

Janitor to Tycoon in 5 1/2 Years

Yemen-Born Israeli a Realty Whiz at 28

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Given today's inflated real estate market, membership in the once-elite Million Dollar Club has become about as much an honor as admission to Diner's Club.

There are so many brokers and salespersons who sell \$1 million of property, they no longer merit a cursory listing in the newspaper.

Yet it is worth noting when a 28-year immigrant who put himself through school on a janitor's salary makes the club two months after receiving a real estate license. And then goes on to sell nearly \$4 million of property the first five months he's in the business, becoming part owner of three apartment buildings and one house.

It has not yet been a full year since his income began to soar from four figures to six, but already he talks classic tycoon: "I think the first hundred thousand you earn is the hardest."

Ely Dromy is the first to admit he is a cocksure workaholic, bordering on being hyperkinetic yet scared to death of earthquakes.

But as pleased as he is with financial and personal success, Dromy appears even prouder of his Yemen-born Israeli heritage—particularly his mother and father who he says sacrificed everything for their six children and he, because they never learned Hebrew after they left their homeland for Israel, still work there as a maid and a construction worker.

Now that he is able to eschew the \$10-a-day carpet cleaning jobs he once eked a living from here, Dromy plans to fly his parents to Los Angeles for a visit and perhaps persuade them into an early retirement.

When he arrived in Los Angeles five and a half years ago, Dromy had little fluency in English and even less money. He'd originally moved to New York and stayed with the wealthy family of an American girl he'd met

in Israel but his pride balked at eating their food, driving their car, taking their handouts.

He came West to stay with a Yemeni friend and can remember hanging out at a falafel stand asking everyone he met if they knew where he could get a job. And presuming they figured he "was just another Israeli bum."

At one point his funds were so low that he had no money for food and found himself getting dizzy and nearly passing out after being offered a beer on a carpet cleaning job. At the time, he thought it was a relapse of meningitis, which he'd survived as a child. He left instructions that he be flown home to Israel and left to the care of his mother, who had saved him before.

Finally, Dromy got a steady custodial job at the Stephen S. Wise Temple in Bel Air and quickly progressed to a job as bus driver, squirting children to and from religious classes and activities at the temple.

He loves children and got along so well with his charges that he offered

to help teach the children Hebrew, to the delight of the religious staff.

As Rabbi Zeldin Isaiah of the temple remembers, "Ely had a modicum of English when he started, but he was articulate. He was excellent with the children. He asked if he could teach a course in Hebrew and before we knew it he was teaching classes here and studying for his own bachelor and master's degrees at the University of Judaism.

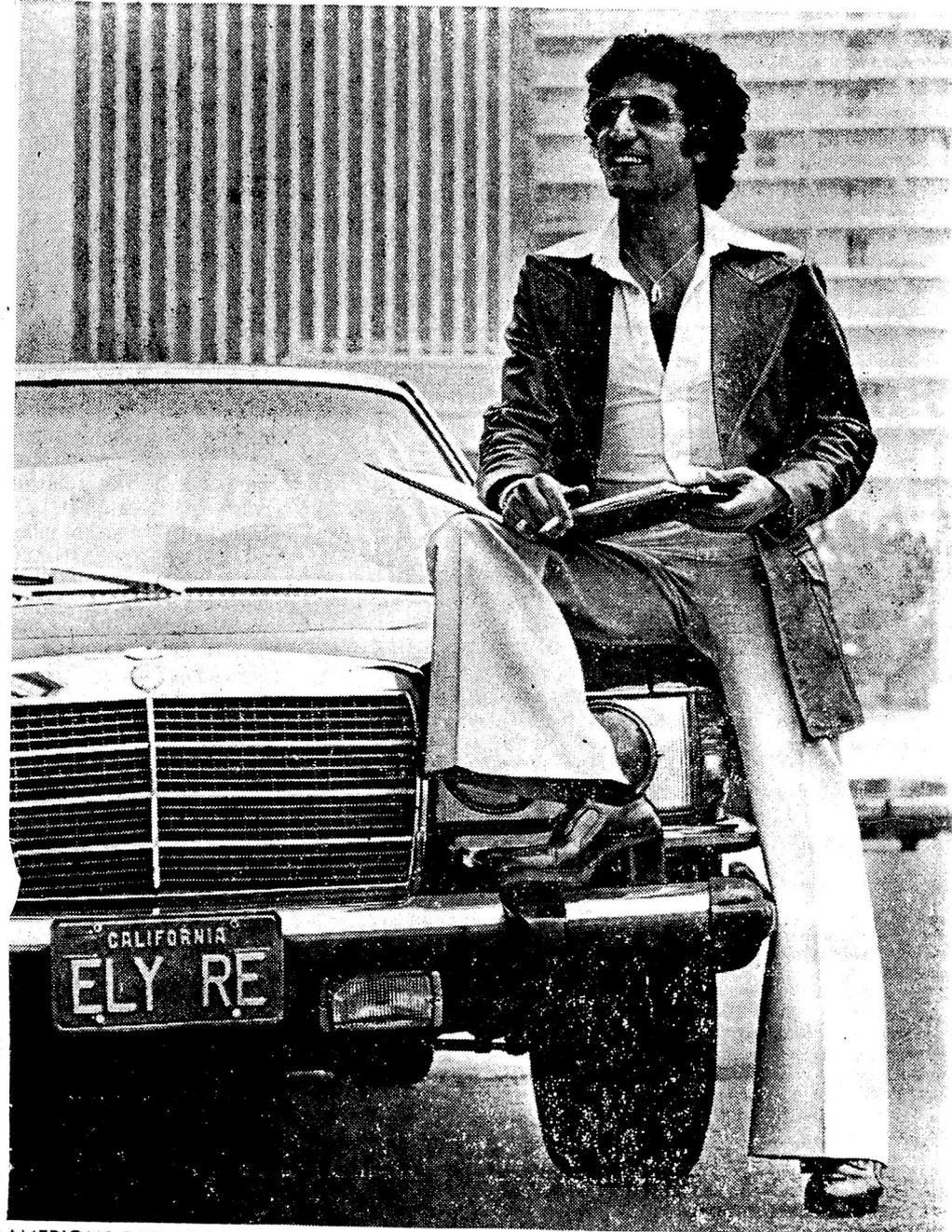
"He began to prepare bar mitzvah candidates and became a full-time teacher on the religious staff. Two years ago, he asked for a Yemenite service at the temple. He got 10 Yemeni friends to come and present it using Yemeni prayers and songs. There were 800 or 900 people there that night in a place that seats 500.

"During the Yom Kippur War, he went back to fight, but how he got there I'll never know. He was an officer in the army before and on reserve. Several of our young people wanted to go for the war and tried. Ely is the only one who found a way to get there. A few months later, we saw a picture of him in one of the books that came out quickly after the war. There he was by one of the first tanks that crossed over the Suez to surround the Egyptian army. But when he came back, he made out as if nothing happened.

"He has a tremendous sense of loyalty. He's the kind of guy who if you ever needed something, wouldn't hesitate to do it. It's an increasingly rare quality in our society."

It was shortly after the Seven-Day War that Dromy got the urge to go into real estate. Despite the fact that he had never made a great deal of money here and sent monthly payments home to his family, he managed a small savings.

He wanted to buy—with friends—the apartment building in which a Yemeni friend lived but was unable to do so. In addition to completing his master's degree in education at the University of Judaism, he went to



AMERICAN DREAM REALIZED—Ely Dromy, 28-year-old real estate wonder, with his Mercedes.

Times photo by Tony Barnard

IMMIGRANT CLIMBS TO SUCCESS

'I Like His Confidence'

Together, they put down \$80,000 on an apartment building they bought for \$282,000. Four months later, they were able to sell it for \$360,000 (to another of Dromy's clients) with nearly a 100% return of their investment.

It's been moving like that and better ever since Dromy completed his first transaction. These days one is likely to find him talking into two telephones at his desk in Dan Gabriel's Westwood Blvd. office—that's when he's not talking on the phone in his new Mercedes 450 SE or on one of the two phones in his Westwood apartment.

"I like his confidence," says Dr. Harvey Paley, a Beverly Hills ear, nose, throat and facial plastic surgeon. "When he tells me to write out a check for \$5,000 or \$10,000 now, I don't sit and study it so much. In the last six or seven months with Ely, I've gotten to where I understand the numbers and the tax ramifications.

"I had only one building when I met Ely. I've known him since he was a bus driver and didn't know where he was going to eat next. Until I started investing with him, I hadn't really thought much about my investments. Really, all I did was write the checks."

Dromy, who got to know Paley when he became friends with his 9-year-old son Jack, has purchased two apartment buildings and a house with Paley as the chief investor. He claims the doctor's real estate investments will earn more money for him this year than medicine. Says Paley, who's now considering various tradeups, "So far I haven't seen it. But in another month, I guess it could be true. We just got an offer on one of the buildings."

How does he do it? What gives Ely Dromy the edge to earn \$100,000 for himself in the time someone else would feel pleased to earn \$10,000?

On the surface, it's easy to see that he learns fast, that he runs on the theory that the more he does, the more he can do. But there are specific real estate maneuvers he has learned that work well for him, some of which he will talk about.

All but one of the buildings he's been involved in buying or selling were unlisted. By being painstakingly aware of neighborhood market values and making a lot of phone calls to property owners, he has been able to sleuth out good buys that weren't officially on the market.

Dromy also delights in mentioning to sellers that he has "a doctor interested" in their property. "They think doctors are suckers," he laughs,

But beyond basic intelligence and increasing familiarity with the field, Dromy simply seems to thrive on the basics: hard work and perseverance.

He is not easily discouraged by an owner he has called out of the blue who accuses him of "sounding like a damn detective" or worse. And he is clearly no stranger to hard work. "In Israel, you have to work hard just to survive," he says. "When I was going to school there I was teaching in the morning, tutoring students in the afternoon and going to school at night. I was serving in the army 60 to 90 days a year. And I couldn't afford to have my own apartment over there."

The money keeps rolling in, its pace accelerating. Dromy hasn't even had time to get his broker's license and still works as a salesperson, figuring he'll wait until things slow down to study for the broker's exam.

Though he clearly enjoys the life-style the money brings, he claims it's not what motivates him. Rather he insists, it is the sense of accomplishment, of doing so much with so little and the possibility of doing so much more. With his Yemeni friends, he plans to open a travel agency and run a car wash, diversifying as a form of earthquake insurance.

In the meantime, he still teaches classes at the temple and goes folk dancing once a week. His only worries now seem to be making sure his parents are cared for, convincing friends he's "not just running after money" and finding a wife to bear him children.

"Harvey (Paley) says it's a good thing I'm not married now," he acknowledges, however. "I'd be divorced within two years. But I love children and want to have some of my own. I think eventually I will go back to teaching children."

Dromy would like to become a U.S. citizen, acquiring dual U.S. and Israeli citizenship. "Everything emotional I have is with Israel," he says. "Everything rational is with this country."

Though as an immigrant he had to work to learn the Americans' language and culture, he believes arriving as an outsider has given him the same sort of added strength, a being a Yemenite in Israel afforded.

"But as a Yemenite in Israel, I would never have had the opportunity there that I have here. As a Yemenite in Israel it would be very difficult to be successful. You have to know someone; there is favoritism, politics. America is a dream to people who want to make it. You don't mind working hard when you have experienced living in a place where it's hard just to survive.

"Here I was a custodian and a bus driver, but I could talk to doctors. Over there, I wouldn't even know a doctor except as a patient. Israel is smaller and more limited. I grew up there as a person who was dark. I had an inferiority complex. I knew I had to prove to those people that I was as good as they were. From now on I will be judged on different terms."

work on a second master's degree in business at UCLA and studied for a real estate license. After he received the latter last November, he remembered the friends he had made as a bus driver and sent notes announcing his real estate position to their parents.

Though it's almost unheard of for a rank beginner to start in the investment division of a realty company, Dromy convinced Dan Gabriel of Dan Gabriel Realty in Westwood to give him the opportunity. It was agreed Dromy would work with a partner who'd had a year's experience and like the other salespersons in Gabriel's office, he and his negotiations would be carefully reviewed to avoid costly legal entanglements.

"For the first couple of months, he didn't do a thing. Didn't pop anything," says Gabriel. "He was doing a lot of running around, soliciting buyers and sellers but he wasn't able to put anything together. For a while I thought he wasn't going to make it.

"There's a much bigger chance of being a complete bombout for somebody who's starting in the investment division. I didn't call him in and ask him to leave because once I make a decision to take on somebody, and I can see that they're trying, I leave them alone."

Helped by His Manager

Gabriel, who is 32 and now has some 40 persons working for him, says he is only acquainted with perhaps two experienced people in the city who sell as much in a year as Dromy sold in his first five months. Yet he attributes some of Dromy's success to his manager, Keith Jeske, and Jeske's ability to think as fast as Dromy comes up with possibilities for deals.

"You have to really fly to keep up with Ely," says Gabriel. "He works an awful lot of hours. He's got to have been working 18 hours a day. I told Ely when he came, 'If you work at it, it's the highest paying business. It's the lowest-paying if you don't.' He took me seriously."

So seriously, that until Dromy made his first deal he couldn't sleep nights. Chronic headaches and stomachaches almost immobilized him. He had seen several doctors, none of whom could find anything physically wrong with him. He even started seeing a psychotherapist at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

"I would tell her all my dreams—that I was going to be this and that," he remembers. "She was the only one I could tell."

The headaches were not new—Dromy had tried everything including hypnosis for them—but the sleeplessness added a particularly menacing dimension to the malady. "I realized it was an ego problem," he says. "I started looking at myself as a failure. I wanted very much to show people that I was worth their time and their trust."

So to gain the confidence of his potential investors, Dromy offered to put his own savings of \$7,500 into his first deal. If they lost a little, he lost everything.