wrapped in love from all directions.”

Tell us more about how you got turned on by the profession?

First of all let's begin with Florence. You don't have to go to a museum to see the city's fabulous art. It's enough to look up or down to take in all the wonderful shapes and colors, and you find yourself living in art. The studies were very serious with emphasis on the applied side. I would say it divided into 75% practical work and 25% theory, including the history of furniture, the biology and technology of wood, drafting, and three-dimensional design. Theoretical courses took up about 8 hours a week and the remaining were devoted to practical hands-on work. We did courses in carving, wood restoration, antique carpentry, and the use of antique wood tools.

After hours Jeremy not only took trips around Tuscany, absorbing the colors, smells, wines and food — he also worked as an apprentice to one of the restoration specialists of Florence, Simone Chiarugi, fourth generation in the profession, permanent restorer to the Uffizi Museum and the Pitti Palace, whom Jeremy calls “the real master of the profession.”

At the end of a year Jeremy had not yet received a certificate from the school, but two important things brought him home: he ran out of money and he missed home. When asked if he felt he was sufficiently mature an artisan, his straightforward reply was “Mature? To the end of my days I won't know enough, every day I learn something new.”

Back in Israel he also studied with the Russian master, Igor Wissotsky, 62 years old, 40 years in the restoration profession and chief restorer of The Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Wissotsky recently received a contact from The Hermitage and apparently will be leaving Israel in the next few months. Jeremy, who works with him without remuneration, hopes that Wissotsky's

clients will continue to come to him, and he sees his work with Igor as an investment in his future.

When Jeremy came back from Italy and began to look around for work with some of the veterans in the profession, no one rolled out the red carpet for him.

Jeremy entered the profession in a very Israeli way. Before leaving for Italy he worked as a waiter at Orna V'Ella on Shenkin to earn some money to go abroad. When he returned to Israel he went back to waiting tables at the restaurant to put together some initial capital to finance his future business, but now he equipped himself with business cards that read "Jeremy Zetland, Restorer". With every meal and every bill, with a winning smile he slipped a card to each customer, saying: "This is what I'm doing now." As he said, "The restaurant has a great clientele of professionals, and passing out my card there was my initial marketing effort. Indeed, my first clients came from there while I was still working on the porch of my rented Tel Aviv apartment."

The first client was an architect, a regular at the restaurant, who had an old cabinet from the 50s badly in need of restoration. Immediately afterwards came the second client, an interior designer with a 19th Century carved wooden rocking horse. Even today when he works in the hanger at Batzra, his third year in the trade, and for certain jobs employs a worker for whom he serves as a teacher, Jeremy says with a smile: "I don't make millions."

But he also doesn't share the opinion of veteran restorers that there is no work in this profession in Israel. Says Jeremy, based on his cumulative experience to today, "There is antique furniture in Israel, from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. True not everyone has it, but many people have at least one hundred-year-old item, and people with a European or Anglo-Saxon background or mentality have more than one item at home. My clients are people ready to invest money in something that has sentimental value or high market value. I guarantee my work for a lifetime. If something connected with my work is not right I'll repair it over and over again, for as long as I live."

When asked how much it costs to restore a piece of antique furniture, the answer is: "It depends on its condition." Jeremy: "Some furniture you only need to strip the paint, expose the original wood and polish it, and then there's furniture that's missing pieces of wood, that needs parts to be built anew. I can only say – in general – a chair can cost between 300 and 900 shekels, an armchair from 700 to 1200 shekels, a table from 4,500 to 6,000 shekels, a low dresser from 3,000 to 4,000 shekels, and a high dresser can reach 6,000 shekels."

Where do you find the pieces of antique wood and missing metalwork to restore furniture?

Most comes from old pieces of furniture that have passed through my hands. I have been working now for 3 years, accumulating all the time. In Israel there is no cooperation between professionals, just like there is no giving praise to another's work, something I would very much like to change. But when I was missing antique pine wood I contacted another restorer and he gave me a piece. It works on the principle that today I need something and tomorrow you'll need something. The supply in Israel is very low. So I learned to make do and be inventive. I take the old wood from the back of the dresser, use it to restore the front which is more important than the back, and build a new back. Old metalwork I can shine up or leave dull, depending on the piece and the client, and if I'm missing metalwork I call a shop in Paris

