

# Abe Nathan - 40 years for Peace

A feature by [Hans Knot](#)



February 28th 2006 - it's 40 years ago that Abe Nathan made world wide news by flying with a very small private plane from an airfield in Israel into the boundary of the state's enemy: Egypt. Between May 1973 and October 1993 the same Abe Nathan was responsible, together with a few hundred presenters, technicians as well as crew members and people at the office, to run a radio station off the Israeli coast. The Voice of Peace transmitted programs in English, Arabic, Hebrew, French as well as Russian to the people in the Middle East. Abe himself did regular programs to tell the listeners what a better world it could be when there could be Peace in the Middle East. But who is this Abe Nathan, who was jailed three times in the 1980s and 90s by the Israeli government for an illegal meeting with another enemy, Yasser Arafat?

Abe was born on the 29th April 1927 in the Persian city of Abadan (nowadays part of Iran), the third child of a traditional Jewish family. His father,

Jacob, who was born in Sanaa (Yemen), worked for the Anglo-Iranian oil company and later opened a successful store for trading linen. His mother, Matilda, was a housewife. The family was a wealthy one. Another brother and sister followed Abe. Two bizarre stories are associated with his birth. These stories were told by one of the family members to the 'Maariv' daily newspaper shortly

after Abe's peace mission in February 1966. He was born with a birthmark and an expert who was asked to explain this mark said it was an omen that the child was destined to achieve great things. According to another story, Abe refused to be



breastfed and therefore his parents had begun looking for a cow, however she in turn refused to be milked. Abe himself recalled, both in his own autobiography and on different radio broadcasts on The Voice of Peace, having had a happy childhood and a good relationship with his neighbours, who were respectful towards his family.

*Photo: Abe and the media*

He often described the Sabbath meals with his father sitting at the head of the table and all the children paying him respect, and the family strolls on Saturday mornings to the synagogue, wrapped in prayer shawls while greeted by their Muslim neighbours. He also mentioned the prayers from the Torah that were said in English. Abe remembers that as a child he used to lie on the roof of the house during the hot

summer nights and observe the stars. One night his father came to the roof and said to him "Son, if you wish to reach the moon you should aim for the stars". Although Abe used to describe his childhood as blissful, he had always felt that he was 'the black sheep of the family' as he was always the only one to be blamed.



Since Abe is importunate, spoilt and stubborn it is probable that this feeling results from self-obsession. In another interview Abe described how he had no toys as a child and that from a very small age he was left alone and had to learn to take care of himself.

*Photo: Abe in prison*

When he was six Abe was sent, together with his younger brother Raymond, to be a boarder at Saint Mary in Bombay- a prestigious Catholic Jesuit boarding school. This school was for rich people and for children of the British residents of India. Abe was a boarder at the school while his brother lived with his aunt. As the financial position worsened, Abe too moved to the aunt's residence, a move which bought about a feeling of deprivation. In an interview to the teenage magazine 'Maariv Lnoar' which

took place in 1966, Abe ventured to talk about his school days: "My parents wanted to emigrate from Persia to Israel - but they also considered India and England . . . at [Saint Mary] I was aware that I was a Jew and wasn't forced to eat the sacramental bread". In another interview, Abe described how as a child he fell in love with the Christian rituals and how he was deeply offended when he was not allowed to sing in the choir. He also described how he was once called 'Jew-boy' by children and then suffered a direct hit from a stone that scarred his face and brought about severe haemorrhage. One of the teachers - Father Conti who witnessed this incident asked Abe what had happened to which the latter replied, "I stumbled over a rock". The children appreciated Abe's behaviour and he was never bothered again.

*Photo: Abe and Yasser Arafat*



Abe met Father Conti again at the end of 1966 when the latter was nearly eighty. Conti told him how he used this incident in front of his students as an example of good behaviour. As a result of the political crisis in Persia in 1939, the Nathan family left Abadan for India. Even though their financial position deteriorated, Abe's parents continued to encourage Abe to study in order to get along better in life. However, when Matilda Nathan discovered that her son had a collection of Christian icons she decided he should go and study in the Jewish - Zionist school named after Sir Jacob Sassoon. In this school Abe and his fellow students received a Zionist education with an emphasis on right wing political orientation in the spirit of the Better Movement and they used to chant "the Jordan river has two banks/ this one belongs to us [the Jewish people]/this one belongs to us too". During the summer vacation, Abe, like the rest of the students joined a summer camp where they were taught Hebrew songs.

Abe recalls that as a teenager he already had clear ideals and a wish to be a leader. At the age of fourteen, he won first prize in a political debate that took place in the school of the Jewish community of Bombay. The topic was the establishment of a Jewish State, and this is probably the first time Abe's name reached the press. Abe explained that even though he was mischievous he wanted to continue his education and become a lawyer or an engineer. His friends and relatives of the time claimed he was diligent and dedicated all his time to studying. Shortly before he graduated from school, Abe organized a student strike - five classes in protest at the behaviour of an English teacher who used to utter anti-Semitic remarks.

When becoming more adult, he decided to train as a pilot for the Royal Air Force. Years later he left to live in Israel, where a lot of inhabitants saw him as an



unpractical idealist as well as a big dreamer. However I think he must be seen as a big fighter, this in the positive way. Already in 1947 he made a name when he was involved with a transport of fugitives to and from India and Pakistan, when both countries were at war. When there was a war between the Arab countries and Israel, way back in 1948, he fought on the side of the Israeli Army and bombarded Palestinian cities. Following his own words, he bombarded at one stage an Arab bunker and killed four officers. One person in

the bunker saved himself, which was a certain Nasser, later president of Egypt. A change of thoughts came to Abe during the same war, when he told his crew not to make the planned bombing. Lucky enough for Nathan, was that the same day a 'stop the fighting' was arranged between the fighting parties and he could not face a punishment in prison.

*Photo: Abe and UN Secretary Boutros Boutros-Ghali*

But Abe was responsible for more things, for instance he lead a transport of weapons from Czechoslovakia to Israel. Seeing the enormous impact of the first war in the Middle East he decided, when the next conflict started, to take part in a more peaceful way. He bought an old aeroplane and decided to fly to Cairo to have peace

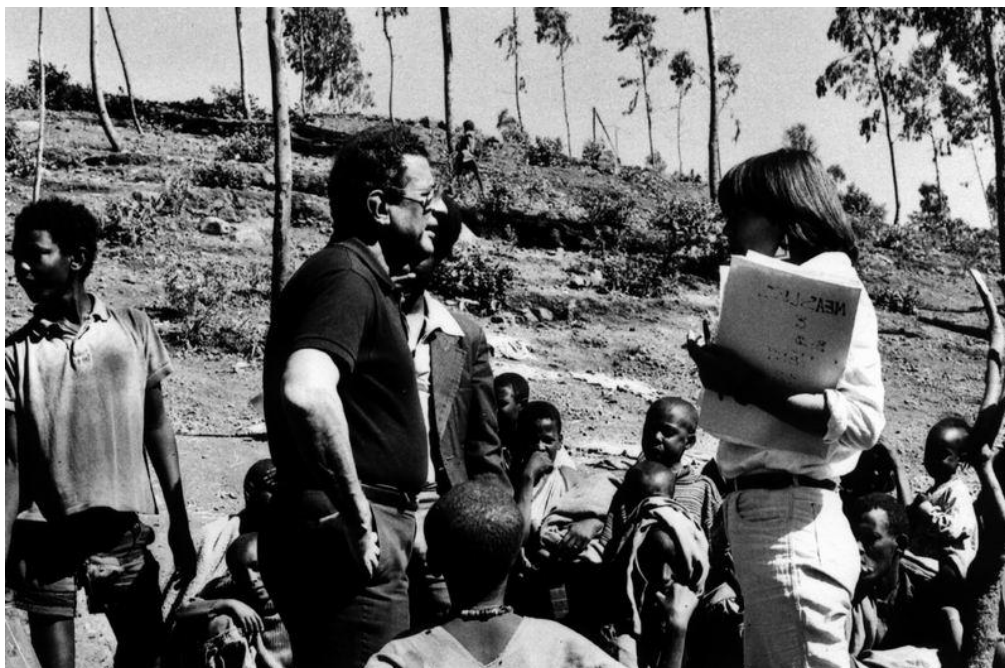
talks with the leaders of the country. However he was not given permission to land at the airfield. In Tel Aviv a large crowd got together as one of the local newspapers mentioned that Abe's plane was shot down, and it was even rumoured he died. When he came back to Israel he decided to start an advertising campaign and asking people for



support. The result was that more than 100,000 people sent him reflections of support and that was a sign for him to give more and more time for Peace.

*Photo: Abe on hunger strike in Jerusalem 1978*

But it would take some time before it was really so far advanced. In the time between there were lots of other activities. For instance Abe worked first as a pilot for the Israeli company El Al. Next he wanted to be a theatre impresario, in which he failed. But he was very successful in the hotel and catering industry, whereby he was owner



of the well known Hotel California restaurant at Dizengoff Street, one of the important streets of Tel Aviv. But he was working too much and didn't pay enough attention to his family, which resulted in a divorce in 1954 from his Egyptian wife Suzie. Together they had one daughter.

*Photo: Abe in Ethiopia*

It was in 1966 and 1967 that Abe took two other efforts to get in contact for talks with the Egyptian government. First he left his country from the airport Herzilya (20 kilometres from Tel Aviv) with a small single seater aeroplane. The second time was directly after the Six Days War when he started at the airport of Nicosia at the Isle of Cyprus. His target was the city of Port Said and when his plane landed Abe was refused permission to enter the country. Also the authorities made it clear that, if he made another attempt, his plane would be shot down. He made a second attempt but wasn't attacked and also he did not land on Egyptian ground. When coming back to Israel, he was in great trouble as a court case waited, for the fact he illegally visited the enemy. The result was a punishment of 40 days in jail or a fine of 4000 Euro's, which was a lot of money in 1967. He chose jail and gave the money



to a local hospital. Nevertheless his flights made world news and he was invited by Pope Paul VI to come to Rome to get the Medal of Peace, a medal only presented to the Great Presidents of the World as well as the legendary Secretary of the United Nations, U Thant.

*Photo: Abe and Shimon Peres*

When meeting Abe for the first time in 1968, I asked him where he got the idea to put a radio station on the air from a ship in international waters. He answered with: "While I was on the Isle of Cyprus I listened to Israeli as well as Arabic stations, who talked about the aggressive fights and the listeners could feel that there was heavy



fear for a long war. Also the whole world knew what was happening in the Middle East and nobody would know how many people would be killed in this bloody war. Sitting in this Hotel room I thought that there should be only one way to reach all those people in their countries, including their leaders and fighters to warn them for disasters coming from war situations. And there came in the idea to start my own radio station. But how could I get a licence as in the warring countries there was a state monopoly and no private radio at that time. While looking outside the window of my hotel room I was seeing the answer: a radio ship from international waters. If I could give it a try, there should be a possibility that people would listen a little bit to my future messages of Peace and maybe this could be a little bit of help for all those people in war."

*Photo: Abe destroying war toys*

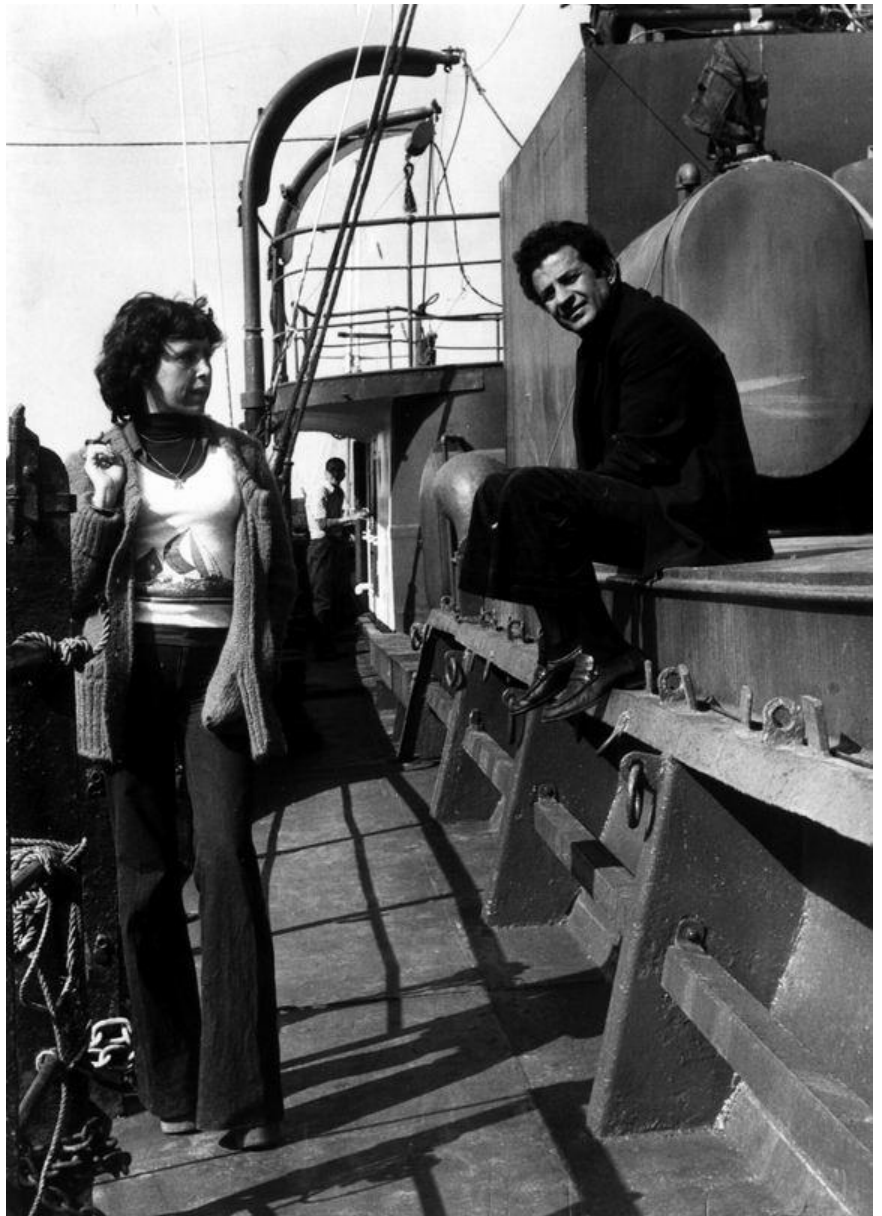
In the mid sixties, Abe's name already made the international newspapers when campaigning for his aid service to the people of Biafra, where a huge famine took place, during time of war. Hundreds of thousands of people died. Abe went to Canada as well as the USA and talked to rich Jewish people as well as the governments of the countries. The first transport plane to land with food in Biafra, had

Abe Nathan as captain and many flights would follow, paid by charity funds. Those flights took place from the isle of Sao Thom  , which was still a colonial part of Portugal. Abe Nathan got help from the World Council of Churches, which had its head office in those days in Amsterdam. Mostly those flights were made in old aeroplanes during the hours of darkness, so they could not be shot down by the people at war. He got, for these nightly flights, special help from pilots from Norway, Canada, France as well as Holland. Abe also made several flights to the Indian province of Bihar in 1968 to bring help to the hungry people there.

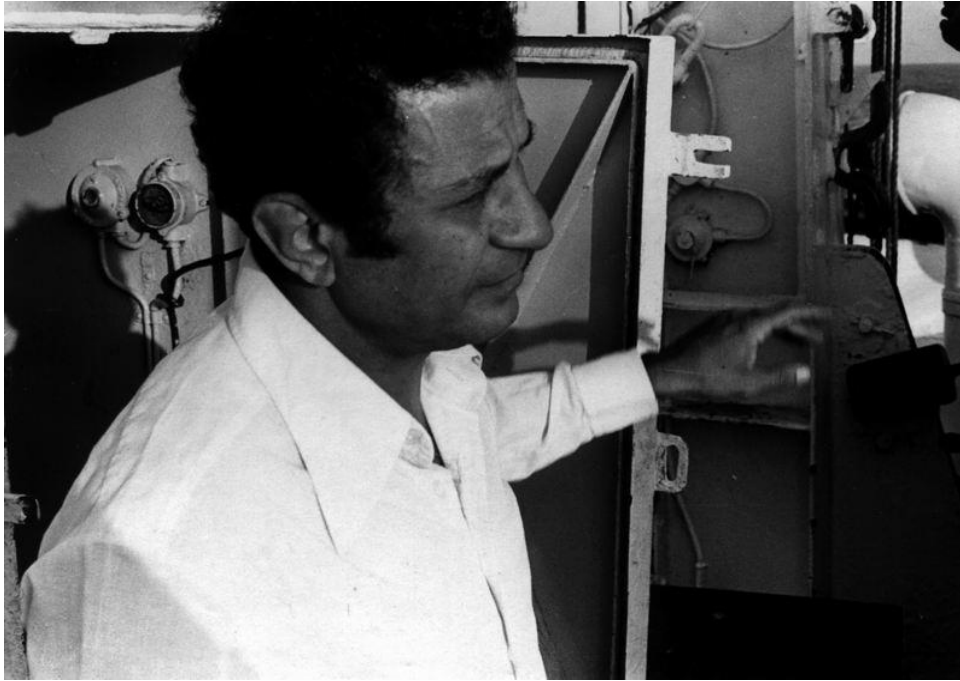
*All the following photos: Abe on the Peace Ship*

But a year earlier Abe made his first visit to Holland. It was just 14 days after the British Marine Offences Bill became law, that on August 29th 1967

Abe arrived in Amsterdam. He was 40 years young at the time, to see if he could find a ship which could stay anchored on international waters. He had heard that the Dutch coasters were one of the best for this purpose. Abe, however, was always a man of publicity and the first thing he did was getting in contact with a journalist of the







biggest daily newspaper, 'De Telegraaf'. In this newspaper he told that he planned a radio station on which he could tell the Arab people that, especially on the Egyptian stations, they got a very coloured message of war and that he would change that in the future with his programmes.

He thought at that time, that it would be very easy to get his station on the air as he was backed by financial sources in Israel as well as Arabia. The station would come on the air in 1973 as the Voice of Peace, but in 1967 he still had another name in mind, 'Shalom Group One'. A name which had something to do with a group of Israeli intellectuals, brought together in The Shalom One Peace Foundation, from which



Abe was the Chairman in those days. Due to political reasons, so he told the journalist from the newspaper that he personally would be the only mentioned backer from Israel.

Next he promised in another newspaper, early September 1967, that he would soon fly to Heathrow Airport to meet Ronan O'Rahilly, co-owner of Radio Caroline. This Irish man could advise him, as Ronan brought his own radio station on the air from early 1964 on international waters. After this meeting he promised to fly with his 40 years old plane to the USA to visit all the mayors of the main cities to ask them to give money for his Peace Project.

Just a few of the many appearances from Abe Nathan in local, regional, national and international newspapers in which he brought his ideas for a Peace station. It was in February 1968 that the then Minister of War, Moshe Dyan, sought for publicity to tell the world that Israel was not waiting for the station Nathan wanted. 'All this so called Peace activities will work against Israel and her population. If Nathan goes on with



his ideas, we have the possibility to put him in jail, even if this last for a period of 10 years.' Maybe this brought some fear for some people but in the Jewish community in Holland Dyan's words fell wrong and it was to the generosity of Dutchman Leo Fuld - owner of a chain of restaurants - that a large full page advertisement appeared in the

Jerusalem Post as a protest against the plans from Dyan and his fellow Ministers.

Ten years became a few days in prison as Abe had made a second attempt to fly to Egypt without permission from the authorities in Israel. In a letter to Pirate Radio News, dated June 14th 1968 Abe mentioned that he had an option on a ship and that he was, at that moment in New York, on a search for professional but cheap equipment. At the same time he was also busy organising the founding of a Peace School. The Dutch AMRO Bank opened a account and finally the Peace School was opened in Nazareth as 'Shalom School' with money donated by Dutch people.

Abe took great interest in helping people in need and after a very major earthquake

took place in Nicaragua, where thousands of people lost their lives, Abe directly decided to take the first plane from New York to the people in need. But before that



he contacted some very rich friends of his with the aim to donate money. Within days a big new truck, loaded with food and medicines, went into the territory. It was month later we heard again from Abe when he took, with a plane from the Middle American country, some children with him to Amsterdam to give them a well earned vacation after they had been in terrible trouble after the earthquake as well as the famine that followed.

April 16, 1969 Abe made the headlines again in which he told that it was very difficult to get together the 160,000 guilders he needed to buy the ship on which he had an option. Only 10,000 was already on his account but the big question was: 'where to get the rest of the money?' In the local press in Groningen the first small message was found about the MV Cito, a ship which was at the quayside just 350 metres away from my parents home. The MV Cito was there already laid up for one and a half years, and we used to play there a lot around the ships. Next to the Cito there was, in those days, the MV Zeevaart, which would become in 1970 the MV King David the radio ship for Capital Radio.

Travelling a lot, Abe arrived in Paris where he gave another press conference on June 5th. He told the press that he planned a radio ship 20 miles off the Israeli coast with the aim to enlighten the inhabitants of Israel and surrounding countries about



taking away feelings of hatred and distrust between each other. Of course, also in France, he tried to get people interested in financing his project. Strange enough, possibly under influence from the government of Egypt, Abe Nathan was told to leave the Hilton Hotel and France as soon as possible. He left the country but with an unexpected destination: Egypt.

It was the third time he tried to get in talks with the Egypt Government, the first time in a small plane was in February 1966. After landing he was only allowed to have a short talk with the Governor in Port Said. The same happened in 1967 and when he arrived back in Israel, he was arrested and temporarily put into prison as he had entered the enemies country without permission. But also the third time, July 1967, no permission was given to Abe Nathan to talk with anyone of the Egyptian government, and so he decided to go back to Holland. Arriving at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam he gave another press conference: 'I only went to Egypt to see how the atmosphere is at the moment. They told me 'welcome mister Nathan' when I arrived,

this because they didn't recognize me as the Mr Abe Nathan. The atmosphere is very depressing and talking to inhabitants I learned that they're very tired of the circumstances of the war. Also they told me that they want to listen to a special radio station, if I start one. I've promised them to see if the station can start as soon as possible and keep it there for many years. Also I've told them that as soon as the ship is on air I will be on the ship myself and never leave it before there's Peace."

### HANS KNOT

with special thanks to Noam Tal

'Who's Abe Nathan' is an introduction chapter for the publication:  
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Photos: Archive Hans Knot Groningen Holland  
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