



Arno Michaelis

Healing after Hate: How a Former Neo-Nazi Learned to Stand for Israel

Arno Michaelis will share his personal story at Jewish Family Service's Spotlight Event on May 6.

ASHLEY ZLATOPOLSKY CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Former skinhead Arno Michaelis grew up in an alcoholic and emotionally violent household, but after living a life filled with hate shaped by his childhood, he finally decided enough was enough.

In elementary school, he was the school bus bully and, by the time middle school rolled around, Michaelis, who grew up outside of Milwaukee, was committing serious acts of vandalism.

As a teenager, he found an outlet for his aggression in the punk rock scene, where he aligned with fellow skinheads. Michaelis believed in a Jewish conspiracy where white people were under threat of genocide. He had a swastika tattooed on his middle finger and shaved his head.

Yet, as the years went by, the hate began to take a toll. Michaelis, now 54, attempted suicide after a Thanksgiving dinner when his mother told him he was one-sixteenth Indian. He was so enamored with his racial identity that being anything but 100% white wasn't acceptable.

Then he had a second suicide attempt. "It was the most miserable seven years of my life," he says of joining the neo-Nazi movement. "I didn't care if I lived or died."

However, becoming a single parent at age 24 changed everything for Michaelis.

His 18-month-old daughter needed him, and he knew if he didn't change his ways, death or prison would take him away from her, as it took the lives and livelihoods of many of his friends.

THE PATH TO HEALING

In 1994, Michaelis began to distance himself from white supremacy.

Ten years later, he quit drinking and began speaking out publicly against racism and hatred.

Michaelis, who is now an activist for peace and justice and has written a memoir of his skinhead years and transformation, says the kindness of a Jewish boss helped his path of healing.

Jack Cooper, who ran a T-shirt printing company, hired Michaelis despite his skinhead ways.

Even though Cooper was Jewish and the descendent of Holocaust survivors, he gave Michaelis a fighting chance. "I was very outspoken about my racism and antisemitism," Michaelis says. "Rather than fire me, Jack just said, 'He's a good kid. He's just going through a phase.'"

"He didn't treat me any differently," Michaelis continues.

It's one of many life experiences Michaelis will share at Jewish Family Service's upcoming Spotlight Event at Temple Israel, "Healing after Hate," which will take place on May 6.

"We heard Arno Michaelis speak last year at a conference hosted by the Network of Jewish

continued on page 8



Yom HaShoah Service at Temple Kol Ami to Highlight Son's Quest

Co-author of *Schindler's Listed* to speak.

PAUL GROSS SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH NEWS

Temple Kol Ami will have a special Yom HaShoah service open to the entire community on Wednesday, April 23, at 7 p.m. Rabbi Natalie Shribman and Cantorial Soloist Janet Christensen will lead a meaningful remembrance service, and Randi Biederman, co-author of *Schindler's Listed*, will speak about her late husband Mark's 20-year search for his father's buried treasure that was left behind after the Nazi's deported all of the Jews from his town in Poland.

The story takes many twists and turns, including Mark's father being the third name on Oskar Schindler's list, and Mark's mother being "saved" from

the gas chamber by the Angel of Death himself, Dr. Joseph Mengele.

Although the Biedermans lived here in Detroit and Windsor during much of Mark's search, this is the first time she has spoken locally about the book.

Schindler's Listed can be purchased at Temple Kol Ami, Borenstein's, the Zekelman Holocaust Center, Schuler Books and Book Beat. Biederman will sign books upon request at the Oneg following the service.

RSVPs are required to attend the Yom HaShoah service. Email Cheryl Spektor in the Temple Kol Ami office at cspektor@tkolami.org to RSVP or for more information about purchasing a book. **JN**

continued from page 6

Human Service Agencies and found him to be a compelling speaker with a story we wanted to share," says Jewish Family Service Chief Development Officer Amy Newman. "We are hopeful that Arno's story will resonate from his place of healing in a time when we can all use some inspiration."



Amy Newman

A VOICE FOR ISRAEL

Since the events of Oct. 7, 2023, Michaelis has also used his voice to advocate for Israel.

"When I saw Jews under attack from all directions, there really wasn't a question of whether I'm going to stand with the Jewish community worldwide," he says. "It was just automatic for me.

"Twelve-hundred people in Israel were brutally massacred in the most cruel and sadistic ways. Two hundred and fifty people were taken hostage," he continues. "I made a decision on Oct. 7 that I will advocate for the Jewish people and advocate for Israel, which I believe are intrinsically linked."

Michaelis hopes sharing his raw, personal

story can help others overcome prejudice, including hate against the Jewish people. "I'm ashamed to say it took me a long time," he says, "but I really believe it wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for Jack's kindness."

Michaelis admits he encounters skeptics, but it doesn't slow him down. "I don't blame them," he says. "I've done horrible things that deserve scrutiny, and they deserve doubt.

"If someone doubts the authenticity of my turnaround, I can't begrudge them," he adds. "At the same time, I'm confident in my authenticity. I wouldn't be doing this otherwise."

Jewish Family Service CEO Perry Ohren said, "Unfortunately, we live in times laced with hate and Jewish Family Service wants to help all of us to heal and to live healthy lives with all of our neighbors. We think Arno is a model for all of us." **JN**



Perry Ohren

Tickets for "Healing after Hate" are \$100 and help support Jewish Family Service initiatives. Register at www.jfsspotlightevent.org



Arno Michaelis