



Len Traubman died Oct. 4 at age 80. (Photo/Courtesy Adam Traubman)

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Len Traubman, who got Jews and Palestinians talking, dies at 80

BY **ALIX WALL** | OCTOBER 8, 2019

Len Traubman, co-founder of the **Jewish Palestinian Living Room Dialogue Group** and a pioneer in Jewish-Palestinian relationship building, died Oct. 4 of Guillain-Barré syndrome. He was 80.

Born Lionel Traubman in Duluth, Minnesota in 1939, he and his parents, second-generation immigrants, moved to Los Angeles when he was 5.

Fifteen years ago, Traubman published “The Oreckovsky Family: From Russia to America,” documenting his mother’s family’s journey escaping pogroms in Russia and settling in Duluth. The book is now in more than 100 libraries.

A graduate of UC Berkeley and the UCSF School of Dentistry, Traubman became a renowned pediatric dentist with a long list of accomplishments. He was a two-term director of the San Francisco Dental Society and a lecturer in pediatric dentistry at UCSF for 15 years. He saw patients at his San Francisco practice from the 1960s until his retirement in 2000.

In 1966, he met social worker Elizabeth “Libby” Linn at a tennis match in Indianapolis, where he was doing specialty training. “I knew right away he had something I needed,” said Libby, who wasn’t Jewish. She told her parents about him that same day.

They married in 1967 and moved to San Francisco. In 1977, they moved to San Mateo and settled in for more than four decades.

In 1982, **the Traubmans** cofounded the Beyond War movement, now known as the Foundation for Global Community. As anti-nuclear activists, they had long worked to encourage face-to-face interaction between Russians and Americans during the height of the Cold War. But when the Iron Curtain came down, they set their sights on the Middle East.

Len was a strong believer in citizen diplomacy. “There are things that governments can do that people cannot, like forging binding agreements,” he told J. in 2002. “And there are things that citizens free of government can do that the governments cannot, like changing human relationships.”

Going by the maxim “An enemy’s story is one that you haven’t heard,” the Traubmans **founded the Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue Group in their San Mateo living room** in 1992, along with some Palestinian neighbors. Adham and Nahida Salem were among the first to join, but only after Libby repeatedly visited Adham’s store nearby, telling him, “I’m not going to stop asking until you show up.” Though the Salems now spend half the year in their native Ramallah, whenever they are in California, they attend the dialogue group.

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“These two, and all they do, give me hope,” Nahida Salem said of Len and Libby in 2012, the group’s 20th anniversary.

Elias and Fanny Botto were introduced to the Traubmans by a mutual Palestinian friend, and they joined the group in its early days. A Palestinian born in Jerusalem who fled to Bethlehem during Israel’s War of Independence, Elias admitted he was skeptical at first that the dialogue groups would last. But after his first meeting, he became a regular at both the original San Mateo group and a group in San Francisco, and over the years he has appeared at many Jewish events, sharing his story with others.

“I really took it to heart. Len became a brother,” Elias said. “Through Len, I’ve learned how important dialogue is, not just between Jews or Israelis and Palestinians, but I see how the whole world lacks that capability to listen to each other.”

In the early years of the group, Len Traubman recruited participants however he could. For example, as soon as he heard of a new Palestinian contact, he would drive to meet them and invite them to dinner. But after the first group spawned numerous others, people started reaching out themselves. At one point, the Traubmans were facilitating three or four groups a month.

“More and more, we are being asked into synagogues, campuses, colleges and high schools,” Len told J. in 2002. “The media calls us. These groups just seem to be a model of hope.”

From 2003 to 2007, [Camp Tawonga hosted](#) Israelis and Palestinians who lived in the Middle East, along with local Jewish and Palestinian participants of the dialogue groups, for intensive weekends. At its apex, Tawonga’s Peacemakers camp hosted 250 people.

Len Traubman also was a frequent letter-writer to J., with [a letter from him and his wife appearing as recently as the Sept. 20, 2019 issue](#). Len was not a religious Jew, but in his letters, he often invoked the Shema as a guiding concept, imploring people to actively listen as the Shema says, but in this case, to the stories with which they were unfamiliar.

The work of the Traubmans became well known, and they were often asked to consult with groups around the world. The State Department and the Reform movement were two of their “clients.” Libby estimates they have sent out more than 17,000 DVDs about their work, to every U.S. state and 98 countries around the world. They paid for most of this out of their own pocket, but some years ago found a fiscal sponsor in the Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center.

As the years went on, they began to get a lot of interest in their work from Africa. In 2010, a man in Nigeria saw one of the films about the Peacemakers camp and invited the Traubmans to Nigeria to facilitate dialogue between 200 Christians and Muslims there. [Videos about that summit](#) were seen in other parts of Africa, provoking even more people to reach out to them.

“We’ve been having regular conferences with people from Côte d’Ivoire and Cameroon and more,” Libby said. “We support them financially and help them bring warring tribes together.”

Locally, the Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue Group lives on; this month, the group will have its 314th meeting.

In addition to his wife, Len Traubman is survived by his son, Adam Traubman (Raychel) of Cardiff-by the Sea in San Diego County, daughter Eleanor Traubman (Mike) of Brooklyn, New York, and three grandchildren. Donations in his memory can be made to the [Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center](#), earmarked for the Jewish-Palestinian Living Room Dialogue Group.