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This Day in Jewish History / The father of Feldenkrais dies

Ukraine-born Moshe Feldenkrais moved to Israel with friends at age 14, worked as a builder, earned a PhD at the Sorbonne, taught judo, helped foil the Nazis – then his knee began to hurt.

By David B. Green | Jul. 1, 2015 | 6:30 AM

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Moshe Feldenkrais demonstrates how a skeleton sits. Photo by International Feldenkrais Federation/Wikimedia Commons

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On July 1, 1984, Moshe Feldenkrais, creator of the method of physical therapy that bears his name, died. Though the charismatic Feldenkrais has been gone for three decades, his philosophy of life and of movement remains influential to this day.

Moshe Pinhas Feldenkrais was born on May 6, 1904, in Slavuta, in what is today Ukraine. He was the oldest of the four children of Avraham, a rabbi

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The Zionist aspects of the American Revolution

On its 239th birthday, the U.S. continues to favor the reconstituted Jewish state, perhaps because it once cast itself in the very same role.

By Chemi Shalev | West of Eden

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and a lumber merchant, and the former Sheindel Leib. In 1912, the family moved to Baranovich (now in Belarus), where he had his bar mitzvah and became involved in a Zionist youth group.

It was with his comrades from Baranovich that Feldenkrais made aliyah to the Land of Israel in 1918, at age 14. (He was followed some years later by his parents and a brother.) In Tel Aviv, he and his comrades found employment as construction workers. In 1925, he also earned his high school degree, from the Herzliya Gymnasium there.

Over the next few years, Feldenkrais was employed as a cartographer for the British Mandatory geographical survey, before he headed to Paris to study electrical engineering.

Doctorate from the Sorbonne

Feldenkrais remained in France until 1940, earning his doctorate at Sorbonne, where a teacher was none other than Marie Curie. Later, he worked in the Radium Institute lab run by Marie's daughter Irene Jolie-Curie and her husband Jean Frederic Jolie-Curie.

Parallel to his scientific work, the physically gifted Feldenkrais also studied judo, which he learned directly from its creator, Japanese educator Jigoro Kano, who wanted him to be the conduit for introducing judo to the West.

Moshe did indeed become the co-founder of the Judo Club of France. During this time, he was also married briefly.

Come June 1940, though, Moshe fled France one step ahead of the Germans. When he departed, he took with him two liters of "heavy water," which he brought directly, together with other secret documents connected to his radiation research, to the British Admiralty.

The one thing he wasn't

Feldenkrais remained in the United Kingdom for the duration of World War II, working on developing submarine-tracking sonar. It was during this period that an old and serious knee injury flared up.

Unwilling to undergo surgery, he began observing the movement of the knee, until he came up with a non-invasive science of movement that helped him overcome his injury. This Wall Street the basis for the Feldenkrais Method, a way to increase one's physical and emotional self-awareness so as to reduce physical pain and increase efficiency of movement.

He returned to Israel only in 1950, at the invitation of Ephraim Katzir, at the IDF Science Corps, who had heard that Feldenkrais was a rocket scientist. "Unfortunately," Katzir, later Israel's president, told Aviva Lori of Haaretz, in 2004, "within a few months, we saw that he really didn't know anything about rockets."

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A Feldenkrais class in Tel Aviv, 2004. (Nir Kafri)

Guess who stood Ben-Gurion on his head

What did impress Katzir and his colleagues was Feldenkrais' exercise method, which his brother, Aharon Katzir, recommended to Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, who was suffering from lower back pain.

Feldenkrais worked with Ben-Gurion for a year (an unadmiring Paula Ben-Gurion referred to him as "Mr. Hocus-Pocus"), during which he helped him overcome his pain and taught him, among other things, to stand on his head, something Ben-Gurion showed off to photographer Paul Goldman on the Herzliya beach in 1957.

In the decades that followed, Feldenkrais became the go-to guy for physical training. According to Lori, the celebrities who visited his Tel Aviv studio included Moshe Dayan, Margaret Mead and Betty Ford.

In 1959, he decided to take his 13 best students and subject them to three years of intense, daily training, so that they could become the next generation of Feldenkrais teachers.

Feldenkrais continued teaching, both at home and abroad, until the end of his life. According to his student and close friend Noa Eshkol, a choreographer and the daughter of Israeli politician Levi Eshkol, Feldenkrais "wasn't prepared to die until he knew the secret of gravity." If he did learn that secret, he took it with him when he died, in Tel Aviv on this day in 1984, at the age of 79.

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