

- [Print Edition](#)
- [News](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Editorial & Op-Ed](#)
- [Features](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Art & Leisure](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Letters](#)
- [Food & Wine](#)
- [Tourism](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Cartoon](#)
- [Friday Magazine](#)
- [Week's End](#)
- [Anglo File](#)
- [The Appel indictment](#)
- [EU anti-Sem. report](#)
- [The Geneva Accord](#)
- [Separation fence](#)
- [Mideast road map](#)
- [Women's Places](#)

Previous Editions
Select Day

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- Print
- Send by e-mail
- Send response
- [This Day in Haaretz](#)
- [Today's Papers](#)
- [Map of Israel](#)
- [Useful Numbers](#)
- [In-depth](#)
- [About Haaretz](#)
- [Tech Support](#)
- [Paper in PDF format](#)
- [Headline Newsbox](#)

HAARETZ Media Kit

In the court of king Grimsson
By Sara Leibovich-Dar Reykjavic

Two weeks ago Friday, Dorrit Moussaieff, the Israeli-born wife of the president of Iceland, Olafur Ragnar Grimsson, remembered that it was the eve of Hanukkah and that the first of eight candles had to be lit to mark the holiday. There is no Hanukkah candlestick in the presidential residence in a suburb of Reykjavik, the capital. Finally a solution was found. A menorah that a former president of Iceland received on a visit to Israel several decades ago was brought to the table. It was something of a surrealistic scene: Outside the winds howled, the snow piled up and the lake next to the residence was frozen over, while inside, in a room crammed with thousands of books, the president of Iceland and his wife had a shrimp dinner by the light of Hanukkah candles.

The president was astounded at the candle-lighting ceremony: He knew nothing about the customs of Hanukkah. Later it would turn out that there are other Jewish and Israeli customs he is not familiar with, either. "If we lived in Israel, I

wouldn't have been able to marry you," his wife tells him, after the president was surprised to learn that there is no civil marriage in the Jewish state.

"If we had not been able to wed, Israel would have lost a wonderful marriage," he replied.

The people say yes

Dorrit Moussaieff, 53, is the daughter of the London-based jeweler and renowned Judaica collector Shlomo Moussaieff and his wife Aliza, a successful international businesswoman. Dorrit also designs and sells jewelry, is part owner of and a reporter for the British magazine Tatler, and speaks fluent Hebrew. She was born and raised in Jerusalem, living there until the age of 13. In the early 1960s, she moved with her parents and her sister Tamar to London. Her younger sister, Sharon, was born in London and lives in Tel Aviv.

Olafur Grimsson, 60, grew up in a tiny fishing village, studied political science and economics at the University of Manchester



Moussaieff and Grimmson, center top. "I married not only him but the whole nation of Iceland."

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By Jonathan Lis

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More Headlines
18:20 [Israeli lawyer: Prisoner swap with Hezbollah to take place Tuesday](#)

14:35 [Arafat to Guardian: Time running out for two-state solution](#)

15:42 [Two Palestinians shot dead near Gaza Strip security fence](#)

15:16 [20 farms shut after suspected traces of foot and mouth found](#)

15:52 [Report: Israel believes U.S. willing](#)

and was a professor of political science at the University of Iceland in Reykjavik, as well as a member of parliament and the country's finance minister before being elected president. He and Dorrit met at a lunch in the home of mutual friends in London. "My father was sick and I didn't want to come to the lunch. I didn't even have time to wash my hair," Dorrit Moussaieff recalls. "But fate played a big part here. At first I didn't like him; I kept thinking about my father and all I wanted was for the meal to be over so I could leave, and he kept talking on and on about Iceland. I asked myself why I needed to hear this. He suggested that I write an article about Iceland. 'What's to write about?' I replied, 'I heard that the only thing you have there is good fish.' I like good food.

"The next day I met him again at a ceremony to commemorate Yehudi Menuhin. I didn't even remember what he looked like. A day later he called and asked when I would be doing the piece on Iceland. I'm still writing it. I fell in love with the country almost before I fell in love with him. He was still a question mark when I already loved Iceland."

She fell in love with him only after they went on a skiing holiday to Aspen, Colorado. The first time he was pretty bad, and Moussaieff wasn't sure he was the one for her, but the second time he reached the bottom of the hill first and she was enthusiastic. "That's important for me," she explains. She is active in a wide range of sports, including calisthenics, swimming, ice surfing, windsurfing, and snow cycling. "I never went to school so I had lots of time to learn all types of sports," she says.

For a year they conducted a secret love affair. "Everyone in Iceland thought I was a student who was coming to visit his daughters," Moussaieff says. "I didn't want the gossip columns to write about us. When there were photographers around, I turned my face away so I wouldn't be in the picture. I didn't even tell my father that I was having an affair with the president of Iceland. I told him Olafur was a professor at the university."

In September 1999, without telling her in advance, Grimsson revealed the existence of the affair in a television interview. He told the 288,000 people of Iceland that he had fallen in love with a rich brunette who lived in a beautiful flat that was filled with antiques in the Chelsea area of London. The nation and Moussaieff were taken by surprise. "He could have told me that he was going to do that," she says. In response, she told the Times of London

[to examine PM's plan](#)

15:26 [Houses flooded, roads closed in north due to stormy weather](#)

16:01 [PM: 'I won't quit': cops focus on Lod probe](#)

that she was fond of Grimsson and loved the Icelandic people.

Grimsson: "I thought the time had come to tell my nation that she exists. I want to be honest with the Icelanders. That is part of our culture. When you tell people the truth, you give them the feeling that you trust them. The power of the president is not based on the protocol or on the symbols of office but on the people's trust in the president. That is the heart of democracy."

They were formally engaged in May 2000, but it was three more years before they married. In the meantime, they were criticized for living together without being married. Moussaieff says she was in no hurry. "First I wanted to get to know the country and to know what was expected of me if I married. I wanted to be married only if I felt that it was the right thing to do." True, polls published in the local press showed that the country's citizens wanted their president married (even though the proportion of children born out of wedlock in the country is the highest in the world - 65 percent). "But even if the polls had shown different results, I would have married her," Grimsson says. In that case, I would not have wanted to marry, Dorrit Moussaieff notes. "It's not right to force oneself on this nation."

They were married in May of this year in a civil ceremony at the presidential residence. Only a few guests were invited. "When you are president you can marry in a public wedding or in private. To do it publicly is not our style," Grimsson says. Moussaieff still finds it hard to believe that it all happened. "If someone had told me five years ago that I would marry the president of Iceland, I would have asked him what he had drunk. I married not only him but the whole nation of Iceland."

She feels a lot more like an Icelander than she does an Israeli. "If something bad were to happen to Iceland, it would hurt me personally. I never felt that about any country before. My whole life I was like a gypsy. Even though I lived in England for many years, I didn't have patriotic feelings for that country. And I always had problems with Israel."

Why?

"Israel is not a democracy. It is a religious dictatorship. When I visit Israel with friends, I can't have a cup of coffee with milk after having a hamburger in the hotel. I can't travel on Saturday, I can't eat lobster. The only hope for Israel is to separate religion and state and for the Haredim [the ultra-Orthodox population] to start working

instead of learning all day. In Israel, everyone, especially those Haredim, thinks he has something coming, that someone else will pay. We are setting the Palestinians a bad example.

"The view in the world is that Muslim fundamentalism is bad, but who killed Yitzhak Rabin? A Jew. Our trouble comes not from the Palestinians but from our own people. What's the difference between the demand that a Muslim woman wear a head covering and the demand that a Jewish woman wear a wig? In the end, there will be more religious people than secular people in Israel, and they will impose their will and Israel will revert to the Middle Ages. I am religious in my soul, I just don't like the religious coercion. Even my grandfather in Jerusalem would always tell me, 'You can't do that, it's Shabbat.' If that were to happen today, I would do the exact opposite."

Part of the package

The president in Iceland is a representational figure, but unlike the procedure in Israel, he is chosen in personal elections every four years. Grimsson's first wife, Gudrun Katrin Thorbergsdottir, was very popular and took an active part in her husband's first campaign, in 1996. She died of leukemia two years later. The two have twin daughters, today aged 29. "If I had planned a new ideal wife for myself, I would not have come up with someone who was born in Israel," Grimsson says. "I'm a realist. I knew there would be difficulties. I thought that my relationship with Dorrit would lead to a situation in which I would no longer be wanted as president. No one knew how it would work out. There was a lot of insecurity here. We are at the center of a small village and everyone is watching us."

"When Olafur was elected president, I wasn't part of the package," Dorrit Moussaieff says. "In a way, I felt it was unfair that I should become the first lady only because of a tragedy, without the people having chosen me as well. I had the feeling that I was forcing myself on them. In my first days here there were women who didn't want to shake my hand. Even one of the daughters didn't want to meet me."

Moussaieff's Jewishness was another obstacle. The leader of a small but active neo-Nazi group in the country attacked her on his Internet site. "There were a lot of sarcastic comments about her Judaism," says Miriam Rovner, a former Israeli who has lived in Reykjavik for 26 years and works as a kindergarten teacher in the city. "They said about her what people always say about Jews everywhere in the world -

that she likes money."

Her great wealth - her father's fortune is estimated at \$150 million - also put people off. Some Icelanders told the world press disdainfully that she was part of the jet set, that she would never be able to live in Iceland. Her former husband, Neil Zarak, told the Sunday Times that her family is richer than all of Iceland. One jewel of hers is comparable in worth to Iceland's gross national product, the Evening Standard wrote. But today she is far more accepted. "She became a fact of life, she is part of Iceland," Rovner says. Hope Knutsson, a New York Jew who works as an occupational therapist in Reykjavik, where she has lived for the past 29 years, thinks "it's nice that there is someone here who represents a different culture. The majority of the people here are very much alike, it's a homogeneous country, so it's nice to have a Jewish woman representing the few Jews who live here. True, we tried to invite her to meetings of ours, and she didn't come, but the average Icelander doesn't even know that there are Jews here. Most of us don't want to be identified as Jews, and it was a brave act by the president to marry a Jewish woman."

Hildur Runa Hauksdottir, the mother of the Icelandic rock singer Bjork and an environmental activist in Reykjavik, says that the fact that the president's wife is Jewish is a cause for joy. "It's wonderful," she enthuses. "Before Christmas she read passages from the Bible on television. We respect her religion and she respects our religion. The more time that passes, the better she becomes and the more people understand her."

Moussaief, for her part, finds similarities between Iceland and Israel. "The Icelanders are very much like the Israelis - very spontaneous," she says. "Setting a specified time for something in Israel is meaningless, and it's the same here. Like Israelis, the Icelanders don't attach importance to the rules of etiquette and say what they think. As in Israel, everything happens at the last minute. From England, I'm used to everything being planned months in advance. I'm always in a panic, but in the end everything works out."

Pressing issues

The Icelandic press keeps a close eye on Moussaieff. Last week, a few days after she arrived in Reykjavik on a commercial flight from London, one of the papers wrote that the flight was delayed by an hour because of the first lady. One of the passengers claimed that Moussaieff was the last person to board the plane. "That's not true,"

Moussaief says. "The plane did not wait for me and I was not the last person to board it. In fact, I was one of the first passengers aboard. It's all nonsense. Such stories were never published in Iceland before."

Now it's liable to happen more frequently. A few weeks ago, a photograph of Moussaieff was published showing her dressed in leather pants at a formal ceremony. One of the president's advisers commented that it's not appropriate for the first lady to be photographed in leather pants. "I am what I am, and what I wear is what I feel like wearing at that moment," she retorts.

She will never be caught dressed sloppily. Her bag, her shoes and her coat match her blouse to the last button. This month a local magazine chose her as one of the best-dressed women in Iceland. She was photographed for the piece wearing a skirt by Dolce and Gabbana and in clothes by Donna Karan. "Sometimes I change clothes five times in a day," she reveals. "It's very important for me to look good. People take more notice of what you look like than of what you do."

The Icelanders are materialists, Hope Knutsson agrees. "One of the reasons they like her is that she dresses well. They think that anyone who dresses well is a nice person." An important part of her winter wardrobe is fur coats in different sizes and colors. The worldwide protest against the use of furs doesn't bother her. "Animals are just animals," she asserts. "When every man and woman in the world has enough to eat, I will begin to be bothered by the situation of the animals. In the meantime, I don't care about animals. I'm more concerned about people."

Grimsson agrees: "We understand that there should be harmony in nature. This is part of the harmony. People here have survived in the north for hundreds of years only because they wore furs. If you want to hunt animals and sell the furs to big countries, that really does create a threat to the existence of the animals. But Iceland has only 288,000 people, and fur coats for them will not make the animal world extinct."

Moussaieff is not a devotee of the rules of protocol. "I find it difficult to behave according to what I am supposed to do. I am a spontaneous person. In the middle of a formal event I saw a boy almost trip, so I tied his shoelaces for him. People commented that I mustn't do that. At a very formal dinner I am capable of getting up and getting something myself. When the king of Norway and his wife visited us, we went to visit a place where bird meat is

smoked. It was 11 A.M., everyone was hungry, and when we got back to the bus I took the tray with the meat and served it to the king and his wife and the other passengers. But that made the atmosphere so much more pleasant.

"That kind of thing is always happening to me. When the queen of Sweden was here, she wanted to go swimming. She didn't have a bathing suit and all the stores were closed. I offered her one of my bathing suits. I was told that this was impossible, that according to the rules of protocol I could not give the queen an old bathing suit of mine, but she took it and we went swimming and had a good time."

She breached the rules of protocol again on a visit to Russia a few months ago, when she acted as an interpreter. "[President Vladimir] Putin speaks Russian and German. I was the only one who knew German. That makes all the difference. If you talk to someone by yourself and not through interpreters, you can understand what kind of person he is."

And what is the verdict?

"The Russians are lucky to have a president like that. Previous presidents drank vodka, but he drinks water and eats fish and vegetables. He goes skiing and does karate and he says he will build one of the best ski sites in the world in Russia. He is an excellent president."

The interview with Haaretz was also conducted without sticking to the usual rules. Moussaieff agreed to be interviewed but didn't tell the president's spokespersons about it. They learned about the interview only a few days later - and were furious. "I didn't know I was supposed to do that," she says.

She doesn't need either spokespersons or PR people. In Iceland everyone knows her even without them. Residents of Reykjavik were doing their Christmas shopping in the city's small commercial center, which is located at the intersection of several small streets. The sidewalks were covered by a thick layer of ice. Mousaaieff ventured out wrapped in a white coat with fur trimming, with only her face visible, but everyone recognized her, smiled and whispered among themselves.

The same pattern repeated itself in the two busy shopping malls in the city. Everyone recognized her, and saleswomen in the shops went over to embrace her. She is a big buyer. A few weeks ago she bought 20 pairs of jeans in one store, as gifts for her friends. Sometimes the president joins her

on her shopping sprees. In the week of Christmas they arrived late one evening at a large bookstore in the center of Reykjavik. Clients shook the president's hand and wished him a happy holiday. He bought a large number of books as presents. "Books are the most popular holiday gift in Iceland," he says. "Everyone has collections of books, including the fisherman and the farmer in the remotest village." As Grimsson left the store, the bags triggered the alarm. The guard at the entrance laughed. No one imagined that the president had stolen a book, but he returned and negotiated the door again, this time successfully.

The presidential couple travels in Iceland without bodyguards. The presidential residence, too, is unfenced and unguarded. Invited guests enter the president's office without a security check. It's a matter of principle, Grimsson says: "Our message to the world is a dialogue between the leader and the people. We are not the only ones. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, traveled all over his country with only a chauffeur. In Israel, too, there were no security men between the leaders and the people in the past."

But that changed after a prime minister was assassinated.

Grimsson: "Politicians are assassinated in Nordic countries, too, but that does not change the Nordic openness. People are creating more and more walls between the elected representatives and the people that elected them, on the pretext of security. In many cases, this is used even when it is not needed. There are always dangers - driving a car is dangerous, too - but that doesn't mean that because of the dangers the public's representatives have to be remote from the people. They must be accessible. That is part of democracy. If you don't do that, you lose those moments in which the people tell you what they think without security people fencing you off from the nation.

"The only way to consolidate a democratic society is on the basis of trust. Israel's tragedy today is that you have lost that trust. In the first years of Israel it wasn't like that. The tradition of Israel was one of dialogue and trust. It's hard to aim for a life that is without dangers and risks."

Grimsson discovered this for himself in a fashionable cafe in the center of Reykjavik during the pre-Christmas season. A bearded young man tried to strike up a conversation with him. Grimsson gave him a short reply. The man walked up to our table and kissed the president on the

cheek. In the absence of security people, Grimsson had to push him away himself. The young man did not give up. He left the restaurant, stood himself next to the window and blew Grimsson kisses through the glass. Grimsson ignored him. The people love him, Moussaieff said, in an attempt to play down the event.

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