



The Smile of Hope

The Organization for Widows & Orphans (IDFWO)

Part 5 of the cycle: Facets of Restoration (New Life for Widows & Orphans)

By Brigitte B. Nussbächer

Since October 7, widows and their children have been mourning for the irreplaceable: the loss of their beloved, the loss of a father.

The IDFWO embraces them. It is family. Hope. A home in sorrow. Through its programs, children learn to smile again, mothers find new strength, and communities are born. With love and support, it offers perspective and the promise: You are not forgotten.

And we can take part!



Not alone: the widows and orphans in Israel. Photo IDFWO



A Clear Commitment: No One Should Be Alone

[The IDFWO](#) is more than an organization - it is a family. A family for the widows and orphans of the IDF who have lived through the terrible: the loss of a loved one in the service of Israel. In 1991, almost 20 years after the Yom Kippur War, the organization was founded as an initiative of the widows at the time to give them a voice and a mouthpiece in public.



Our personal connection to the IDFWO came about through our friend Moshe from [Jerusalem](#), who made the first contact. Through our [project for Israeli orphans](#), we share a common goal. This year it was a special pleasure for us to meet their leader and CEO, Shlomi, in person to deepen our cooperation. It is fitting that their headquarters are located in Petach Tikva (Gate of Hope). Because that's exactly what they are: a gateway of hope for affected families.

[Meeting with Shlomi in Petach Tikva. Private photo](#)

The IDFWO accompanies the bereaved with emotional support, financial assistance, educational opportunities and a community that provides strength and support. It advocates for their rights at a legislative level, in public and with decision-makers. With year-round programs, projects and activities, it offers those affected new perspectives, a strong network and the secure feeling that Israel will never forget them. In the midst of grief and pain, a community full of courage and resilience grows - a place where loss gives rise to unity and hope awakens despite darkness.



[The IDFWO programs create connectedness. Photo IDFWO](#)

And this starts from the very first moment! When soldiers or security forces fall in battle or are murdered in acts of terrorism, the IDFWO is informed immediately after the family. This means that someone from the 21-strong team can make direct contact with the widow in order to support her. This ranges from attending the funeral to providing night nurses to enable young mothers to sleep through the night and many other practical support services. Pregnant widows are provided with midwives who accompany them until the birth. Additionally the IDFWO also sees itself as a partner to the widows, helping to raise the orphans.



A Great Role Model



Shlomi, the current managing director of the IDFWO, joined the organization 15 years ago and was initially the director of the youth program. Before that, he had already gained a wealth of experience in the education sector. He took over the management role in 2021.

When asked what was decisive for his decision, he cites two reasons. Firstly, his mother, who grew up as an orphan herself and whose life story has given him a lot of insight.

Shlomi, CEO of the IDFWO. Photo IDFWO

And then there is [Janusz Korczak](#), the Jewish writer and doctor in Poland, who gave up his medical career to run first one and then two Jewish orphanages. In 1940 they had to move to the Warsaw ghetto and in August 1942 all the children were taken away for deportation to the Treblinka extermination camp. Although Janusz could have escaped this fate, he decided to accompany “his” children to the end in order to make this last journey easier for them. He told them that they were going on a wonderful trip to a beautiful place and that they should all dress up especially nicely. Singing happily, they walked in two rows - to their deaths! A sculpture in [Yad Vashem](#) commemorates this special man, who became a great role model for many, including Shlomi.

The Widows

Shlomi talks about widows with great understanding. Of the childless, whose greatest challenge is not to fall into a black hole of isolation.

Of those who have children and have to be there for them and who are so caught up in everyday life that they have no time at all to deal with their own grief. Who have to try to be father and mother to their children.

Of those who have suffered this cruel [loss during pregnancy](#) and who now have to bring their children into the world alone. Of the children for whom the word “father” will always remain an abstract concept.

He speaks about how this grief, pain and emptiness never completely disappear. Even years later, they are still a constant companion to these families. Because it is not just a single life that ends. Instead, an entire universe of possibilities shatters - “dreams dissolve, futures evaporate, and what remains is a landscape of acute pain and bewildering loss”.



That is why the IDFWO not only provides medical and financial aid. It also helps to build a new life. Through programs and activities such as lectures, day trips, adventure workshops, singing evenings and fun days, [regional communities](#) are created. Training courses help widows to enter new or deeper into their working lives. Joint trips abroad open up perspectives beyond the routine and facilitate valuable relationships with group participants.

Day Trip. Photo IDFWO



The [sailing seminars](#) are particularly effective, as practicing the operation and maneuvering of a boat can become a life-changing journey. Those affected learn to hoist their inner sails and move forward despite difficulties and losses. Their ability to navigate, overcome turbulence and maneuver safely becomes a profound and encouraging experience. This gives participants the hope of regaining control as well over their lives in reality through conscious steering.

Sailing courses at the IDFWO. Photo IDFWO

Otzma Camps for Orphans

Shlomi has dedicated himself to the children in particular and launched the Otzma (strength) Camp project. Children between the ages of 6 and 18 are looked after at these camps. They take place especially during holidays such as Hanukkah, Passover and Sukkot. Many of these children find it difficult to connect with other children of the same age after they have lost their father. They have to assert themselves in a world where so few know and understand their fate and their loss. They experience that most people neither share nor comprehend their pain.

At the [Otzma Camps](#), these children come together with other orphans. These camps offer them the opportunity to take new steps in life in a community where they feel understood and protected.

Here they don't have to explain to anyone how much they miss their father. And how difficult it is for them to realize that their mother is no longer the same either. That their home has changed forever. How much they miss the security they used to find in their family, how much they sometimes long to be able to take refuge in their father's strong arms. Here they can be open, talk freely about what they have experienced and how they feel about it. They can cry together, share their experiences and learn from each other.



Lifelong friendships are formed at the Otzma camps. Photo IDFWO

And this is also where they start to smile again, play, enjoy themselves and master life. This is where friendships are formed that will last a lifetime.

Witnessing how these children slowly find their way back into life and learn to deal with their loss, how they look to the future with hope and confidence again, how healing and restoration slowly take place, that is what inspires Shlomi for his work and breathes new strength into him, again and again.

After October 7, 2023

After the Hamas massacre, the situation has become extremely challenging. Other organizations are happy when they grow. But things are different for the IDFWO. Since October 7, more than 350 widows have joined the organization and more than 730 additional orphans are being cared for. As a result, the team has had to double to 21 employees in order to meet the additional needs that have arisen in a single day. There are also 240 volunteers helping out.

It is not easy for the staff to deal with all the suffering that surrounds them. Shlomi reports that on the day of the massacre, he made a conscious decision to lock away and shut out his feelings. Only in this way is it possible for him to make the tireless effort that is required these days. He feels the responsibility of the historic role he holds as the head of the only organization that cares for the widows and orphans of fallen soldiers and security forces personnel and is accredited by the government. And he feels that he would become an emotional wreck if he would let all this get to him.

And so he continues to radiate strength, empathy and helpfulness and is available almost around the clock. The fact that he has a family himself, and that his own wife was heavily pregnant at the time of the massacre, helps him to understand the needs of the women and children even better. After October 7, he personally spoke to all the directors of the hospitals to ensure that these widows received preferential treatment.

One of the highlights for Shlomi since October 7 was the moment when he witnessed how a little boy, who had lost contact with his peers since the loss of his father, was able to play with others again for the first time at such a camp after learning that they were all orphans. And how he smiled again for the first time in endless months. These first tiny steps towards healing give hope and perspective - and the strength to continue with this incredibly important ministry.

And so the IDFWO stands by these affected families, from the very first moment, during the shiva (mourning period), during the first one to three years, when it's all about coping with shock and survival, and afterwards. **For a lifetime: Forever connected. Forever grateful.**



Shlomi thanks us for our support. Private photo

Anyone can [support IDFWO's programs](#) and become part of the vibrant initiative that transforms grief into hope and memory into action. Together we can support the women and children left behind, help them rebuild their lives, enhance their resilience and show them that they are never alone. In this way, our shared commitment becomes a source of strength and comfort for the families left behind.



The story of the Organization for Widows & Orphans (IDFWO) is part of the cycle: [Facets of Restoration](#).

[Brigitte Nussbächer and her husband Harald Bottesch](#) regularly visit Israel. Their current focus is on supporting families who were directly affected by the Hamas massacre on October 7, 2023: Widows and orphans, traumatized people and evacuees. During their last mission to Israel in April 2025, they again visited those affected and established links with specialist organizations on the ground in order to provide specific, long-term and sustainable help.

More articles from Brigitte B. Nussbächer under: www.arc-to-israel.org/en/artikel

