

His daughter, Sharon, explains. "Back in the day when serious people wanted serious jewelry and had serious money to spend, they went down to 47th Street to all these independent jewelry stores as opposed to a department store. So those are the stores my Dad serviced and help develop those special lines...They came up with the designs and he was able to create them from scratch."

As in bronze sculpture, they use a lost wax process to make jewelry molds; it's just that everything is in miniature. "In the beginning I didn't wear glasses. I could see everything," says Cohen proudly. "Slowly, slowly, in my age, I started wearing glasses. Then glasses wasn't enough; I had to have magnifying glasses." It was precise work; "sometime a very tiny, tiny thing to solder together."

And you had to learn how to apply just the right amount of heat. Take gold for example. "If you put too much heat, it becomes a ball...You have to control your hand. You have to move it out (of the flame), then in, out, in. You have to know when is the point that it's going melt." Silver is different. "With silver you have to heat the whole piece to solder the post."

The business was instantly successful. His daughters remember playing at his feet while he worked at the bench. "As very young girls we had really nice jewelry," says Sharon. "Our Dad made our engagement rings and our wedding bands." She also points out, with an exasperated eye-roll, "He's very talented." Apparently any musical instrument he picks up, he can play.

And, "he's an exceptional artist," chimes in Leah, noting that he worked in water colors back when he was on the kibbutz.

Amnon dismisses these compliments and talks instead about jewelry design. "With me it was different. I didn't draw the design. I see something or I get something in my mind, and I started working on the piece. And by the time I finished, it became something else."

He also could make copies. He remembers fashioning a replica out of cubic zirconium of a huge diamond piece owned by Donald Trump's mother. It was

something she could take out in public worry-free while the real thing sat in a safe at home.

Just imagine the bustling scene on 47th Street during its hey day. Hassidic Jews, with their braided long locks of hair and black hats jostling along the street, carrying fortunes in precious gems in their pockets. Diamond dealers still wear special vests "and they put inside the vest two pocket, very deep. Some of these people, they're walking around with half a million in their pocket or more. Diamonds," marvels Cohen.

It was nothing for him to walk around with a \$50,000 piece tucked into an envelope in his pocket. In a move that is reminiscent of the wild west practice of sending payrolls by way of African American buffalo soldiers, Amnon Cohen would sometimes send precious gems for delivery via his daughters. No one would suspect them.

Over the past 10 years or so, the jewelry business has changed dramatically. Foreign competition from China and particularly Mexico has flooded the market with what Cohen admits is high quality product. "They do beautiful stuff. They have young people over there that can see like I don't know what. And they take their time, slowly, slowly, finish the piece and it's beautiful jewelry. It's not cheap."

Particularly, now that gold is so expensive. Besides, when you're in a recession, the first victims will be the non-essentials, like jewelry. "Business started going very, very bad," says Amnon, who was now living alone in New Jersey and commuting



Working the jewelry trade across from his brother Josef in New York City in the 1960s.

by bus to 47th Street. "It was hard to pay the rent over there, keep the house." His daughters had moved to Northern Virginia. They both married, and Sharon with her husband Sam Elswick came to Orange and bought the Holladay House Bed and Breakfast.

Amnon came for a visit. He went house hunting; found a likely prospect. His first question was, "check what's the tax." Sharon said something to the effect of \$1,300. "I say 'wow' that's a lot of money." He thought she meant per month. "And she say, 'no it's for a year.' And I pay in New Jersey \$6,000 a year...I said 'that's it, I'm going to close the business and move.'"

Until recently, he was thinking of opening a jewelry store in Orange. But he changed his mind. "It's not worth it...how to pay the rent and how to pay the insurance." Still, he has his bench; he has his tools. Sharon says confidently, "He'll be involved in jewelry in some fashion. We just haven't figured it out just yet."

Called "a natural green thumb," by his daughters, Amnon now enjoys cultivating a magnificent garden. Last summer he grew tomatoes and cucumbers for the B and B as well as 24 watermelons from just four plants. It reminds him of his days on the kibbutz by the Sea of Galilee. "Farming is not new for me." Asked about the culture shock of moving from New York City to Orange, he responds, "The only shock over here is, it's quiet."

And so Amnon Cohen's "aliyah" has led him from Afghanistan to Israel to New York to...where it's quiet...Orange, VA.



Relaxing at his home in New Jersey in the 1970s.



Flanked by his daughters, Leah Cohen-McHale (left) and Sharon Elswick, Amnon Cohen reminisces about his past from the comfort of a couch at the Holladay House Bed and Breakfast in Orange.

PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Aliyah to Orange

Right after Amnon Cohen was born, his family walked to Israel. That's right; they walked...all the way from Afghanistan. The year was 1938. They were Jewish refugees coming home to the Promised Land.

"The few families, they walk from Afghanistan to India; Karachi, and then from India, I believe, we walked to Syria, Turkey, smuggled across the border," says Cohen in heavily-accented and still somewhat halting English. "We went to Israel illegal at that time...After three months, we got to Israel. I was three months old."

The Cohen family was taking part in what was known as the Aliyah Bet, or "illegal" immigration of Jews to Israel that occurred between 1933 and 1948. At that time, the British controlled Palestine. They limited the number of Jewish immigrants. But this family had no where else to go. "It was a very tough time," confirms Cohen. "That's why you don't see any Jews in Afghanistan today. They all left."



Amnon Cohen was promoted from corporal (two stripes) to sergeant (three stripes) during his three-year hitch in the Israeli Army. He spent part of the Sinai War of 1956 in a foxhole on the Jordanian border.

In Hebrew, the word "aliyah," means 'ascent.' But for the Jewish people it's more than an uphill walk; it's a figurative return to the Holy Land from Babylon. For the Cohen family, they had finally come home, after generations, possibly centuries of exile. His father, a successful merchant in Afghanistan, could speak Russian, Afghan, Persian and Turkish. Now he had nothing but eight hungry mouths to feed. Once in Israel, he found work in the orange groves surrounding Tel Aviv. Riding in a horse-drawn cart, he only came home weekends.

Flanked by his daughters, Sharon Elswick and Leah Cohen-McHale, Amnon Cohen relates this harrowing tale from the comfort of a couch at the Holladay House Bed and Breakfast in Orange. You might say that his "aliyah" has come a long way from when his family carried him as an infant from Afghanistan to the Holy Land.

He sifts through photographs, finds one when he was six years old. Israel was still four years away from independence. One of his first memories is of the Germans bombing Tel Aviv. He was maybe three or four at the time. He remembers Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of this tiny fledgling nation with its back to the sea surrounded by enemies.

At age 12, he went to a kibbutz, a communal farm near the fresh water Sea of Galilee. "With all the trouble with the Arabs at that time and all that, so they decided to start a collective farm, called a kibbutz; like all together," he explains. "You don't get salary; everybody works. The product they send to market, and with the money, they bought things that they don't have in the kibbutz: clothing and some type of food that you don't grow over there."

He celebrated his bar mitzvah at age 13



Amnon Cohen as a six-year-old, four years before Israel's 1948 independence. He was eight in a family of 10 children.

on the kibbutz. They grew bananas, all manner of vegetables, raised sheep, goats and chickens. He would go to school for five hours in the morning and then worked in the fields in the afternoon, sometimes as a shepherd. They lived in constant fear of raids from Arabs. "They sneak in... They come at night and steal the aluminum (irrigation) pipe that you water the things, and some vegetables from the garden."

He joined the military and worked his way up to the rank of sergeant over three years. He even remembers appearing in an Italian movie called "The Best of Enemies," filmed in the Negev Desert. He also remembers the Sinai War of 1956. "That's the first time when Israel took the Sinai and Gaza strip," he says of Israel's preemptive strike against Egypt. But, he adds, President Eisenhower made them give it all back. He did not actively fight in that war, but "as a freshman, we went to the Jordan border, in case they attack. So we were laying over there in foxholes."

After he served his hitch in the Israeli Army, Amnon Cohen returned to Tel Aviv; learned the diamond polishing and cutting trade. His older brother, Josef, immigrated to the United States to become a diamond and precious stones salesman. In 1963, Josef sent for his younger brother.

Amnon was a handsome dark-eyed 26-year-old. "I was young... I would say the entertainment life in Israel was eh, not that great." He does a little palms-up shrug. "All that we did at that time was to sit in a



Amnon Cohen (left) with his brothers, Josef and Eli at a wedding in Israel. Josef was the brother who summoned Amnon to New York and introduced him to the jeweler's trade.



The Cohen family at a wedding in Israel. Amnon Cohen smiles from the back row. His father, the man who led the family from Afghanistan to Israel on foot, is pictured at center with a granddaughter at his feet. His mother is pictured at far left, flanking the newlyweds.

café. Like in Europe, the café is on the sidewalk. So, that's what you do; and go to a movie. No television, no nightclub, no disco-tech, no nothing."

He boarded a ship aptly named 'Israel' in Haifa and sailed for New York City, via Naples. He remembers their arrival in New York. "We didn't sleep that night just to see the Statue of Liberty. They didn't let us in because it was dark. We were outside; I don't know where, and then we saw the Statue of Liberty." He saw car headlights streaming along Riverside Drive at 4:00 in the morning. He asked some Americans on board and they replied, "Oh New York is 24 hours busy." I couldn't believe it."

It was the summer of 1963. The Twist was all the rage; Chubby Checker and the Peppermint Lounge was igniting Manhattan's dance club scene. No more sleepy afternoons sipping coffee on a Tel Aviv street corner for him; Amnon Cohen was ready to party. "Yeah that's why I got late married," he winks. His daughters Sharon and Leah giggle nervously.

He arrived on this scene speaking Hebrew and a little bit of Farsi and Afghan, but no English. "Nothing. Not a word." His eyes twinkle mischievously. "I guess sometimes the girls like the accent, you know."

But enough of that; there was work to be done. He stayed with his brother; tried to get work as a diamond cutter and polisher. But the system was different than in Israel, where you did one job and one job only in the assembly line process of turning a rough stone into a

gem. "Here it's a different story. You have to go and look for the diamond and work a big diamond, not small, and you have to work from the beginning to the end, the faceting."

Instead, his brother found him work as an apprentice to a jeweler. "So, he teach me how to work, and I had to pay him to teach me. So, after one or two weeks, I started making pieces and he says, 'I feel bad to ask you to pay me; I'll pay you.' So he gave me pocket money, \$20 a week." After a few months, "he said 'Okay, now you can go and find a job in a big manufactory.'"

And that's precisely what Amnon Cohen did. Here he was, fresh off the kibbutz and the Israeli Army, and he's found promising work in the biggest jewelry store in the world, the Diamond District on 47th Street in New York City. It's what he did for the next four and a half decades.

"In the beginning I used to solder the joined catch on a pin, all day and all the night. I didn't like it. I was so fast. The boss himself tell me, 'Oh you're working too fast. Take your time. Take your time. I don't have enough pieces to give you.' It was crazy."

Then he went to work for the boss's competition. "And we did it from the beginning to the end. It was handmade. So there you can learn how to do everything." From there he moved to a smaller jewelry "manufactory," became foreman where, "I learn a lot."

By now, Amnon Cohen had married Beth, an American who came from Eastern European Jewish stock that had escaped the holocaust. Their marriage in the New World could be seen as a symbolic reunification of ancient German/ Polish and Middle Eastern Jewish bloodlines, an "aliyah" or homecoming of the Judaic gene pool, so to speak.

They opened up a business whose name reflects their reunification. They called it Ambec, an amalgam of their names. Amnon went into the jewelry design, manufacture and repair business, filling special orders for stores.

“There’s a war there all the time”

"Ach," laments Amnon Cohen with that signature fatalistic shrug, "There's a war there all the time, you know." With neighbors of varying degrees of hostility to the north (Lebanon), the east (Jordan and Syria) and the south (Egypt), the feeling of being surrounded in Israel is felt "all of the time."

He's been back to his native land many times, yet he sees the situation as un-resolvable. "Today, we have peace with Egypt and Jordan, but still those terrorists go from Gaza strip to Sinai and attack from there."

Trouble between Jews and Arabs does not just date back to the creation of Israel in 1948; it goes back to biblical times, when Jews were exiled from Babylon. Still, Jews, Arabs and Christians have all co-existed in an area called Israel for centuries. During the crusades, the much-respected Muslim leader, Salahadin, threw out the Europeans and invited the Jews back to Jerusalem where they lived peacefully with Arabs and Christians.

"The Muslims don't want the Jews over there," muses Cohen. "They were against the independence of Israel."

The recent troubles started in 1948, when, under pressure from the U.N. the independent nation of Israel was carved out of Palestine. Most Arabs refused to accept this new nation with its sovereign boundaries. They fled to Jordan and Lebanon and the first of countless regional wars erupted.

"One of the big problems now when they negotiate, what's going to happen with all those refugees?" queries Cohen. "Because those refugees, let's say, were 200,000. Today they are six million." The Palestinian camps with their tents have now become permanent cities with buildings of brick and mortar.

The problem has also been exacerbated by Israeli land grabs and settlements in places like the West Bank, the Golan Heights and the Gaza strip, but they counter that they are justified in light of unsuccess-

ful invasions by their neighbors. If you lose a war that you started, then you have to give up the land you lost.

Cohen claims when he visits today that it's safe inside the country. "If they have a problem, it's on the border, like in the Gaza border. In the West Bank, it's a little bit better now. If they have a problem, it's throwing rocks and things like that. But in the Gaza strip, you really have to be careful. They shoot rockets; then Israel retaliates. They shoot rock-



As a corporal in the Israeli Army, Cohen was 19 years old when this picture was taken. He had lived on a kibbutz near the Sea of Galilee since he was 12.

ets again; we retaliate again."

Three or four years ago, he went back to Israel and visited with cousins still living in the same house in Tel Aviv that his parents occupied those many years ago. He had not been back for 20 years. "I didn't recognize the country," he says wide-eyed. "I couldn't rent a car because I don't know where to drive. I had to depend on my nephew and my nieces in all that."

Overall, he is not optimistic. "I don't believe there is ever going to be peace." He pauses a long beat, a sad and wistful expression flitting across his face like a passing cloud. "They don't want it, and Israel tries but they don't believe it's going to be peace because every time they're asking for more and more and more. Their idea is to kick the Israelis to the sea."