**Oren Kagan:** So this is something I have, I didn’t open it, right? But it says, *[in Hebrew]* “the dress that grandma wore when she signed the Declaration of Independence.” So this is the dress she wear when she signed the Declaration of Independence. And I have it here.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** That’s Oren Kagan, Rachel Cohen-Kagan’s grandson, and closest living relative. Cohen-Kagan was the representative of WIZO, the Women’s International Zionist Organization, and one of only two women - the other being Golda Meir - who signed the Declaration of Independence.

In 1949 she was elected to the very first Knesset – this time alongside ten other women representatives. Twenty-five Knessets later, which is to say today, the 120-seat legislative body remains only a quarter female.

Hey, I’m Mishy Harman and this is Israel Story. Israel Story is brought to you by the Jerusalem Foundation and *The Times of Israel*.

So Israel is turning 75, and we feel this is a moment for us to step back and take stock. To ask where we came from, where we are, and where - for G-d’s sake - we’re going. And in order to answer those questions, we decided to go back to the basics. Our series - **Signed, Sealed, Delivered?** - looks at our founding moral compass - *Megillat Ha’Atzmaut*, or the Declaration of Independence.

Thirty-seven people signed *Megillat Ha’Atzmaut*. And over the course of the past several months, our team has diligently tracked down the closest living relative of *each one* of these signatories, and interviewed them. We talked about their ancestors and families, about the promise of the Declaration, the places in which we delivered on that promise, the places in which we exceeded our wildest dreams, and also about the places where we fell short.

And it is through these descendants of the men and women who - with the strike of a pen - gave birth to this country of ours, that we wish to learn something about ourselves.

Today we’ll meet Rachel Cohen-Kagan, and her grandson, Oren Kagan. He’ll present one of the *many* political perspectives we’ll be featuring throughout the series.

We’ll be right back.

 *[Ad]*

**Mishy Harman (narration):** OK, we’re back. Here’s our producer Zev Levi with Oren Kagan, Rachel Cohen-Kagan’s grandson.

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**Zev Levi (narration):** Rachel Cohen-Kagan was born in 1888 into the Zionist Lubarsky family of Odessa. Her father, Ya’akov, was one of the founders of the *Hovevei Zion* Movement, which meant that - growing up - Rachel hobnobbed with many of Odessa’s leading Zionist figures such as Ehad Ha’Am and Hayim Nahman Bialik. You know, as one does…

She studied math at the University of Odessa, and - in 1913 - married Dr. Noach Cohen, a physician. A year later, just before the start of World War I, he left for Palestine, and Rachel, who stayed behind with their newborn baby, had to wait for five long years before she could join him.

It was, therefore, only in November 1919, at the age of 31, that she boarded *The Ruslan*, a ship that brought over so many of Israel’s future luminaries that it is sometimes nicknamed the “Israeli Mayflower.” After twenty-one tumultuous days at sea, they docked at the Jaffa port on the third night of Hanukkah.

Once here, Cohen-Kagan became active in Haifa, mainly on matters of social welfare. Following the death of Henrietta Szold, she was appointed to the *Va’ad HaLeumi*, the Jewish National Council, and put in charge of the social welfare division. Among her most notable accomplishments was the establishment - alongside her famous pediatrician sister-in-law Dr. Helena Kagan - of *Tipat Halav*, a network of baby wellness clinics across Israel, which managed, within the span of just a few years, to dramatically lower local infant mortality rates.

In the Knesset, she promoted the first legislation to secure equal rights for women, but her comprehensive progressive bill was thwarted by the religious factions within the coalition. As a result, she angrily resigned from the Knesset, and was elected chairwoman of WIZO.

Cohen-Kagan later on returned to the parliament, and fought openly and fiercely for women’s rights to divorce, for equal service for women in military combat units, and for the strict criminalization of domestic violence, which in the early years of the State only carried a weak mandatory minimum sentence. She was, on many accounts, far ahead of her time and for that reason, perhaps, her name has sunk into obscurity in Israel.

She remained active up until her death, in 1982, at the age of 94.

Asked once for the secret to her vitality, she said, “actually, I have only two talents: I know how to relax — reading a book, listening to music, taking a walk; and I have a positive genius for sleep.”

Here she is recalling her mood upon signing the Declaration on that Friday afternoon, in May 1948:

**Rachel Cohen:** I remember exiting the museum after the signing. The sun was about to set, and the skies were still clear and blue. But looking westward, the sun colored them red. And there was something symbolic about that, it accurately reflected our mood. Blue represented our hope, our serenity and our joy. And the red, of course, stood for our fear of blood and fire.

**Oren Kagan:** I'm Oren, and I'm grandson of Rachel Kagan, and I'm a software engineer. I've been in United States for almost twelve years with a start-up company, came back, have three kids, live in Haifa. She lived in this house at the top apartment. My family lived at the ground floor. So I would go and visit her daily. She had a chair between the stories. She would go one and would sit and rest, another one, you sit and rest. My uncle said that she was lousy cook. This is his words. I can tell that there was always ice cream in the fridge, vanilla, mocha, and strawberry. That's the classic trio. I think I would go in order. I would take the strawberry first, then the vanilla and then the mocha. This is the invitation. *[In Hebrew]* Dear Sir, we are hereby honored to invite you to the occasion of the Declaration of Independence, which will take place on Friday, the fifth of Iyar, May 14th, 1948, at 4pm, at the Museum auditorium, 16 Rothschild Boulevard. We ask that you keep the contents of this invitation and the location of the gathering a secret. Guests are kindly asked to arrive at 3:30, sincerely, the secretariat. This invitation is personal and non-transferable, and the dress code is festive dark clothing. This letter was written in the masculine language. She has her badge, and she needed to replace the Mr. with Mrs. in handwriting. No one printed the badge for women. As an activist feminist, she was the only one who signed the Declaration of Independence. It was her and Golda Meir, and she was basically representing women because she came from WIZO and that's it. She had kind of a spiritual experience. And she said that she would look at Ben-Gurion calling the Declaration of Independence and didn't think it's real. Ben-Gurion said, “everyone will be equal. And we'll treat everyone equally, regardless, gender and religious and age and all of that.” That is one of the important pieces of the *Megillat Ha'Atzmaut*. And she thought — she was quite naive that ‘let's do it! We are the most fabulous nation in the world. And we came back to Israel after 2,000 years. And we established a new State. Let's do what it says!” But then she found that reality was much tougher. She was very quiet. She wouldn't argue in loud voice. She would say her opinion and she would fight for it but quietly. After the Declaration of Independence, there was the first Knesset. She was a member of the WIZO party that was supported by women. I think it's the only time that there was a party for women. And she as lead of women and head of WIZO prepared the law for equal rights for women and family. It was denied. But the final law, which was very much reduced in scope, was actually accepted, but she wouldn't vote for it. And she said, “I don't want to take part in something that may confuse the public. Because they may think that this law actually gives full women rights,” she abstained, and she quit the Knesset. I'm very proud of her. And the entire team who actually established Israel at that time. That's the greatest achievement that we were successful to create a Jewish State. It's a miracle, I would say. This is what they signed for. And this is what they fought for. The Declaration of Independence is kind of the ‘Big Bang’ of Israel. It's a singularity point. And that's it, you cannot change it. I would sign it as is, without any change. I think we partly lived to the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, and partly did not. The spirit of the Declaration is strong. But the implementation is weak in some of the areas. The fact that there's so little number of women in the Knesset, for example, or in high roles, right? You can see that. The suppression of women from the *Kotel*, they have a special small place in synagogues, right? They cannot go with everyone else in the front, they need to be in the back in a special place. It's very problematic. What we have today is not an equality for women law, not according to her. In schools, in education, in academia, and in high tech industry, I think we made a lot of progress. But general rights at home and in synagogues, we didn't made a lot of progress. Wherever women can serve, technically, they should serve. My daughter is an officer in the army, and she's doing fabulous. Fabulous. Better than men. And the country should take advantage of that. Equality is something that is very natural. The more freedom women's have, it will be a better society.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Mitch Ginsburg and Lev Cohen are the senior producers of **Signed, Sealed, Delivered?**

Our staff also includes Yochai Maital, Zev Levi, Adina Karpuj, Jamal Risheq, Hadas Kidron, Shoshana Sarah, Shira Shankhalil, Ross Bordow, Yael Ben Horin and Rotem Zin. Sela Waisblum is our sound engineer. Zev Levi scored and sound designed the episode with music from Blue Dot Sessions. Our music consultants are Tomer Kariv and DJ Yoni Turner, and our dubber is Becca Sykes. The episode was recorded in our very own Nomi Studios.

You can catch up on all our regular Israel Story episodes, as well as all the other **Signed, Sealed, Delivered?** mini-sodes on our site – israelstory.org – or by searching for Israel Story wherever you get your podcasts. You can, and should, also check out our home at timesofisrael.com/podcasts. And of course, follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, all under Israel Story. If you're interested in sponsoring episodes of Israel Story, email us at sponsor@israelstory.org.

This series is dedicated to the memory of my beloved father, David Harman, who was a true believer in the values of the Declaration of Independence, in Zionism, in democracy and - most of all - in equality.

I’m Mishy Harman and we’ll be back next time with another installment of **Signed, Sealed, Delivered?** and a completely different perspective on Israel’s Declaration of Independence. Till then, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye.*

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