

Israeli Culture

Penny-pinched There and Here

To examine life at the bottom of the economic pyramid, U.S. journalist Barbara Ehrenreich worked a variety of minimum-wage jobs. Local activists tell her how her book has helped improve the lives of cashiers in Israel.



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Barbara Ehrenreich, one of the most prominent journalists in the United States, does not know if her work has an influence on society. When she writes a column or article she sometimes receives many responses or is invited to speak on the radio, to an academic conference or to activists. A discussion takes place, but that's it. It is doubtful, she says, whether anything in the real world changes. Is this just modesty, or is it the truth of the matter? It's unclear.

For a moment last Thursday, it seemed as if Ehrenreich had suddenly discovered her ability to influence people. "I'm stunned," she told scores of students, attorneys, social activists and others at a conference on the working poor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, "to find that my book has so much relevance in Israel."

Ehrenreich was referring to her American bestseller "Nickel and Dimed - On (Not) Getting By in America," first published by Metropolitan Books in 2001. "About a million copies have been sold in the United States," she tells Haaretz during an interview, "even more than the wonderful Naomi Klein's 'No Logo,' which has been very successful outside of America, but less so in America."

Ehrenreich's book, published in a Hebrew translation by Babel Publishers earlier this year, is a model journalistic document: Ehrenreich set out to examine exactly how Americans who earn the minimum wage manage on \$6 to \$7 an hour. She left her bourgeois home in Key West, Florida, and roamed the U.S. for months working as a waitress, cleaning private homes for a cleaning service, and as a sales assistant at the giant Wal-Mart chain. She gave up her credit cards and relied on her salary for all her needs - food, housing, clothing and everything else.

"There was no way," she wrote in her book, that "I was going to `experience poverty' or find out how it `really feels' to be a long-term low-wage worker. My aim here was much more straightforward and objective - just to see whether I could match income to expenses, as the truly poor attempt to do every day."

She found this nearly impossible. To live on such low wages - to pay the rent and eat properly, never mind buy clothing or raise children - she found it necessary to either share a miserable one-room apartment, live in a trailer on the neglected outskirts of a city or work at two full-time jobs.

Ehrenreich discovered that quite a few of her fellow workers were homeless without seeing themselves as such. As far as they were concerned, if they had a car to sleep in at night, they were in good shape.

They stop being invisible

Before her talk at university, Ehrenreich met with attorney Yuval Elbashan, an activist with Yedid - The Association for Community Empowerment, which invited Ehrenreich to visit Israel. He told Ehrenreich that her book was improving the well-being of cashiers at the SuperPharm chain here.

Several months ago, Elbashan read "Nickel and Dimed" and was impressed.

It would be hard not to be impressed. The book is an eye-opener and after reading it, it is no longer possible to stay in a hotel and walk past the chambermaid without noticing that she is a human being; it is no longer possible to relate to a cleaning woman as a servant or to go into a supermarket and ignore the cashiers. In the wake of Ehrenreich's book, these people, who work as the servants of consumers, stop being transparent. They are revealed as people who work hard under difficult conditions and live difficult lives.

Inspired by Ehrenreich, Elbashan went into a SuperPharm branch a few weeks ago, stood in line and watched the cashiers. He found that they barely received one 20-minute break per shift and that they were not allowed to sit down at all. Managers wanted them to serve the clientele "at eye level."

Elbashan spoke about this at the Sderot Conference on Society in November, which focused on "harmful employment," and said that from now on he would not shop at Superpharm, as reported by Ruth Sinai in Haaretz on November 8. So Ehrenreich's message had made waves in Israel.

The result: A public campaign developed against cashiers' harmful work conditions, demonstrations were held outside SuperPharm branches, a counter-campaign was initiated by the chain's management and a compromise was reached. While the cashiers will still not be allowed to sit, they will be given orthopedic mats to stand on. The mats are supposed to ensure healthy posture. Superpharm also promised that each cashier will receive a full 20-minute break per shift and that nurses and doctors will monitor the workers' health. In

return, Elbashan agreed to declare that the chain is "an enlightened employer."

Elbashan says this was a major achievement. "Actually, it's a question of respect. In the wake of the book, which stimulated us to act, the cashiers are no longer invisible."

The campaign has since led Supersol's management to allow cashiers at its Universe Club branches to work while sitting, as do cashiers at the supermarket chain's other stores.

Supersol CEO Effie Rosenhaus said on December 7 that the 400 cashiers would receive special seats adapted to their work within the next three months.

But it is also possible to see things differently: Perhaps the cashiers are not invisible, but they are definitely mute.

"During the time of slavery it was customary for slave owners to invest in the health of their slaves, because that's how you maintain property," says a social activist who opposes the compromise on orthopedic mats. According to this outlook, the Superpharm cashiers' conditions have improved but their status has been damaged: From now on they are no longer able to demand more than the minimum wage for a long shift on their feet and a tiny break. Perhaps Ehrenreich is right. Perhaps her writing really does not have any influence.

How many husbands?

After her lecture at the university on Thursday, Ehrenreich met in south Tel Aviv with activists from the Mahapach organization for social change. There were those who expressed disappointment. "I had expected she would be more of a philosophical thinker, more of a charismatic intellectual," said one woman who had read Ehrenreich and had come to meet her.

In Ehrenreich's defense it must be said that she came to the meetings even though she was ill. "I brought my granddaughter's cold with me to Israel," she says.

In any case, in her writing Ehrenreich is charismatic and impressive, precisely because of those qualities that disappointed in the meetings - simplicity, modestly and clarity. The issues she raises and analyzes are concrete and not abstract; she does not rely on theories and she does not quote philosophers. Her thinking can be said to belong to a rare school - the school of common sense.

For example, in a recent article she addressed U.S. President George W. Bush's statement that the cure for the poverty of single mothers is marriage. That is, if poor single mothers find husbands, their troubles will be over. Bush's assertion is much like Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's position that a family needs two salaries to extricate itself from poverty. Ehrenreich reflected and responded: Most women marry men of their own economic status. In the case of poor women, it is likely that their husband will also earn minimum wage. Of course it is necessary to pay for childcare. And there is no longer federal government welfare [in the U.S.]. "I once sat down to calculate how many men a woman has to marry to end her poverty," wrote Ehrenreich. "I found she had to have at least two."

Ehrenreich has argued that one factor leading to excessive wealth in the top 1 percent of U.S. households is the abject poverty of the bottom 10 percent. She supports this argument with simple logic: The Walton family, the owners of the Wal-Mart chain, is the wealthiest family in the world. The CEO of the chain earns no less than \$66 million a year. She calculated how long it would take her, working in the women's department at Wal-Mart at \$7 an hour, to reach

that sum. It turned out that she would have to work for no less than 5,000 years.

Ehrenreich believes that her argument exposes a basic principle of the market economy that most people prefer to ignore: Paying low wages to employees is what ensures the prosperity of the wealthy, and not the other way around. In the American media, as in the Israeli media, her voice is perhaps not alone, but it is definitely exceptional.

Coming out of the laboratory

Ehrenreich, 63, says that she came to writing almost by chance. By training she is a scientist. After completing a doctorate in biology, she wrote for a professional biological publication. She did not intend to become an author or an essayist - it just happened. She chose not to work in scientific research but rather to work for social change.

At first, she wrote manifestos, leaflets and short investigations for newsletters. The first national magazine she wrote for was the feminist Ms., in the late 1970s. She focused on health and healthcare. Mostly, she had to write about "trivial issues in women's magazines" to earn a living and be able to write about subjects she cared about.

Since the 1980s, she has been a much sought-after freelance journalist, and for years her articles and essays have been appearing in leading publications - Harper's Magazine, The Nation, Mother Jones and The New York Times Magazine.

For a time in the 1990s, she published an essay once a month in Time magazine. In 1997, there was a change in management at Time: They no longer accepted her articles on poverty, inequality or the death penalty. They would only accept articles "on women," like Monica Lewinsky or Princess Diana. So she stopped writing there regularly.

She was recently asked to fill in for senior New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, who took three months off to finish a book. She said that she was pleasantly surprised because there was no censorship of her articles: "I wrote about whatever I wanted - Wal-Mart, abortions, a little against the war in Iraq. It was good."

Between anti-Semitism and homophobia

On Friday morning, Ehrenreich spoke with local activists in Tel Aviv's low-income Florentine neighborhood. They are fighting for a community center, against the closing of the neighborhood Tipat Halav well-baby clinic and for participation of neighborhood residents in municipal decisions. "I'm impressed," Ehrenreich told the activists.

She was charmed by their social and feminist values, their advanced ideas and their good intentions. "You inspire me," she told them.

Ehrenreich's next book, her 14th, will deal with white-collar unemployment in the United States. "Last Friday, I almost finished the book. I sent the manuscript to my children, who are my best critics."

Her son, Ben Ehrenreich, is - like her - a successful freelance journalist and writer. "He has just signed a contract for his first novel," says his mother proudly. Her daughter Rosa Ehrenreich Brooks lectures on human rights in Virginia. Ehrenreich recently moved near her to be "an active and involved grandmother," as she puts it.

She also went into the field to research the new book, but this time she had to assume a false identity. She wanted to investigate the unstable employment of white-collar workers and the corporate culture that creates this instability. "If in the past such workers moved between two

or three jobs during the course of their lifetimes, nowadays they have at least 11 jobs," she says. "Many of them find looking for a job is a full-time job."

Ehrenreich set out to find a job in public relations. She describes the job interviews, the tests, the demands, the salary and the rejections - she failed in her mission and did not find a job.

Her investigation led her to evangelical Christian churches, "and this is something pretty creepy," she says. "The churches serve as welfare centers - a welfare system alternative to the state - like the Palestinian Hamas [as she wrote in her most recent article in *The Nation*, which received many angry responses] or the Israeli Shas movement.

"It's appalling to see how widespread anti-Semitism is in the States. And we are talking about businessmen," she says, adding that she had not expected this. "They joke about Jewish names, they tell corny jokes about Jews. We know about homophobia and it is often reported and discussed in the media. We don't hear much about anti-Semitism in American culture. But it's everywhere, and in a casual, jolly atmosphere." She will report on these experiences and insights in her new book.