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The archetype of the wandering Jew: Corinne Evens' globe-spanning empire of business and philanthropy

Belgian-born to wealthy Polish parents and now based in Paris, Corinne Evens founded a real estate empire, has business and philanthropic interests in Israel and Europe, and recently launched her own line of jewelry.

By Aviva Lori | Jun.20, 2013 14:33 PM



Corinne Evens: "I have no roots anywhere and I can live in any place. Even in the West Bank. I have a few houses but no home." Photo by Ilya Melnikov

this story is by
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The Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, opposite Natan Rapoport's sculpture honoring the heroes of the ghetto uprising. Photo by AP

It was a moment of deep satisfaction. Waldemar Dabrowski, director of the Warsaw-based Polish National Opera and a former minister of culture in Poland, concluded his remarks by saying, "Life in Poland is better with you, Corinne, and the world looks better, too." Everyone's gaze was fixed on Corinne Evens, who blushed and smiled sweetly and primly. In April, a group of people gathered in Warsaw - friends, acquaintances and donors of Corinne Evens - from all over the world. They came to mark the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and the official opening of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, in the square opposite the sculptor Natan Rapoport's monument commemorating the heroes of the revolt.

Evens is everything that Poles are fond of these days. She speaks with a French accent; she is a Jewish international businesswoman and philanthropist, a citizen of Belgium and a resident of France, where she lives in the coolest quarter of Paris (Le Marais), in a renovated 16th-century house. She has philanthropic and business interests in Israel and is Polish by descent.

In short, she is a walking evocation of nostalgia for everyone. At the modest brunch in Warsaw, Dabrowski related, with palpable emotion, that Evens traces her roots to Radzymin, a town near Warsaw where he was born and in which the Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer grew up.

Corinne Evens, a wealthy heiress, founded her own real estate empire and is involved in projects in the United States, Poland and other parts of Europe, as well as in Israel.

A mathematician by education, she is an artist and studied acting at a theater school in Paris. She was a film student at New York University and a film director, editor and scriptwriter. A full-time mother, she has also recently begun to design jewelry.

Evens' appearance is deceptive. Nothing in her dulcet smile and outgoing cordiality, in fact nothing in her exterior appearance, betrays the fact that behind the little woman is a shark who manages a variety of businesses with a high hand and is knowledgeable, down to the most minute details, about every commercial or philanthropic project in which she is involved.

One such project, to which she is deeply committed and emotionally involved, is the new museum in Warsaw. As the president of the European Association for the museum, her mission is to raise funds for the permanent exhibition, which will be ready in another 10 months. At the conclusion of the events commemorating the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, when she found a moment to relax in the lobby of the local Marriott Hotel - another of her projects, this one a business venture - she said, "It is always very painful for me to come here. When the soldiers fired the salute of honor today, I thought about my grandmother. The Nazis took her from the prison in the center of Warsaw and shot her in the street. But at my age, I know well that life is founded on contradictions. The Israeli education minister said that the revolt in the ghetto was a prime example of heroism, and the motivation for Israel's establishment. I hope that the new museum will be able to explain to people, here and around the world, that life is more complex than black and white, conquerors and conquered, victims and oppressors."

Evens, 58, was born in Antwerp, Belgium, to Irene Radzaminska and Georges Olivenstein. Her father managed to leave Poland in August 1939, a week before the Nazi invasion. "His mother packed him a suitcase," Evens says, "and told him to go east, to Russia. But instead of Russia he reached Romania and from there went to southern France, to Marseille and Nice. He volunteered for the underground Polish army, but was captured by the Gestapo and sent to a concentration camp. He escaped and somehow got to Italy, where he met my mother and fell in love with her - but she was married."

After the war, Olivenstein immigrated to Israel, along with his brother and sister. He tried to acclimatize, changed his surname to Even and for three years worked at occasional jobs, in the textile industry and in various hotels - for a time he was a maintenance man at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. Finally he decided to return to Europe and look for the woman he had met in Italy. He found her. After she got a divorce and they were married, they moved to Antwerp, where she had an uncle who was in the diamond business. Olivenstein-Even learned the trade and quickly proved to have an extraordinary gift for it. He founded his own company, developed ties in Africa and became a highly regarded - and very well-to-do - international diamond merchant. He was a key figure in the Antwerp diamond industry and the president of the local Diamond Exchange. He added the "s" to his name in the 1960s, becoming Evens.

Real estate and diamonds

Corinne Evens resembles her father in many ways, not least in her determination and practical head for business. As a young woman she accompanied him to meetings and to business trips in Africa, but embarked on her own independent path. After obtaining a master's degree in pure mathematics from the Free Universities of Brussels, she moved to Paris and entered the film industry.

Whyfilm?

"I had a boyfriend who was in cinema, and I always liked that art form. I studied film at NYU for a short time and I worked in the film industry for eight years. I wrote, directed, edited and also acted. At the same time, I studied acting at the school of Jacques Lecoq in Paris."

Though money was never a problem - her father was able to support her in every venture - her ambition to prove herself and become economically independent overcame the pleasures of bohemian life. In 1983, she started to become involved in real estate in Paris, acquiring buildings cheaply, renovating them and then selling them to the highest bidder. But in 1990 she did a U-turn and joined her father's diamond business in Antwerp. For the next 10 years she was his personal assistant. They were in the diamond polishing trade, buying uncut gems in Africa, Russia and South America and selling them all over the world after shaping and polishing them. When her father died, she served as president of the company for two years. She then shut it down and returned to Paris to the real estate business. To my observation that she sells property only in limited circles she notes, "That is what suits me. I do not want to be known. I prefer to do what I do quietly and not stand out."

Evens has two children, from two partners. Jonathan, 23, is an engineering student, and Deborah, 17, is in high school. She has never married. Her current partner, Yves Flon, an aikido master, is Deborah's father.

Evens' Polish connection dates back to 1992. "I traveled with my father to Warsaw," she recalls. "He was looking for business opportunities. He was thinking of buying a hotel. I asked him about the house he grew up in, and he showed it to me, at 8 Wilcza Street, one of the few streets in Warsaw that wasn't destroyed in the war. We also went to see the school he attended and we visited my mother's town. Four years later, my father died. I went back to Warsaw in 1998 and returned to my father's place. The people living in the apartment were very nice and let me come in. I walked through the small rooms. You could still see floral wallpaper that remained from

before the war. It was a shock for me. I called my father's sister, who lives in Tel Aviv, and asked her exactly where her room and his room were, and she guided me through the apartment.

In September 1939, she continues, "My grandmother and my aunt were kicked out of that apartment and it was given to some historian. The woman who hosted me there is his granddaughter. I told them that I had only come to see and feel how my family had lived there and that they should not be frightened - I had not come to demand the home back.

"Six months later, I met Wiktor Markowicz, a Jewish businessman from Poland who lives in America. He started to tell me about the museum in Warsaw and introduced me to a friend of his who was in the process of buying an apartment in Warsaw. I asked her where it was and she said it was on Wilcza Street. I asked her what number and she told me it was number 8. That is incredible, I said - it is the building my father lived in. I asked her to keep an eye open for any other available apartments there. After a time she called and said there was an apartment for sale. It's not my father's apartment, but I bought it anyway, and now I manage the Evens Foundation offices from there and visit regularly."

'Bohemian soul'

The Evens Foundation is a philanthropic organization founded in Belgium, in 1990, by Evens' father. She has kept it going and through it is promoting new projects in the realms of culture, society and education. The foundation is active mainly in Europe and also in Israel. Its motto: "Living together harmoniously in Europe." The foundation's offices are located in Antwerp, Paris and Warsaw, and it runs programs in European citizenship, peace education and media.

"We award prizes and scholarships for projects in these fields," Evens says, "some of them in distressed regions and among migrants. The condition is that in the case of children, the parents must be involved. It took many years to build it up." One of the projects that benefits from the foundation is the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow, one of the largest events of its kind in the world.

Evens is especially proud of a project called "Poetry Unites - My Favorite Poem." Now in its fifth year, this poetry contest is geared to young people in Poland, Germany and Bulgaria. It is a national competition in which youngsters analyze a poem and write an essay about it, and two participants from each country win prizes. More than 900 entries were received this year. "That is a typical Evens project," Markowicz himself says with a smile. "Only she could have devised something like that."

How so?

"Even though she is an entrepreneur and a business investor, she has a wild bohemian soul."

Markowicz, who divides his time between New York and Florida, persuaded Evens to support the Warsaw museum project. "It started when I was looking for partners for a real estate project in France," he says. "I wanted to buy offices in Paris. Someone introduced us, and we found a common language. She became a partner in the project, we bought the buildings and it was all quite successful. We met occasionally and I told her about the museum. The president of Poland, Lech Kaczynski [who was killed in a plane crash in Russia in April 2010], said he would provide the building on condition that Jewish people would fund the permanent exhibition. Corinne became involved and that is how the project began to be realized. Her role is to raise funds, but at the outset we were six partners, together with Corinne, and we had to pay an advance of \$7 million to the Polish government to start the project."

An international team of researchers, historians and designers is now working on the permanent exhibition. It will tell the story of the thousand years of Jewish history on Polish soil using multimedia, and will also address the future. The cost of the entire project is between \$40 million

and \$50 million. "Raising money for a museum in Poland is not easy in Europe," Evens says. "The Jews do not want to give money to the Poles. They say they are anti-Semitic."

What's your opinion?

"I am very worried about the anti-Semitism in Europe and about Israel's image internationally, but I do not think the Poles are more anti-Semitic than, say, the French. Anti-Semitism is on the rise in Europe because of the Arabs who are flooding the continent and inundating it with anti-Israeli ideology. In addition, there is the ancient traditional anti-Semitism, cultural anti-Semitism. Now there is also an economic crisis, and whenever there is an economic problem, people look for a scapegoat. I was not brought up to hate in general and not to hate Poles, either. I like the Poles very much and feel comfortable here."

Have you not considered buying an apartment in Israel, for security?

"Yes, I am looking."

Most of Evens' dealings in Israel are philanthropic, though she has other interests as well. After her father died she decided to continue the ties with Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Be'er Sheva, that her parents had initiated in the 1970s. "When I came to the university, in October 1990, Corinne's parents were already donors," says Prof. Avishay Braverman, who was then president of the university (and is now a Labor **MK**). "After her father died, Corinne became a friend and a member of the board of governors. With a donation she gave we built an auditorium named for her family at Midreshet Sde Boker," referring to a branch of BGU at Kibbutz Sde Boker.

In the past decade, Evens has consolidated and expanded her activity in Israel. Coexistence projects are the apple of her eye. Her flagship project is the Evens Program in Conflict Resolution and Mediation at Tel Aviv University. Headed by Prof. Ephraim Yaar, the two-year interdisciplinary program focuses on both micro-conflicts - such as those that arise in the family, in the community and between neighbors - and macro-conflicts between nations. Sixty students a year take the program, which has no thesis requirement. A mediation center and an international program for overseas students have also been established. The program is underwritten (to the tune of about \$100,000 annually) by the Olivestone Trust (Keren Even Zayit), an Israel-based fund created in memory of Evens' father.

"Corinne is a very special person," says Prof. Yaar. "You always think that philanthropists keep their distance and believe they deserve respect. I know many distinguished people who, when a donor arrives, wag their tail around him. Corinne is the exact opposite: a cordial, informal person who does not keep you at arm's length. It is a pleasure to work with her. She does not flaunt her great wealth, but gives you the feeling that you and she are completely equal."

Another Olivestone Trust project is the "Peace Labyrinth," a traveling exhibition that spent two years at the Bloomfield Science Museum in Jerusalem and has been on display for the past three years at the museum in Kibbutz Ein Dor, in Galilee.

The concept was developed by two Dutch teachers, who were awarded a prize for the idea by the Evens Foundation in Europe. In Dutch it's known as "The Peace Factory." Evens: "It is an interactive exhibition for children. Through games, they learn how not to harbor prejudices toward the surroundings, for example. It turns out that this is not in the genes, that it can be implanted."

Maya Halevy, director of the Science Museum, explains how the idea was conceived. "Corinne helped the Dutch disseminate their game elsewhere in Europe, and a representative of the Jerusalem Foundation met her at a conference in which she presented the project. He thought it could be appropriate for Jerusalem and suggested that we consider it. We looked into it and developed a game that was suitable for a science museum. We focused not only on the big

questions about conflicts between peoples but also on issues relating to violence, intolerance and prejudices between friends and neighbors. Corinne is very much involved. She brought people to see how an exhibition can be applied scientifically and locally. She is a very forthright person. You would never know she is a millionaire. You would think that someone like her would arrive with status symbols, Louis Vuitton, you know, but no - she focuses only on what's important to her, and the rest doesn't interest her."

The Olivestone Trust is also involved in micro-finance projects for small businesses in the Bedouin and Arab communities in Israel. The trust's president, businessman Yossi Steinman, works with Evens on real estate projects in Israel and elsewhere. "I have known Corinne for 25 years," he says. "I worked with her father in property investments abroad. I knew her when she was just starting out in the business world."

What kind of businesswoman is she?

"She likes to be involved in everything. She is the opposite of passive. It's important for her to know what's going on and to go into details. I don't think she is so easygoing, but easygoing types are less interesting. She likes thrills in business and enjoys new challenges. Not long ago we were in India and China, to look into things. She found those places exotic and fascinating. She has a very big business in France and she works very hard and manages it successfully. She is incapable of just sitting idly. She is a very exceptional businesswoman. Business for her is not an end in itself but a means. She puts most of the money she makes into philanthropic projects. Most of the companies I know don't do that. So, even if her over-involvement can sometimes be irritating, we accept it with love."

One of their joint ventures is Mydas, an investment fund that owns 55 percent of the western section of the Sarona project in Tel Aviv, on former German Templar land. Seventy-two percent of the shares of Mydas are held by four partners, two of whom are Evens and Steinman. They also have investments in office buildings in London and Warsaw. In the Polish capital, they are senior partners in the Marriott Hotel, which is about to be expanded in the form of an additional tower. "It will be the tallest tower in Poland," Steinman says, noting that it was designed by the renowned Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid.

"Corinne is also very involved in this project," he says. "Besides that, she is also a member of boards of directors in the United States, mainly in Manhattan but also in other cities, as a consultant about businesses in which she has investments. She is a very colorful, positive character."

A tribal society

An hour's drive from the glittering Sarona project is a very different world: the city of Bethlehem. Through her French real estate company SIFFA, Evens is investing in the Bethlehem Multidisciplinary Industrial Park, which is being built with financing from the French government and the European Union. "About 10 years ago, I traveled regularly to Ramallah," Evens says.

"Together with a Jewish businessman who used to live in Israel and a Palestinian mathematics teacher, I founded an education fund. Around that time I met [the Israeli industrialist] Stef Wertheimer. He took me to Tefen [the Galilee-based industrial park he founded] and showed me what he had done there. That gave me the idea of establishing a multidisciplinary industrial park in Bethlehem. The idea was that it would create a way for Israeli and Palestinian businessmen to meet and provide as many jobs as possible for local Palestinians."

Evens contacted Valerie Hoffenberg, a politician with connections at the Élysée Palace, and President Nicolas Sarkozy gave the project his blessing. The Bethlehem Municipality made a 40- dunam (10-acre) lot available, and the French government and the EU invested 10 million euros to build the necessary infrastructure.

"The problem is that I cannot bring Israeli entrepreneurs and businessmen into the project as partners," Evens says. "The Palestinians are afraid. They say that if it is done too publicly, there will be trouble."

She is not optimistic about the prospects for peace, at least not at this time. "From what I know," she says, "the Palestinians are totally unprepared for a process of peace. Nor are they ready to manage a state of their own. If they have a state, they will not know how to run it. At present they are getting along because of the cooperation with the Israeli authorities and the international community, which is helping them, but once they are alone they will be lost. If the Palestinian diaspora and the Arab states do not lend them a hand, they will not succeed on their own - but neither the Palestinian diaspora nor the Arab states is helping out. When one conducts negotiations, it must be with someone who can implement the results of the negotiations, and they are not capable of doing that."

Why not?

"Because they are still a tribal society that does not know how to manage itself as a nation. They still bide under the rubric of refugee camps, supposedly, but I don't think one can call them that. Most of them do not live in those places. They only place a few people from their tribe in them in order to preserve them, like the Indians on the reservations. They are artificially keeping refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. But this is a matter of culture and it looks good internationally."

We know they are not Norwegians. The question is whether understanding can be reached with them.

"I think that Israel really needs to stop a little with the settlements. But the problem is that in the end the Palestinians don't come to the [negotiating] table."

Why not, in your opinion?

"If there will be a solution to the conflict and there will be peace, I don't think they will continue to receive the large amounts of money they are now getting from the international community. Are they truly prepared to contribute their share to the effort and forgo the donations of the international community? I'm not sure they are."

"I think the United Nations did not finish its job in 1947 but left the Jews and the Arabs with a problem which remains unresolved to this day. I think the only way to solve the problem is to learn how to live together as neighbors. I want the Palestinians to have their own state, but the problem is that they are not yet ready for this, so we need to contribute everything we can to help them bring about a state. The majority of the Palestinians are highly educated, but the Arab states exploit them as an instrument for their political purposes."

The fact that Evens is a Jew is as natural to her as the fact that she is a woman, without external signs or anything distinctive. "My children know they are Jews, but we do not observe the precepts," she notes. "My partner is not a Jew and I do not know how to observe the precepts. I am not especially proud of being a Jew; I simply am a Jew and that's that. Besides being a Jew, I feel Polish, French, Israeli and a bit Belgian. I have no roots anywhere and I can live in any place. Even in the West Bank. I have a few houses but no home. Whenever I am in a particular place for a few days, I fall in love with it right away and want to stay. I am the archetype of the wandering Jew."

A year ago, Evens reached a decision to draw a little closer to her father's large shadow and launch a jewelry design business. "I decided that I would at last establish a jewelry line," she says. "When I worked with my father, he always asked me why we don't deal with jewels, but I never had time for that. But this year I decided to fulfill his vision." The name of the firm is Goralska, combining the Hebrew word for fate or destiny and the Slavic suffix that identifies femininity.

"My line aims to express the fate of women," she adds. The message is to make jewelry for older women, those who already have experience and have borne children and can take their fate in their hands." Her jewelry is delicate and sensitive, all in gold and studded with gems, including diamonds. She designs the items herself and manufactures them in various locales. This fall she will open a showroom in Place Vendôme, the beating heart of Paris where the finest fashion designers are located.

What drives you? /sn 't it nicer to sit in cafés and contemplate life?

"I really don't know - I sometimes ask myself the same question. The fact is that I very much like to laze around, just stare at the ceiling and do nothing. And I do that quite a bit, too. But then I tell myself that life is short. When I am active I am able to be more effective. I work a great deal. Most of the time, in fact. It gives me more purpose in life.

"I like doing things, contributing my small share to make a better world. I am continuing on the path in which I was raised. Just to work and make more money seems to me very bland. That is why I want to give part of the money I make to philanthropic causes, to donate to things I believe in. I want to die in tranquillity. That is my wish. That will bring me peace."