

Throughout history, persecuted Jews have always defended themselves. From the Sicarii assassins who attacked their Roman overlords to the Bielski partisans of World War II made famous by the Hollywood movie *Defiance* (starring 007's Daniel Craig), the Jewish people have repelled attacks from all sides. Nowhere was this more prevalent than in Israel, a country that has been continually under attack since its founding in 1948.

Throughout multiple wars and terrorist attacks, Israelis have relied on the reality-based style of self-defense known as krav maga (phonetically pronounced, krov ma-ga, the art means "contact combat" in Hebrew). Krav maga was created by a European refugee, the late Imi Lichtenfeld, a champion boxer and wrestler who fled the Nazis from Budapest. He is revered worldwide as the "Father of Krav Maga."

In 1981, at the age of 21, Darren Levine was part of a delegation of 23 people from the U.S. who went to Israel to study under Lichtenfeld. Funded by the philanthropist S. Daniel Abraham, the idea was to highlight Israel's efforts in the art of self-defense and spread krav maga worldwide. The training facilities were sparse: the bomb shelter of the Dream Beach Hotel in the town of Netanya, Israel. The training was exhausting: six to seven hours a day with more training at night for six weeks.

This initial course led to Lichtenfeld visiting Los Angeles in 1982, and yearly training visits to Israel for Levine until Lichtenfeld's

death in 1998. Over the years, Levine would test for rank, sometimes achieving his goals, sometimes sent back to work harder. No diploma mill here. Lichtenfeld wanted to make sure his pupil was well-trained because he had bigger plans in store for the American.

Eventually reaching his 6th-degree black belt in krav maga, Levine was awarded a Founder's Diploma for "Special Excellence in Krav Maga." Levine is one of only two people ever to receive that esteemed honor the other was Eyal Yanilov (see cover story in July 2016 *MA Success*). Levine humbly downplays the honor, suggesting that others were to receive such awards, but were precluded by Lichtenfeld's death. What Levine does recognize, however, was that the torch of krav maga's development had been passed to him.

Over the past decades, while still engaged as a prosecutor for the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office, Levine has taken on this task with zeal. Along with John Whitman and Ryan Hoover, he co-authored *Complete Krav Maga: The Ultimate Guide, Black Belt Krav Maga* and *Krav Maga for Beginners*.

Most importantly, however, krav maga's military-based expertise has been put into the hands of civilians through the efforts of his organization, Krav Maga Worldwide. Krav Maga Worldwide has close to 150 locations around the world and 700 trained civilian instructors. The logic behind this is simple: What works for a soldier can work for a civilian, too.

MARTIAL ARTS SUCCESS: Parts of the world today are now experiencing the terrorism that Israel has felt since before it became a country in 1948. Why is studying an art that has helped keep Israelis safe for all these years the right thing for Americans and other Westerners to do at this time?

DARREN LEVINE: The specific problems that a country faces leads to certain expertise. If Israel were not [the target of] terrorism, then krav maga would not exist. While the terrorist is motivated by ideology and the street criminal is motivated by emotion or greed, the physical motions they use are the same. For krav maga, it doesn't matter *why* they're trying to kill you. It only matters that they're trying to do it and how we respond. So, we have modified threats to address violence in everyday encounters that civilians face.

maSUCCESS: Few people know of your karate and boxing background. What arts were you into before krav maga?

LEVINE: I grew up in the era of Chuck Norris and Bruce Lee, and trained under Chuck Norris and [his colleague] Pat Johnson in Sherman Oaks [California] as a teenager. My best friend's father was William Smith, Sr., a true-life fighter who played tough guys in Hollywood martial arts movies [like *Conan the Barbarian* and TV shows like *Kung Fu*]. He would train his son, Billy, and me in fighting and weight-lifting, and discuss differences between real fighting and movie fighting.

I also grew up around boxers. My dad was a boxer who taught me not to start a fight, but to take care of business if it happened – and to not lose. As well, my older brother was a boxer and many of his friends went on to become pro boxers. While I enjoyed training on fancy kicks, I knew that front kicks and boxing were the most applicable moves because of William Smith's training.

maSUCCESS: Your mentor, Imi Lichtenfeld, opened his first school in 1964. Your organization has close to 150 locations and 700 civilian instructors certified worldwide. Would you say that your efforts have really brought this system to civilians?

LEVINE: I would agree 100%. Imi's school that opened in 1964 was really to teach judo and aikido. Israel had a great system, but it was underappreciated within its own country [with people saying,] "That's what they do in the army." There was a hesitancy to teach those techniques [used by the army] to civilians. Imi would always say, "If krav maga were ever to become big in the world, it would have to be spread from Los Angeles."

maSUCCESS: Many of krav maga's instructors were ranked in other arts. How does krav maga compliment an existing school's traditional or martial sport's curriculum?

LEVINE: My background was in another martial art, [so] I don't view krav maga in terms of "Us vs. Them." I don't think anyone in Krav Maga Worldwide has the arrogance to go into an existing school and say, "This is going to be the best thing you've ever done, or this is the only way."

It is a way. Krav maga complements existing martial arts programs because we offer answers that many adults are looking for. We've [even] had students say that they were as excited to get their yellow or orange belt in krav maga as they were to get their black belt in other systems.

maSUCCESS: What is the process for a school owner to become certified in krav maga and introduce the system into his or her school?

LEVINE: The most dedicated martial artists don't want what comes easy. They want what makes them and their students the best they can be. [So], we have high standards and a rigorous instructor-training program.

We have a team of train-the-trainer instructors who each bring their own experience and teaching methods. [Our] network of affiliated schools around the globe fosters a sense of family. We all share the purpose of making others safer and stronger. Many of these school owners exchange ideas and, when members of Krav Maga Worldwide-affiliated schools typically drop in to other schools, they are welcomed as part of family.

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