

The man behind the curtain

Jacob Richman is pulling the strings behind some of the most important information websites for English speakers in Israel

• ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

For the hundreds of native English-speakers in the Jerusalem suburb of Ma'aleh Adumim, Jacob Richman is the nexus of the community – even if they've never met him.

"When I got to Ma'aleh Adumim 24 years ago, there was an English newspaper, but it folded due to lack of financial support and there was a hole to fill," explains Richman, who celebrated the 30th anniversary of his aliya on August 30.

"This was around the time Janglo was forming in Jerusalem, and I said it makes sense to do something here. So I started MACHAT, initially as a Yahoo group and then as a website, MACHAT.CO.IL."

Anglos post information sales pitches and inquiries on MACHAT, for everything from service-provider recommendations to requests for rides, much like on other Anglo chat groups around Israel. Richman moderates it himself and sends out a digest of messages twice a day.

He's also added useful data to the website, including a local phone directory in English and a section on the history of the city, which was established

lished by 23 pioneer families on the seventh night of Hanukka, 1975.

Now 56 years old, Richman was raised on Zionism and communal involvement. His mother was a fifth-generation Jerusalemite, and his father grew up in Haifa.

"My great-grandfather on my father's side made aliya from the United States in 1922 and built part of Safed," Richman relates. "My maternal great-grandfather, Pinchas Grayevsky, was a famous Jerusalem historian. My father moved to New York to learn engineering, my mom followed him there, and they were married in New York by [respected author] Rabbi Joseph Telushkin's father. That's how it happened that my sister and I grew up in Brooklyn."

His mother was a Hebrew teacher, and the family was active in the community. "We had a large driveway, and every year two floats for the Salute to Israel parade were built in that driveway – one for the Yeshiva of Flatbush High School; the other for the Bialik School, a Conservative day school."

Richman is a Flatbush graduate and earned a degree in computer science from Brooklyn College. "I held Independence Day parties very year, and in 1984 I announced at the party that I was making aliya," he says.

Help from upstairs

This announcement was hardly a surprise, considering his parents and married sister had already returned to live in Israel by then. On August 30, 1984, Richman left Brooklyn and made aliya.

When he landed, he spent the first month in Haifa with his parents. His sister had settled in Arad. Richman wanted to be in Jerusalem.

"I had visited Israel 12 times, and I had decided that Jerusalem was the place to be. Tel Aviv is another New York, and I didn't make aliya to live in New York," he says.

Almost immediately, he was hired by Intel Electronics in Jerusalem, and stayed there for seven years. "I gave my resumé to the guard at front gate, and it turned out they had an opening," he says. "I had a little help from 'upstairs.'"

After a couple of years, he started publishing free lists of computer job openings, and he continued that for 21 years along with a survey of Israeli salaries – all in order to encourage more Anglos with a computer background to make aliya.

"I kept pushing aliya, to convince people that all Jews belong here. I have a lot of friends still in Brooklyn who visit, and I hope they'll get here permanently sooner or later."

Educational websites

Richman continued working in the computer field. About 18 years ago, he developed AACI's Jobnet, and he worked for Kivun Computers, the company that developed the Dagesh program, the first multilingual, bi-directional word processor for Windows in Hebrew

and English.

Eventually, Richman struck out on his own, developing a slew of educational websites, some of which he has sold. The ones he spends most of his time managing are intended to teach speakers of Russian, Chinese, French, English and Spanish how to speak Hebrew (he also has a site that teaches English). He uses professional translators recording in a studio so the audio presentation is polished.

"I develop and market these sites and try to get advertisers on board," he says. "And I really listen to feedback. Every week I get dozens of emails and adjust my sites accordingly."

In addition, Richman posts videos of life in the Jerusalem area, such as films of the Jerusalem light shows and ice festivals. And he has met nearly every one of the Nefesh B'Nefesh charter flights arriving in the past 12 years, snapping pictures from the moment the new immigrants step off the plane.

"I like going to the airport when the flights arrive. It's a Zionism booster injection," he says. So far, he's posted about 10,000 pictures of new olim online.

"All my websites funnel in from www.jr.co.il. I got that address before they made a rule in 1996 that you couldn't have less than three letters in the domain name," he explains.

Puddles instead of snowmen

Richman moved to Ma'aleh Adumim in 1990, when he was ready to buy his own apartment. A year later, the settlement was declared a city, and today it has more than 40,000 residents.

"When the mall opened, there was no need to go anywhere else," he says. "And there's a Rami Levy supermarket in Mishor Adumim [the city's industrial zone] that reminds me of Pathmark in Brooklyn."

Much as he loves his adopted hometown, he misses snow. "When it snows in Jerusalem, it rains in Ma'aleh Adumim and we get puddles instead of snowmen," he laments.

But he doesn't miss snow enough to move, or even to visit North America in winter. "There's nothing pulling me to New York. The last time I was in the States was 1989, so I haven't left the country in 25 years. My father worked in the World Trade Center on the 84th floor, and that's how I remember it still."

His parents have died, and although he has good friends in town he would like to get married to a national-religious woman "with the same positive outlook about Israel," says Richman, a self-described "glass half-full" optimist who makes a point of sharing positive articles about Israel on social media.

"I've watched two big aliyot – half a million Russians and thousands of Ethiopians – and it's the coolest thing in the world to shake hands and say 'Shabbat shalom' to people from all the different *edot* [communities]. I love getting off the bus on Friday and wishing the bus driver 'Shabbat shalom.' I would not be doing that in New York." ■

'I DEVELOP and market these sites and try to get advertisers on board,' Richman says of his ventures. 'And I really listen to feedback. Every week I get dozens of emails and adjust my sites accordingly.' (Haim Frij)

JACOB RICHMAN, 56
FROM BROOKLYN, NEW YORK,
TO MA'ALEH ADUMIM, 1984