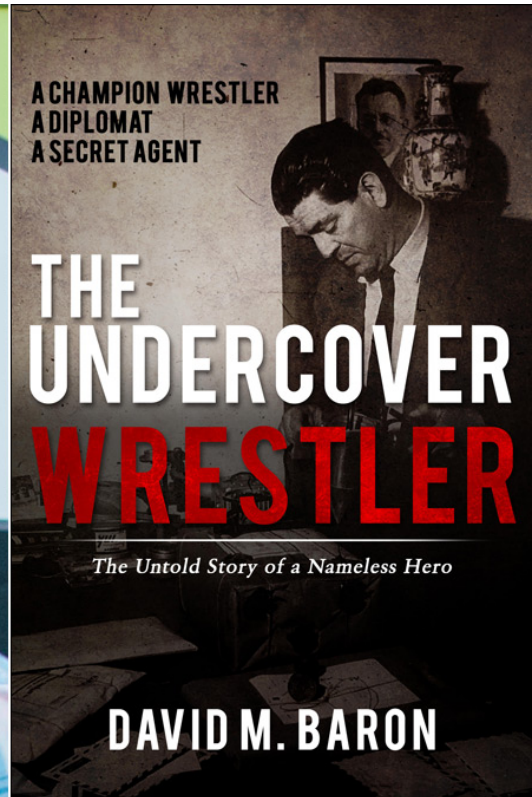


Pikesville Author Chronicles his Grandfather's Wartime Exploits in Semi-Fictional Thriller

[Simone Ellin, Associate Editor](#)



Eight years ago, David M. Baron discovered an old video of his grandfather, Zalman Unreich, embracing Frank Sinatra as the iconic singer stepped off a plane and onto a tarmac in Israel.

Baron couldn't figure out why his grandfather, a former Israeli government employee and Czechoslovakian wrestler who died in 1978, ever crossed paths with "Ol' Blue Eyes." The video piqued his curiosity, and he was inspired to learn more about his grandfather's life.

Baron's findings were the basis for "The Undercover Wrestler: The Untold Story of an Undercover Hero of Israel," a semi-fictional espionage thriller about his grandfather's life that he self-published last September.

A Pikesville resident, Baron, 44, recently spoke about the novel at an event presented by the Edward A. Myerberg Center in Northwest Baltimore. More than 60 people attended the virtual gathering.

"What is a hero? A hero is someone who's selfless, puts others first and is willing to save lives at risk to themselves," said Baron, an IT project manager at Johns Hopkins University. "My grandfather was never adequately recognized for [his bravery]. The two most notable accomplishments my grandfather has not been given credit for are being part of the teams that helped smuggle Jews out of Europe post-World War II and helping to secure weapons for the state of Israel during its year of Independence."

Baron, who only met his grandfather once when he was 2, said he wrote "The Undercover Wrestler" to ensure that Unreich's accomplishments were recognized and remembered.

The book begins in Unreich's hometown of Bratislava, then in Czechoslovakia.

"Zalman was raised in an extremely religious home, with a father who wanted his son to become a rabbi," Baron said.

Instead, he became a wrestling champion who used his self-defense knowledge and techniques to protect vulnerable people in his neighborhood. Later, Unreich immigrated to pre-state Israel.

During the Myerberg presentation, Baron shared photos, videos and interviews to illustrate his grandfather's heroism. He said Sinatra wasn't Unreich's only famous friend. Baron's research uncovered photos of his grandfather with former Israeli prime ministers David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir.

"My grandfather was part of [Meir's] inner circle when she was the first ambassador in Moscow. My grandfather established security for her," he said.

In another photo, Unreich, his older brother, David, and a couple of other young men are pictured with Imi Lichtenfeld, founder of the Krav Maga self-defense system used by the Israel Defense Forces and others. The Unreich brothers, both "renowned" wrestlers, were co-founders of Krav Maga, said Baron.

"My grandfather won the Maccabiah [Games] wrestling championship in 1935 in Israel, and in his archive we found some of his own writings on wrestling and Jujutsu that we're trying to translate now and are looking forward to sharing with the professional wrestling [community]."

A photograph of a letter dated 1948 told the story of how Unreich helped members of the Irgun and Lehi Zionist paramilitary organizations when they were imprisoned by the British in Kenya.

"This letter was written by one of those members who returned in 1948 after the [creation of the] state of Israel," said Baron. "Zalman was part of the Haganah [paramilitary organization] at that time. If you know your history, there was no love lost between the Haganah and the Irgun or Lehi, given their different philosophies of working with the British at that time. My grandfather was part of helping situate those

members in making their time in detention in Africa much easier.

"We found letters sharing what he had done for them or at least one of the things he had done by delivering Hebrew books and other materials to make their time comfortable."

Another photograph shows Unreich and others standing in front of a burial site.

"There were a few famous female paratroopers — Hannah Szenes, Haviva Reik — and they were trained by the British because of their familiarity with the location where they would be dropped to meet with partisans against the Nazi uprising," Baron said.

Baron learned that his grandfather was involved in training the paratroopers. Tragically, the women were killed during the war and Unreich was "part of the team that helped find the remains of paratroopers who died," said Baron.

Baron also learned that his grandfather was a spy when discovering a group photo of Unreich and members of the Mossad, Israel's intelligence agency, as well its counterpart in Czechoslovakia.

To learn more, Baron visited the Czech Republic shortly before the pandemic, where he met with archivist Martin Smok, studying how the Czech police monitored Jews during the war.

"We found intelligence by the secret service police that had information about my grandfather," said Baron. "Martin said during the interview that my grandfather was helping secure weapons and jet planes that were smuggled to Israel to help it defend itself against Arab countries during 1948. Ben-Gurion has been quoted as saying,

'Without those weapons, Israel would not have been able to survive.' That to me is a very remarkable finding. I can't begin to tell you how rewarding it is to find out that my grandfather was part of those teams."

For information or to order "The Undercover Wrestler," visit [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).