



# The Pollution Police

Hal Taback keeps Israelis and San Diegans safe from toxins and pollutants

BY JESSICA HANEWINCKEL

If anyone had ever told Hal Taback as a teenager he'd be saving lives in Israel someday, he probably wouldn't have believed them. And growing up, his only connection to Israel was that he was Jewish, and the only indirect lifesaving he ever did was during his time in the U.S. Navy. But life sometimes has a way of happening on its own terms, weaving a course of its own accord, disregarding any attempts to steer it elsewhere. Such has been life for Taback. Today, the local San Diegan and ardent Zionist travels to Israel frequently on both business and pleasure.

First, pleasure: Taback's two daughters, years

ago, were determined to marry Israeli men and make *aliyah*. They did, and now their families are there. Second, business (and saving lives): Since 1990, Taback has owned his own company, the Hal Taback Company, and has worked as an environmental engineer. He detects toxins in structures and in the environment that are human-caused. For example, in a maze of pipes and stacks in a chemical plant, he can detect leaks and suggest a remedy. Five years ago, when Israel's Ministry of Environmental Protection realized Haifa residents just downwind of a refinery had a cancer rate about four times higher than other

Israelis, they called Taback for answers.

"Because all of the big refineries, the chemical plants, the cement plants and a lot of heavy industry is located in Haifa, the ministry decided they had to lower the toxic emissions," Taback says. "I was a natural selection."

Taback, as a consultant to the refineries, wrote a procedure for them to follow, which they're currently in the process of implementing. Although no project is ever "complete" (leak detection and repair, or LDAR, and other toxic emission preventatives are ongoing processes, as new leaks can spring all the time), Taback moved





**Taback visits his Israeli children and grandchildren during one of his many trips to Israel.**

on to another chemical emissions project in Israel, this one in the Negev.

South of the town of Be'er Sheva, the Israeli government has decided to build what Taback calls "IDF City" (equivalent to the U.S. Pentagon). The only problem is that the site sits just downwind of Ramat Hovav industrial complex, which consists of about a dozen chemical plants, including the world's largest generic prescription drug manufacturer and the world's second largest pesticide manufacturer — huge producers of any number of toxins in the water, air and ground, not to mention perpetual foul smells.

"I taught them how to do LDAR, and everybody was impressed with what I gave them," says Taback, who helped develop the LDAR process originally. "In each of those plants there could be 50,000 to 100,000 places to check for leaks and control them, and this takes a long time to do. In America we've been doing LDAR for 25 years, and still four times a year we have to do it again."

Back in the '80s, Taback also solved another irksome, though less dangerous, emissions problem, this time in Ashdod. An Ashdod power plant emitted smoke that blew inland, right over a kibbutz that raised apples.

"This stuff was raining down, and the ashes got on the apples and made a big ring on them," Taback says. "They were selling these apples at \$2 or \$3 a pound in Southern Europe, and it was killing them. We changed the burners and got rid of the problem."

Taback continues to work with various plants and refineries in Israel (he even once helped a cement plant with dust control and tire burning in cement kilns the length of football fields) as well as the Ministry of Environmental Protection, teaching Israelis how to protect themselves and the fragile environment from the damage of toxic substances.

But with the exception of his work in Israel, Taback's business has moved largely away from outdoor pollutants and into buildings and homes — and it's these more personal projects that give him the satisfaction that he's made a difference in people's lives.

"When somebody gets sick because something in the building is bugging them, and I can find it and get rid of it so they don't feel sick anymore, I get a lot of *naches* from that," he says. "Among all of the serious accomplishments I've had in the outdoor environment, I've helped clear the air in the L.A. area. Years ago, you couldn't see the San Gabriel Mountains very often.

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**Jean Frank, 85, of La Jolla, dies**



La Jolla resident Jean Frank was lucky enough to survive four years in Nazi prison camps while her parents, brother and a sister perished among the six million. She devoted the rest of her life to making sure those around her never felt the hunger she experienced, says son Larry Klein.

Her death June 5 of heart failure will leave a hole in the community she called home since 1974. She was well known to the bakers and storeowners in the area, who often gave her leftover food to take to the needy. A novelist and poet, she founded the "Poetry Unlimited" program in 1977, which soon became a well-attended 'open mic' session for aspiring poets, musicians and artists.

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Today, you can. Almost every day the mountains are visible...we used to have 120 days a year that exceeded the first stage alert, when kids weren't allowed to go out and play. Today there are as few as one, two, sometimes none. That's really quite an accomplishment, but you know what? No one has ever told me thanks for that. When I go to somebody's place and I fix their problem, I get a one-on-one relationship. They're so appreciative."

In one recent example, Taback, who is a member of Temple Solel in Cardiff-by-the-Sea, discovered why the temple's rabbi, Rabbi David Frank, had been getting sick each day in his new office about a year ago.

"I found there was mold in the little space between his desk and the window," Taback says. "I pulled out a briefcase he had stuffed in there, and the bottom of the briefcase was covered in mold and the whole area was wet. I told the rabbi they were over-watering the flowerbed just outside his window, and the water was getting under the wall and into his office. I prescribed a solution, and now the problem is gone and he's not sick."

For Taback, detecting toxins and emissions problems is all in a day's work. But there was a time when "a day's work" meant something completely different from environmental consulting. When Taback was a young man just out of high school, he dreamed of becoming — and became — a naval officer for the U.S. Navy onboard the USS Roosevelt (coincidentally, the sister ship to our very own USS Midway). After finishing at the University of Rochester, he took his tour of duty, which included a stop in Haifa.

"I went to Haifa and I had an epiphany," remembers Taback, who grew up experiencing anti-Semitism. "I was in this place where they were all Jews, and no one wanted to beat me up. When I was in Israel the world was Jewish, and I became such a Zionist."

Taback returned from his tour of duty to teach gunnery and naval science to students while simultaneously earning his graduate degree in rocket engineering. The rocket scientist (literally) then made the move to California, where he worked for a series of aeronautics companies designing and engineering rockets.

His knowledge of combustion science and how to make combustions less polluting translated nicely into environmental work. When the Environmental Protection Agency began in 1974, he was already working with companies like SDG&E and Edison. The need for new rocket design and development simultaneously waned, so Taback made the switch to permanently devote the rest of his professional life to protecting people and the environment from pollutants and toxins.

Taback puts his reason for remaining in his field for the last three and a half decades simply: "I like doing things that help people." Especially, of course, in Israel. And especially if helping Israelis also means visiting and spending time with his five Sabra grandchildren who live there. ☼

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