

YEHUDA LAPIDOT

**THE IRGUN**  
**A SHORT HISTORY**



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## CONTENTS

Introduction .....	4
The Establishment of the Irgun .....	6
Restrain and Retaliation .....	18
Tehomi Returns to the Haganah .....	20
The Illegal Immigration of the Irgun .....	35
"Aliya Bet" .....	41
The Split within the Irgun .....	45
The Revolt is Proclaimed .....	54
The "Hunting Season" .....	64
The United Resistance .....	74
Black Sabbath .....	89
The Bombing of the King David Hotel .....	96
The Raid on the Jerusalem Railway Station.....	105
The Raid on the Jerusalem Officers Club .....	111
The Acre Prison Break .....	123
Gallows .....	131
In Africa Exile .....	160
The Irgun in Europe and the USA .....	170

## INTRODACTION

These chapters in the history of the Irgun Zvai Le'umi (the National Military Organization), known in Hebrew by its acronym Etzel, and in English as the Irgun or IZL, were written specifically for this Internet website. They are arranged chronologically in order to provide a complete picture of the history of the Irgun, from its establishment in 1931 to its disbanding after the State of Israel came into being.

In its initial years, the Irgun was primarily concern with repelling Arab riots in the country. Whilst the Haganah adhered to the policy of self-restrain ('Havlaga') in the face of Arab attack, the Irgun activity resisted Arab aggression.

With the publication of the British Government 1939 White Paper restricting Jewish immigration into Palestine, the Irgun had no choice but to direct their efforts against the British too. A truce was briefly declared after the outbreak of the Second World War. When the full extent of the Holocaust became known, and it was clear that Britain was continuing to implement the White Paper, the Irgun realized that there was no alternative but to renew the armed struggle against the British in Palestine.

On February 1, 1944, the Irgun proclaimed a revolt against British rule over Palestine and demanded that the British leave the country forthwith and a Jewish state be established. The gradual intensification of military action against the Mandatory government undermined the basis of British rule. These operations carried out with the Lehi (Fighters for the Freedom of Israel) and occasionally with the Haganah as well, ultimately forced the British government to bring the question of the future of Palestine before the United Nations.

On November 29, 1947, the UN Assembly decided to partition Palestine into two states: a Jewish state, the State of Israel, and a Palestinian-Arab state.

## THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE IRGUN

Towards the end of the First World War, while the British and the Turkish forces were still fighting in Palestine, Lord Rothschild received from the British Foreign Office an official letter, which later came to be known as the Balfour Declaration. It read as follows:

The Foreign Office  
November 2, 1917

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet.

"His Majesty's Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

Yours sincerely,  
Arthur James Balfour

When the First World War ended, discussions commenced on the future of Palestine and the region as a whole. On April 19, 1920, the Allies (Britain, France, Italy and Greece, Japan and Belgium) convened at San Remo in Italy to discuss a peace treaty with Turkey. It was decided at that conference to assign to Great Britain the mandate over Palestine on both sides of the Jordan and the responsibility for putting the Balfour Declaration into effect. While the conference was in session, the Arabs launched violent action to foil its implementation.

The first Arab riots took place in Jerusalem in the intermediary days of Passover (April) 1920. The Jewish community had anticipated the Arab reaction, and was ready to meet it. Jewish affairs in Eretz Israel (Palestine) were then being administered from Jerusalem by the Vaad Hatzirim (Council of Delegates), appointed by the World Zionist Organization (WZO) (which in 1929 became the Jewish Agency). The Vaad Hatzirim charged Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky with the task of organizing Jewish self-defence. Jabotinsky was one of the founders of the Jewish battalions which had served in the British Army during the First World War and had participated in the conquest of Palestine from the Turks. Acting under the auspices of the Vaad Hatzirim, Jabotinsky established the Haganah (self-defence) organization in Jerusalem, which succeeded in repelling the Arab attack.

Six Jews were killed and some two hundred injured in Jerusalem in the course of the 1920 riots. Had it not been for the preliminary organization of Jewish defence, the number of victims would undoubtedly have been much greater.

After the riots, the British conducted widespread arrests among both Arabs and Jews. Among those arrested was Jabotinsky himself, together with 19 of his associates, on a charge of illegal possession of weapons. Jabotinsky was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment with hard labor and deportation from the country after completion of his sentence. When the sentence became known, the Vaad Hatzirim made plans for widespread protests, including mass demonstrations and a national fast. Meanwhile, however, the mandate for Palestine had been assigned to Great Britain, and the jubilation of the Yishuv - the Jewish community in Eretz Israel (Palestine) – outweighed the desire to protest against the harsh sentence imposed on Jabotinsky and his comrades.

With the arrival in Jerusalem of the first High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel, British military government was superseded by a civilian administration. As a gesture towards the civilian population, the High Commissioner proclaimed a general amnesty for both Jews and Arabs who had been involved in the April 1920 riots. Jabotinsky and his comrades were released from prison to an enthusiastic welcome by the Yishuv, but Jabotinsky insisted that the sentence passed against them be revoked entirely, arguing that the defender should not be placed on trial with the aggressor. After months of struggle, the British War Office finally revoked the sentences.

Two and a half years after his release from jail, Jabotinsky resigned from the Zionist Executive and issued a strong appeal for an extensive revision of Zionism. The party, which he founded in 1925, after having established the Betar youth movement (Brit Yosef Trumpeldor – the Yosef Trumpeldor Alliance) two years previously in Riga, Latvia, was thus called the Revisionist party.

Relations between the socialist parties and the Revisionists were fraught with tension, not only because the former supported the Zionist establishment which Jabotinsky challenged, but also for reasons of ideological rivalry. Jabotinsky rejected the introduction of socialist orientation into the settlement movement in Eretz Israel and advocated a heterogeneous society, where there would be room for free enterprise. In order to reform the character of Diaspora Jewry, he argued, it was essential to impose order and discipline, to maintain 'hadar' (dignity) and freedom in Palestine, but not necessarily to transform each and every Jew into a farmer.



Zeev Jabotinsky

As leader of Betar, Jabotinsky scrupulously observed outward standards of dress and conduct, thereby furnishing the socialist parties with the pretext they needed to term him a militarist, a fascist and an "enemy of the workers". This was a blatant distortion of the truth. Jabotinsky was a liberal and friend to the workers: it was on his initiative and instructions that every member of Betar who immigrated to Palestine was required to serve for two years in the "Betar battalions", in the various settlements throughout the country, and to undertake manual labour.

The 17th Zionist Congress, which convened at Basle in 1931, rejected Jabotinsky's demand that it proclaims the objective of Zionism to be the establishment of a Jewish state, and this rejection exacerbated his relations with the Zionist leadership. Four years later, when the Zionist Executive decided on a "disciplinary clause" which prohibited "independent political actions" of Zionist parties, Jabotinsky seceded from the World Zionist Organization and founded the New Zionist Organization. His great popularity among European Jews and in Jewish communities in the United States and South Africa was reflected in the response to his initiative. Some 700,000 members registered before the inaugural conference of the New Zionist Organization (as against about one million before the elections to the 1939 Zionist Congress).

After the establishment of this new body, the Revisionist movement in Eretz Israel seceded from the Histadrut and founded the National Workers Association (Histadrut Ha'ovdim Hale'umit). They also established their own health fund (Kupat Holim Le'umit) and the rivalry between the two camps intensified.

The British disapproved of Jabotinsky's activities, and when he left the country in 1930 on a lecture tour of South Africa, the Mandate government barred his re-entry into Palestine.

As noted earlier, the first Arab riots against the Jews took place in April 1920. Scarcely a year later the Arabs launched a further attack against the Jews. This time the unrest began on the Tel-Aviv-Jaffa border (May 1921), reaching Jerusalem on November 2, 1921, the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration. That year 43 Jews were killed and 134 injured.

The Arab attacks sharpened Jewish awareness of the need for self-defence. The inaugural conference of the General Federation of Labor (Histadrut), held in Haifa in December 1920, decided, among other things, to set up a national defence organization (the Haganah) "to safeguard the national and social content of popular defence in this country". The Haganah now came under the authority of the Histadrut and its institutions.

The 1921 riots were followed by seven years of calm, in which the Yishuv doubled in size (from 87,790 on 23 of October 1922 to 150,000 in 30 of June 1927). This lull was exploited by the Haganah for organization, training and arms' purchase. The quiet also generated a sense of complacency, and some of the Yishuv's leaders began to question the need for a national defence organization, which would require considerable funds. These leaders believed that the British Mandatory government could be relied on to defend the Yishuv in times of need. The events of 1929 proved these beliefs hopelessly misplaced.

The riots began in Jerusalem. They commenced with anti-Jewish agitation during Friday prayers at the El Aksa mosque and attacks on Jewish bystanders. The Arab rioters attacked Jews in the Old City, and from there moved on to the new Jewish quarters

outside the City walls. From Jerusalem the riots proceeded to spread to other parts of the country. The worst incidents occurred in Hebron, where rioters moved from house to house, murdering any Jews they encountered. In all, 133 Jews were killed, and 230 were injured in the course of one week.

The unrest took the Jewish community and the Haganah by surprise. The great majority of the Jewish leaders were out of the country (attending the 16th Zionist Congress in Zurich), and the Yishuv was left without clear direction during its hour of need.

In the wake of the riots, severe criticism was levelled at the Haganah, and the controversy regarding its policies and its leadership was revived. There was a growing demand for authority over the Haganah to be transferred from the Histadrut to the Jewish Agency, which represented the entire Yishuv. Moreover, the leaders of the socialist parties within the Histadrut tended to be anti-militaristic in outlook, equating militarism with the fascism then emergent in Europe. They also feared that the transformation of the Haganah into an organized military framework would greatly enhance the power of its leaders and enable them to dominate the Yishuv.

According to its constitution, the objective of the Haganah was the "defence of the Yishuv and preparation of a popular militia". This basically anti-military stance was countered by many commanders within the Haganah, who sought to impart a more military flavor to the organization, but it was not until the 1940s that it actually adopted a military framework. Professor Yohanan Ratner, who served on the Haganah command, writes: <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My life and I, p. 222.

Today it often seems to us to be self-evident that the Haganah had to develop into a regular army, or at least that this was the universal aspiration ... but this is a superficial assumption. Nowhere has it been stated that the Haganah had to become an army, or even that it was intended from the outset to become such; till almost the last moment, certain highly influential elements held a different view

The issues of authority and of militarism caused considerable turmoil within the Haganah rank-and-file and, in conjunction with the Tehomi affair (see below), constituted the underlying causes of the 1931 split in the organization.

## THE SPLIT IN THE HAGANAH

Avraham Tehomi, a senior officer in the Haganah, was appointed district commander of Jerusalem after the 1929 riots. In the "History Book of the Haganah" <sup>2</sup> we find the following about Tehomi and his comrades

From the 1920s on, there was one outstanding group among the Jerusalem commanders – a closely knit band of friends who regarded themselves as a family and as bearers of sole responsibility for the security of the city and its environs. The group was headed by the two "Avrahams": Avraham Zilberg (Tehomi) and Avraham Krichevsky, who were connected to a group which had immigrated in the early twenties from southern Russia – the Odessa group. Several of its members, distinguished by an absolute dedication to the organization,

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<sup>2</sup> Toldot Hahaganah, vol.1, p. 426

were senior Haganah officers in various parts of the country. In contrast to the pacifist spirit which – ostensibly – prevailed in the Jewish community in Palestine and influenced the mood of the Haganah at the time, this group was imbued with an unmistakably ‘militaristic’ spirit.

Tehomi had been involved in the Jewish self-defence organization in Odessa and had immigrated to Palestine with its members. Once there, he joined a group of laborers working on road building and construction, became a member of the Histadrut and was active in the Haganah. However, he held activist views and insisted that the Haganah become a military organization. As Jerusalem district commander, he brought order and discipline to bear on the Haganah, and was consequently accused of ‘militarism’ and of introducing "fascist methods". At the same time, there was growing demand for the Haganah to be transferred from the Histadrut to the Jewish Agency. Tehomi, who enjoyed considerable prestige among the Haganah officers in Jerusalem, could not easily be replaced by the Histadrut leaders.

In the spring of 1931, Tehomi took leave of the Haganah command to visit the United States on private business. On reaching his first stop, Piraeus, Greece, his visa was revoked by the US consul after a medical inspection team on board ship noticed his injured arm.

Tehomi returned to Jerusalem and asked to resume his post as district commander, but was refused on the grounds that, in his absence, a new commander (Avraham Ikar) had been appointed. (Tehomi had also been suspected of contacts with the Revisionist party and of planning to take over the Haganah leadership). The refusal to reinstate him aroused considerable protest among the

district officers, most of whom remained loyal to him. When the Haganah Headquarters persisted in its refusal, these commanders joined him in seceding from the Haganah and, in April 1931, they established a new underground body.

Their organization was named the "Irgun Zvai Le'umi" (National Military Organization). The more commonly-used name was "Irgun B" or Haganah Le'umit (National Defence). It was in dire financial straits and lacked sufficient funds to cover its expenses. In addition, the Histadrut institutions boycotted the organization's members, who were employed in construction or road building, and prevented them from obtaining work (the employment office was at that time part of the Histadrut).

About a month after the split, the Haganah leaders decided to bow to the authority of the Jewish Agency. A joint General Headquarters was established for the first time, half of its members drawn from the Histadrut and the other half from non-socialist parties. Despite this seeming parity, the great majority of the senior commanders of the Haganah were members of the Histadrut and affiliated to the labor parties. The co-opting of non-socialists to the Haganah leadership did not bring Tehomi back into the Haganah ranks and the split became an established fact.

The new organization was concentrated in Jerusalem, and included a group of Hebrew University students known as the "Sohba" (fraternity). Some of the members graduated from the organization's first training courses, and played key roles in the development of the Irgun. The outstanding personalities in the group were David Razieli, Avraham Stern, Hillel Kook and Hayim Shalom Halevi. Over the years, the ranks of the Irgun were swelled by new young recruits, particularly from the Betar youth movement, but also from Maccabi, a non-party sports

organization. New branches were set up all over the country (Tel-Aviv, Haifa and Safed), and the Irgun became a nationwide movement.

In June 1933, Dr. Chaim Arlozorov, chairman of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency and one of the prominent leaders of the labor movement in Eretz Israel, was murdered in Tel-Aviv while strolling with his wife on the beach. The crime stunned the Yishuv and the entire Jewish world. Three members of the Revisionist party were charged with the murder, and although they were eventually acquitted, the charge was exploited to incite hostility against Betar and the Revisionist movement in general.

We are not concerned here with details of the affair, but rather with its impact on the development of the Irgun. The unbridled incitement against the Revisionist Party proved effective, and at the 18th Zionist Congress in Prague some two months after the murder, the power of the labor parties had increased whilst that of the Revisionists had noticeably declined. The agitation had the reverse effect, however, where the Irgun was concerned. Amongst the non socialist parties there was general disapproval that the Histadrut had utilized the Haganah's intelligence service to amass evidence against the murder suspects. The Haganah was supposed to be a non-party organization, and by wielding it against the Revisionist party, its commanders were exceeding their authority. The parity principle notwithstanding, it was strikingly evident that the Haganah was controlled entirely by the labor parties.

Tehomi visited Prague with the aim of mobilizing public support among those Zionist leaders who were not affiliated with the left. After lengthy discussions, a supreme political committee - the

Supervisory Committee - was established for the organization, consisting of representatives of the General Zionist party, the Mizrahi (religious) party and the Revisionist party, headed by Jabotinsky. The Supervisory Committee not only provided political and public backing, but also considerably improved the organization's financial situation. The fact that Jabotinsky himself had joined the National Defence encouraged Betar members to follow suit, thus swelling the organization's numbers. In the "History of the Haganah" we find: <sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to understand today why these people officially supported a seceding organization, when a general Haganah organization existed whose administration was based on equal representation, and which was undoubtedly aware of the need for a united stand in defence of the Yishuv. It may be assumed that narrow party considerations influenced them. First of all, the Histadrut's decisive influence on the Haganah was manifest, both because the Haganah had, in effect, been a Histadrut department for the first ten years of its existence, a fact which could not be overlooked.... and also because left-wing activists in the Haganah always enjoyed greater influence and public weight than the right-wing representatives in the command.

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<sup>3</sup> Toldot Hahaganah, vol.2, p.580.

## RESTRAINT AND RETALIATION

After Hitler's rise to power, immigration from Central Europe accelerated, with the Yishuv doubling in size between 1931-1936.<sup>4</sup> This development was anathema to the Arabs, who were afraid of losing their numerical superiority in Eretz Israel. They demanded that the Mandatory government call a halt to immigration and ban the sale of land to Jews. When they received no response, they launched a campaign of terror, both against the Jews and against the British Mandate.

The anti-Jewish riots began in April 1936 and continued, with intervals, till the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. In the first six months of the riots, 80 Jews were killed and 340 injured. The violence ended when the British appointed a Royal Commission, headed by Lord Peel, charged with the task of examining the Palestine problem and proposing solutions to the British Government. The Commission arrived in Palestine on November 2, 1936 and gathered evidence from Jews, Arabs and British officials.

In the same period, important changes were taking place in the Irgun. Betar members swelled the ranks and became the main component of the organization. This enhanced the influence of the Revisionist party and of Jabotinsky personally, and reduced that of the public committee, which included representatives of the non socialist parties.

When the riots began, the Irgun and the Haganah operated in close co-operation in the defence of Jewish settlements against

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<sup>4</sup> On November 18, 1931 there were 174,610 Jews in Palestine, and by December 31, 1936 their number had grown to 384,000.

the Arab onslaughts. In Tel-Aviv, for example, the defence positions were divided by the municipality between the two organizations, and in Ramat Gan a joint command was established. The Jewish Agency adopted a passive defence policy, based on 'havlaga' (restraint), while the Irgun believed that the best form of defence was attack.

In the initial stage of the riots, Jabotinsky instructed members in Eretz Israel to display "restraint and patience", so as to allow him time to find a basic solution to the problem of the security of the Yishuv in Eretz Israel. Jabotinsky was consistent in his belief that only by establishing a Jewish battalion, sanctioned by the authorities, would it be possible to defend the Yishuv. As early as 1920, when charged with the task of organizing the defence of Jerusalem, he approached the government and requested weapons in order to arm the fighters. Jabotinsky argued that only a regular army, properly disciplined and well-equipped, could defend the Yishuv. Thus, immediately after the outbreak of the 1936 riots, he initiated political action, demanding that the British Government permit the establishment of a Jewish battalion in Eretz Israel. He was opposed on moral grounds to terror and reprisals, but was well aware that failure to react on the part of the Jews would be interpreted by the Arabs as weakness.

## TEHOMI RETURNS TO THE HAGANAH

Tehomi perceived no ideological differences between the Irgun and the Haganah, and argued that, in view of the grave security situation, they should amalgamate. Members of the Irgun's public committee shared Tehomi's convictions. Various public figures tried to mediate, but the amalgamation never materialized.

In search of a way back to the Haganah, Tehomi claimed that the Haganah had accepted the authority of the Jewish Agency, and had realized that there was no alternative but to create an organization based on military order and discipline, thus eradicating the two main reasons for the establishment of the Irgun. In May 1937 Tehomi, together with a large group of his comrades, returned to the ranks of the Haganah, taking with him the bulk of the weapons. At the same time the Irgun's public committee (the Supervisory Committee) was also disbanded.



Avraham Tehomi

The main controversy between Tehomi and his opponents in the Irgun related not only to the question of "restraint" as opposed to "retaliation", but also to the question of the autonomous existence of the Irgun. Among the Irgun's supporters there was a feeling that, in light of the anticipated political developments stemming from the Peel Commission's deliberations, it was essential to ensure that the Irgun would not be constrained by the leaders of the Histadrut and the Jewish Agency. Tehomi's secession did not liquidate the Irgun, though it suffered a severe blow. All the senior staff and a large proportion of the members of the central body and the local committees joined the Haganah. On the other hand, all the activist groups and most of the younger members remained loyal to the Irgun, which was now politically homogeneous. Jabotinsky became its leader and chief commander, and on April 30, 1937, he cabled from Johannesburg, South Africa: <sup>5</sup>

This is my order under the prevailing conditions: if the riots are renewed and there is a tendency to attack Jews as well, do not hold back.

This was the sign that 'havlaga', the policy of restraint, was over.

Jabotinsky appointed Robert Bitker First Commanding Officer of the Irgun after the split. Bitker was chosen for his military experience prior to his immigration, when he had served as an officer in the White Russian army during the post-October 1917 civil war. Subsequently, he moved to Shanghai, where he joined the British army and was appointed battalion commander with the rank of colonel. While in Shanghai he joined Betar and, after arriving in Eretz Israel in 1937, joined the Irgun. Bitker set up a

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<sup>5</sup> Niv, The Irgun Zvai Leumi, vol 1, p.300.

new command and the branches were organized into four districts: Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv and Haifa. The Jerusalem district was headed by David Raziel ("Razi").

Bitker was unfamiliar with life in Palestine and was not fluent in Hebrew. After several months, he was replaced by Moshe Rosenberg, who had previously been Tel-Aviv district commander.

On July 7, 1937, the Peel Commission published its recommendations, the crux of which was: the partition of western Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. Greater Jerusalem (with a corridor to the coastal plain) was to remain under British rule, in order to safeguard the holy places of the three religions.

The Jewish Agency, headed by David Ben-Gurion, accepted the principle of partition, whereas the Revisionist party under Jabotinsky rejected the plan outright. The Arabs too rejected the Commission's recommendations and renewed their anti-Jewish riots. This time Arab weapons were aimed at both the Jews and the British. On September 26, 1937, the Arabs assassinated Lewis Andrews, commissioner of Galilee district, thereby initiating widespread action against British rule. Arabs attacks on Jews also increased.

On November 9, 1937, five Jewish workers set out to work in the fields of Kibbutz Kiryat Anavim, near Jerusalem. They were encircled by an Arab gang and after exchanges of fire all five were killed and robbed of their rifles (Kibbutz Maaleh Hahamisha - The Hill of the Five - was named for them). The murder stunned the Jewish community in Jerusalem, but despite their pain and anger, the leaders of the Jewish Agency continued to call for restraint.

On the day of the murder, the British Mandatory government announced the establishment of military courts in Palestine. Official Order No. 20/37, which came into effect on November 18, 1937, detailed the crimes which would come under the jurisdiction of these courts:

- a) Shooting of a firearm at any person is a capital crime;
- b) The possession of weapons, bombs etc, is a capital crime.
- c) Acts of sabotage and terror are a capital crime.

Within the Irgun, there was a growing call for reprisals against the Arabs, and the organization's leaders asked Jabotinsky, who was then in Egypt, for his endorsement. After considerable hesitation, he approved retaliatory action.

On Sunday, November 14, 1937, Irgun units launched a widescale operation in various parts of the country. The order was given in Jerusalem, and the operation was led by David Raziel, who decided on a number of simultaneous attacks in order to impede police response. The hit unit was generally composed of three members: one to convey the weapons before the operation, one to fire the weapon or throw the grenade, and the third to remove the weapon after the operation. The main purpose of this division was to ensure that in the event of the assassin being caught, he would be unarmed.

November 14, also known as "Black Sunday" (the term was coined by Yitzhak Ben Zvi, then chairman of the Vaad Le'umi), went down in the history of the Irgun as the day on which the havlaga ended. It was not the first time that the Irgun had set out to attack Arabs in retaliation for attacks on Jews, but this time the operation was carried out on the initiative of the General

Headquarters and with Jabotinsky's endorsement. Raziel believed that these activities marked the transition from "passive" to "active" defence. He explained the two methods as follows: <sup>6</sup>

[...] Defensive actions alone can never succeed. If the objective of the war is to break the will of the enemy - and this cannot be achieved without shattering their power - we clearly cannot be content with defensive action. Purely defensive tactics will never break the enemy's strength...

Such a method of defence, which enables the enemy to attack as he sees fit and to retreat at will, to reorganize and to attack again - such defence is known as "passive defence" and ends in defeat and ruin...

All these calculations lead to one conclusion: he who does not wish to be defeated must attack. The same applies to the combatants, who have no intention of oppressing others but are fighting for their own freedom and honor. They too have but one possible path – attack. They must attack their enemy and break its strength and its will...

The Irgun's actions on November 14 took the Arabs completely by surprise and attacks on Jews ceased for some time. The British police responded by carrying out large-scale arrests among the Revisionist party activists. As a result of these arrests and of the law of making arms' possession a capital offence, Rosenberg, the Irgun commander, ordered the suspension of Irgun activities until the situation calmed down. This decision aroused considerable resentment among members, and once again the outcome was

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<sup>6</sup> Niv, Irgun Zvai Leumu, vol. 2, p. 41.

unsanctioned individual initiative. The suspension of activity lasted eight months, until David Raziel was appointed Irgun commander in place of Rosenberg.

## SHLOMO BEN-YOSEF

On March 28, 1938, a private vehicle travelling from Haifa to Safed was attacked on the Acre-Safed road. Four Jewish passengers, including a child and two women, were shot dead. The driver and a woman passenger managed to escape, but their bodies were later found not far from the site of the attack. About two weeks later, a car was ambushed on the Hanita-Nahariya road. Three Jews were shot and killed, including David Ben-Gaon, graduate of the Betar battalion at Rosh Pina. These murders caused a storm of outrage among members of the Labor Battalion at Rosh Pina and three members of the battalion – Avraham Shein, Shalom Jurabin and Shlomo Ben-Yosef (Tabachnik) – decided to retaliate. Without receiving permission from their commanding officer, they set out for the Safed - Rosh Pina road, where they fired on an Arab bus. They missed their target, harming no-one, and then fled to a nearby abandoned building. Spotted as they run to their hide-out, they were arrested shortly afterwards. All were tried by a military tribunal in Haifa and charged with illegal possession of weapons and with "intention to kill or cause other harm to a large number of people". Under the Emergency Regulations, each of the charges was considered a capital crime. The Betar leaders hired lawyers Philip Joseph and Aharon Hoter-Yishay for the defence. The lawyers suggested that an attempt be made to have Jurabin pronounced mentally unstable, and that a document be obtained for Shein confirming that he was a minor. The three defendants rejected this line of

defence and announced that they intended to use the trial as a political platform, from which they would proclaim their convictions openly.

The trial did in fact end with Jurabin being pronounced mentally unstable and sentenced to incarceration in a mental hospital "at the discretion of the High Commissioner". Shein and Ben-Yosef were sentenced to "be hung by the neck". The two accepted the sentence with exceptional stoicism, and proceeded to sing the national anthem, Hatikva. The British commander-in-chief confirmed Shlomo Ben-Yosef's sentence, but later commuted Shein's sentence to life imprisonment on account of his youth.



**Shlomo Ben-Yosef**

When the sentence became known, a number of public figures in Palestine and throughout the world, appealed to the British

Government to pardon the condemned men. Jabotinsky, then in London, was very active in this respect, and several days before the date fixed for the execution, he sent a cable to Palestine ordering the Irgun to react with force if Ben-Yosef were hanged. It read:

If final, invest heavily

It should be noted that Jabotinsky was greatly troubled by the issue of restraint and retaliation. He was opposed to acts of reprisal which claimed innocent lives, but at the same time understood that the havlaga policy was turning the Yishuv into a community of cowards, and that the Arabs and British perceived it as a sign of weakness.

Jabotinsky was aware that Ben-Yosef and his comrades had undertaken an act of retaliation without receiving prior approval. In a speech delivered in Warsaw on July 12, 1938, he gave the operation his retrospective endorsement:

They (the three) wanted to put an end to a situation, in which Jews could be murdered with impunity, but not Arabs. Such a situation must not be permitted. And if necessary, then post factum I, as head of Betar, give you, Ben-Yosef and your two comrades, the order to go out onto the highway and do what you did.

Jabotinsky had wrestled long and hard with this moral question and had finally come to the conclusion that the havlaga policy was

unsuitable in the circumstances. In one of his articles, Jabotinsky wrote, inter alia:<sup>7</sup>

Do not dare to punish the innocent... what superficial and hypocritical nonsense. In war, any war, each side is innocent. What crime has he committed against me – that enemy soldier who fights me – and is as poor as I, as blind as I, as much a slave as I, who has been recruited against his will? When a war breaks out, we demand unanimously a sea and land blockade of enemy soil, so as to starve the population and the innocent women and children. And after the first air raid on London and Paris, we will expect air reprisals against Stuttgart and Milan, which are full of women and children. There is no war which is not conducted against the innocent, just as there is no war which is not fraternal strife. Therefore every war and the tribulations it brings is accursed, whether offensive or defensive, and if you do not wish to harm the innocent - you will die. And if you do not wish to die - then shoot and stop prattling.

Unfortunately, the extensive efforts to commute Ben-Yosef death sentence proved fruitless.

On the morning of June 29, 1938, Shlomo Ben-Yosef prepared for his final hour. He removed the scarlet garments of the condemned man, put on shorts, a shirt and high work-boots. After breakfast, he brushed his teeth and awaited the guards. He walked upright to the gallows singing the Betar anthem. On the walls of his cell, Ben-Yosef had written in his poor Hebrew:

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<sup>7</sup> Niv, vol.2, p. 77.

What is a homeland? It is something worth living for, fighting for and dying for. I was a slave to Betar to the day of my death, and an excerpt from Jabotinsky's poem "To die or to capture the mountain."

The Yishuv was plunged into mourning and anger, and within the Irgun command there was considerable resentment against the Irgun commander Moshe Rosenberg for his decision to suspend military action.

On the eve of Ben-Yosef's execution, Rosenberg and several of the leaders of the movement visited his cell to say their farewells. The next day Rosenberg left the country on private business. On his way to Poland he received a letter from Jabotinsky, thanking him for his services and relieving him of his post. He was replaced as commander of the Irgun by David Raziell.

## DAVID RAZIEL

David Raziell was born in Vilna, Lithuania in 1910. His family immigrated to Eretz Israel when he was three, and his father taught Hebrew in a Tel-Aviv elementary school. When the 1929 riots broke out, David Raziell, who was studying philosophy and mathematics at the Hebrew University, joined the Haganah in Jerusalem, and was one of the first to join the Irgun after it was established.

Raziell did a great deal to inculcate the military spirit into the Irgun and to foster order and discipline. One of the Irgun's greatest problems, was the shortage of military manuals in Hebrew, a shortcoming which he sought to remedy.



**David Raziel**

"The Pistol", the first military manual published in Hebrew, was written jointly by Raziel and Avraham Stern. It was a comprehensive manual, also used by Haganah commanders and instructors in its first few years.

After Ben-Yosef's execution, the Irgun launched a series of operations against the Arabs' but the debate on the question of restraint and reprisals became more fierce, and the Yishuv was split. During this period, the Haganah imposed strict discipline on its members to prevent any individual acts of reprisal or punitive action. The leaders of the Jewish Agency strongly condemned the Irgun and demanded that they cease activities against the Arabs immediately.

### **YAAKOV RAZ**

On July 26, 1938, Yaakov Raz was sent to the Old City of Jerusalem disguised as an Arab and carrying a basket of

vegetables in which a mine was concealed. His commanding officers, who had planned the operation far in advance, did not heed the fact that the Arabs had proclaimed a general strike that day in protest against the Irgun's incessant attacks. When Raz placed the basket beside one of the stores whose doors were barred, he aroused the suspicion of the Arab bystanders. His basket was overturned and when the mine was found, Raz was repeatedly stabbed. The Arabs then fled, leaving him for dead. Yaakov Raz was severely injured, and was taken by the police to the government hospital. Despite his serious condition, he was interrogated by the British Intelligence, the C.I.D (Criminal Investigation Department), throughout his hospital stay. For two weeks he fought for his life. When he felt his strength waning, and feared he would not be able to withstand further interrogation and was liable to betray secret information, he tore off his bandages and died of blood loss.

Yaakov Raz was the first member of the Irgun to die as a result of an operation. The heroism he displayed, and particularly the manner of his death, made him a symbol and inspiration for generations of young Irgun members.

Born in 1919 in Afghanistan, Yaakov Rass (Raz) came to Eretz Israel with his family at the age of ten and lived in the Bukharan quarter of Jerusalem. They arrived at the height of the 1929 riots, which clearly left their mark on the child. At an early age he joined Betar, and then became a member of the underground. His family was poor and he was forced to go to work before completing his elementary studies. Thanks to his fluency in Arabic, the Irgun sent him on special missions into the heart of the Arab hinterland and it was one of these that proved fatal.

## "THE WHITE PAPER" OR "PARLIAMENTARY DOCUMENT 6019"

On May 17, 1939, the British Government published Parliamentary Document 6019, known as the White Paper. This document set out its political aims with regard to Palestine: <sup>8</sup>

The objective of His Majesty's Government is the establishment within ten years of an independent Palestinian State in such treaty relations with the United Kingdom as will provide satisfactorily for the commercial and strategic requirements of both countries in the future.

In order to guarantee the Arab character of the Palestinian State, immigration was to be restricted so that the number of Jews in the country would not exceed one-third of the total population. If economic absorptive capacity permitted, over five years some 75,000 Jews were to be admitted, and at the end of that period "no further Jewish immigration will be permitted unless the Arabs of Palestine are prepared to acquiesce in it." In addition to the restrictions on immigration, the document also stipulated limitations on land purchase by Jews in most of the country:

there is now in certain areas no room for further transfers of Arab land, whilst in some other areas such transfers of land must be restricted if Arab cultivators are to maintain their existing standard of life and a considerable landless Arab population is not soon to be created.

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<sup>8</sup> The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, British White Paper of 1939.

The Arabs rejected the White Paper on the grounds that it did not go far enough, and launched a widespread campaign of violence against the Yishuv. Jabotinsky was determined to take action against the Arabs, even if this action claimed innocent victims. On the moral problem entailed in this war, Jabotinsky wrote:

Each of us would wish that, in the event that it is essential to take action, it should be a direct reprisal against the murderers. But if a Jewish unit should dare to pursue an Arab gang, its members would be arrested and disarmed and they would be placed on trial - and many of them would be hung from the gallows. The choice does not lie between reacting against murderers or against the hostile public in general: the choice is between two practical possibilities - either reaction against the hostile public in general or general non-reaction.

When we are speaking of war, we do not ask ourselves which is 'preferable' - to shoot or not to shoot. The sole question which may be asked in such cases is the reverse: which is 'worse', to be slaughtered or subjugated without resistance, or to resist with all the means at one's disposal, however cruel, because there is no 'preferable' in this case. Everything to do with war is 'bad', and the 'good' is non-existent. When you fire at foreign soldiers do not lie to yourself and do not delude yourself that those you are shooting are the 'guilty'.

If we were to begin to calculate what is preferable, then the reckoning would be very simple; if you wish to be 'good', than please allow yourself to be killed and renounce everything you hoped to defend: home, country, freedom, hope..."

## RACHEL OHEVET-AMI (HABASHUSH)

After the publication of the White Paper, Arab onslaughts continued throughout the country. On June 9, 1939 a bombing attack was planned against Arab visitors to prisoners in the central jail in the Russian Compound in Jerusalem. The explosive device was hidden in a large basket carried by Rachel Ohevet-Ami (Habashush), who was of Oriental appearance and spoke fluent Arabic (her family had emmigrated from Yemen). Rachel was taken by car to a spot close to the Russian Compound and walked from there, her face veiled. She asked an Arab boy to carry her basket, loaded with fruit and vegetables. Its weight aroused his suspicion, and he approached a passing policeman and asked him to check the contents. Rachel was arrested immediately and a bomb-disposal expert detached the fuse and prevented the device from detonating. Rachel Ohevet-Ami was tried by a military tribunal and sentenced to life imprisonment. She was transferred to the women's jail in Bethlehem, where she was the first Jewess to be incarcerated among Arab women prisoners. In time she was joined by additional women, members of the Irgun and of Lehi. Seven years later, after the Second World War, Rachel was pardoned by the High Commissioner and released.

When war broke out, on September 1, 1939, Arab hostilities acts against Jews ceased, as did Irgun reprisals. In the course of the 1936-1939 riots, some 500 Jews were killed throughout the country.

## THE ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION OF THE IRGUN

In the 1920s, the British had already acceded to Arab demands and restricted immigration into Palestine, ostensibly on the basis of considerations of the country's economic absorptive capacity. In the 1930s, the British Government fixed a quota for immigration certificates and authorized the Jewish Agency to distribute them at its discretion. The Jewish Agency, which was dominated at the time by the socialist parties, tended to distribute the certificates to graduates of the 'hakhsharot' (training kibbutzim), which had been set up in Europe to prepare young people for life in communal agricultural settlements in Eretz Israel. The distribution was based on a key agreed among the various movements affiliated to the Zionist Organization. The Betar youth movement had been affiliated since 1935 to the New Zionist Organization, and therefore did not receive its due share of certificates.

The urgent plight of European Jewry and the restrictions on immigration generated an "illegal" immigration movement, which commenced with the beginning of modern Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel. At first Jews entered Palestine by land, mainly by slipping across the northern border, where they were aided by the inhabitants of the border settlements, the settlers at Kfar Giladi and members of the Betar battalion at Rosh Pina.

In the early thirties, when crossing the northern border became more difficult, illegal immigrants found alternative routes, exploiting loopholes in the Mandatory government's immigration regulations. In addition to the certificate holders, the British permitted the entry of high-school and university students, and many young people enrolled at the Hebrew University in

Jerusalem and subsequently remained in the country. Young women often entered into fictitious marriages with Palestinian nationals and were thus permitted to enter the country. In addition, increasing numbers arrived as "tourists" and never returned to their countries of origin. In 1935 close to 5,000 Jews entered the country in this way.

The first attempt to bring in a large group of immigrants by sea occurred in 1934 on the initiative of activists of the Hehalutz (Pioneer) Movement in Poland, who were unwilling to wait years for certificates. Some 350 men and women sailed on a hired ship, the Vallos, without the permission of the heads of the Jewish Agency, who disapproved of any attempt to sidestep the Mandatory immigration regulations and certificate arrangements.

On August 25, the boat reached the shores of Eretz Israel, and the passengers disembarked with the help of the Haganah, who received special permission to assist them. The Jewish Agency did not waver in its opposition to illegal immigration in any form in the years after the Vallos attempt, and this opposition lasted, in effect, until the end of 1938. It was feared that illegal immigration would affect the granting of certificates for legal immigrants.

Jabotinsky denounced the Jewish Agency's stand and advocated mass immigration, which would exploit all possible measures, legal and illegal. He also strongly condemned the efforts of the British Government to restrict the immigration of Jews to Palestine on the pretext that immigration must be adapted to the country's economic absorptive capacity. He argued that the solution to the Jewish problem in Europe was mass immigration, and that if the British chose to restrict immigration, then the borders of the country had to be breached illegally. In June, 1936, Jabotinsky exhorted Jews to liquidate the Diaspora through

'evacuation'. Later he coined the phrase "the national sport" and said:

The national sport which I recommend wholeheartedly to Jewish youth is called free immigration. This is undoubtedly the noblest sport in the world....it helps to win a homeland for homeless masses and transforms these masses into a nation...

### THE START OF "AF-AL-PI"

The renewal of illegal immigration by sea is linked to the name of Moshe Galili (Kriboshein), a Betarite (Betar member) from Eretz Israel who studied in Italy. In the summer of 1936, Galili visited a camp of Jewish refugees from Germany. The visit left a strong impression on him, and he decided to find ways to bring them to Eretz Israel, and named the project 'Af Al Pi' (Despite). With the help of the leaders of the Revisionist Zionist Organization in Vienna, he succeeded in organizing a small, 50-ton vessel. It reached Eretz Israel on April 13, 1937, anchored off Haifa port, and the 15 young people on board disembarked and reached shore safely. In September 1937 an additional vessel reached Tantura (Dor) beach, and all 54 of its young passengers landed safely. Three months later a third group, consisting of 95 Betarites, also reached Eretz Israel. In June, 1938, several months after Hitler entered Vienna, the largest group that Galili organized set out for Eretz Israel. The convoy of three boats carried 381 Betarites from Vienna, who disembarked at Tantura, where Irgun members loaded them onto buses and dispersed them throughout the country.

At this stage, disputes arose between Galili and activists in Vienna, and he abandoned his efforts. This marked the beginning of the second stage of Betarite immigration, when three main institutions took charge: the praesidium of the New Zionist Organization, the Betar administration and the Irgun command. The Irgun's task was to escort the ships and organize the disembarkation of the immigrants.

Two convoys of immigrants, one from Vienna and the second from Poland, 1,940 in all, made their way to the port of Fiume, Italy. They sailed from Fiume aboard the Draga and in October 1938 reached Eretz Israel. At Tantura they were met by Irgun members, who helped them on shore, and dispersed them throughout the country. From then on, the organization of immigration became the central activity of the Revisionist party and of the Irgun.

The following are some of the ships carrying illegal immigrants which reached Eretz Israel.

### **PARITA AND NAOMI JULIA**

On July 13, 1939, the 1300-ton Parita sailed from Constanza in Rumania with 850 immigrants aboard, most of them Betarites from Poland and Rumania. The ship reached Tel-Aviv on August 22 after a forty day journey along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Under cover of darkness, it anchored some fifty meters from shore. Thousands thronged the beach and helped bring the immigrants to shore in small boats.



### Parita near the Tel-Aviv shore

On September 1, the day the Second World War broke out, the 4000-ton immigrant vessel Naomi Julia left Sulina in Rumania with 1130 immigrants aboard. Nineteen days later it was intercepted off the coast of Lebanon by British aircraft. A British warship approached the vessel and troops boarded it, forcing the captain to change course for Haifa. The immigrants feared that the British would send them back to the open sea, and decided on passive resistance. They gathered on deck, poured away their drinking water and began to dismantle parts of the vessel and to throw them into the sea. Some even jumped into the water and began to swim ashore, despite being fired at by the soldiers. Eventually, the Mandatory Government agreed to bring the immigrants ashore

and they were transferred to the Sarafand detention camp. A month later they were all released.

## THE SAKARIA

This was the last immigrant ship despatched by the Irgun and the New Zionist Organization to reach its destination. Plans for its despatch had begun before the outbreak of Second World War. The 3000-ton Sakaria left Sulina in Rumania on February 1, 1940, with 2300 immigrants aboard. Ten days later, after passing through the Dardanelles and leaving Turkish territorial waters, it was intercepted by a British warship and boarded by a British force, which diverted it to the shores of Eretz Israel. On February 13, the Sakaria reached Haifa. The women and children were released, while the men were transferred to the detention camps at Atlit and Sarafand, where they spent six months before being released.

## "ALIYAH BET"

In view of the success of the "Af Al Pi" operations, increasing pressure was brought to bear on the leaders of the Jewish Agency to organize illegal immigration and not to confine themselves to allocating legal certificates, but there was no response. According to the "History Book of the Haganah":<sup>9</sup>

The political leadership of the Jewish Agency did not favor placing the immigration issue on the agenda at that moment. At the time, the Arab revolt was being revived, and the Jewish Agency was co-operating closely with the British authorities in the struggle against the Arabs. Many believed that, in view of the Peel Commission report, a Jewish state would be established very soon, and were reluctant to impede the political prospects by exacerbating relations with the authorities.

Despite the policy of the leaders, several ships, organized by Haganah activists, reached Eretz Israel without the authorization of the Jewish Agency.<sup>10</sup>

It is with pain and bitterness that Levi Schwartz [one of the organizers of illegal immigration] writes about 'the two governments which remained hostile to us - the two governments within our country' (the Mandatory government and the Jewish Agency). 'It is the cry from Eretz Israel - stop!' -

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<sup>9</sup> Toldot Hahagana, vol.2, p.1038.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid p. 1040.

he writes- 'which has, to a large extent, delayed our efforts and we have lost precious time. The summer months have passed, which are so convenient for our activities, without action.

Only in late 1938, after the British government had abandoned the scheme to establish a Jewish state in part of Palestine according to the Peel Commission recommendation, and was openly supporting the Arab national movement, did a change occur in the Zionist leadership's approach to illegal immigration. The Mossad Le'aliyah Bet (Illegal Immigration Institution) was established, and began to set up a wide network in Europe.

By the beginning of the Second World War, some 24,000 men, women and children had arrived in Eretz Israel as illegal immigrants. Of these, some 18,000 were brought by the Revisionists and the Irgun, and some 6,000, were brought by Aliyah Bet. It should be noted that some of the boats were organized by private individuals on a commercial basis.

After World War two it was the Mosad Le'Aliya Bet which carried the brunt of the illegal immigration.

## THE PATRIA AFFAIR

On October 1, 1940, three vessels sailed from the Rumanian port of Tulcia - the Atlantic, the Milos and the Pacific, carrying some 3,500 immigrants from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. At the beginning of November, the Pacific and the Milos reached Haifa, and their 1,800 passengers were transferred by the British to the 12,000-ton Patria. On November 20, the Atlantic arrived and 100 of its passengers were also transferred to the Patria. The British Government had decided to take drastic steps in order to put an end to the illegal immigration,

and announced the following day that the immigrants were to be deported to Mauritius, and that their fate would be decided when the war ended.

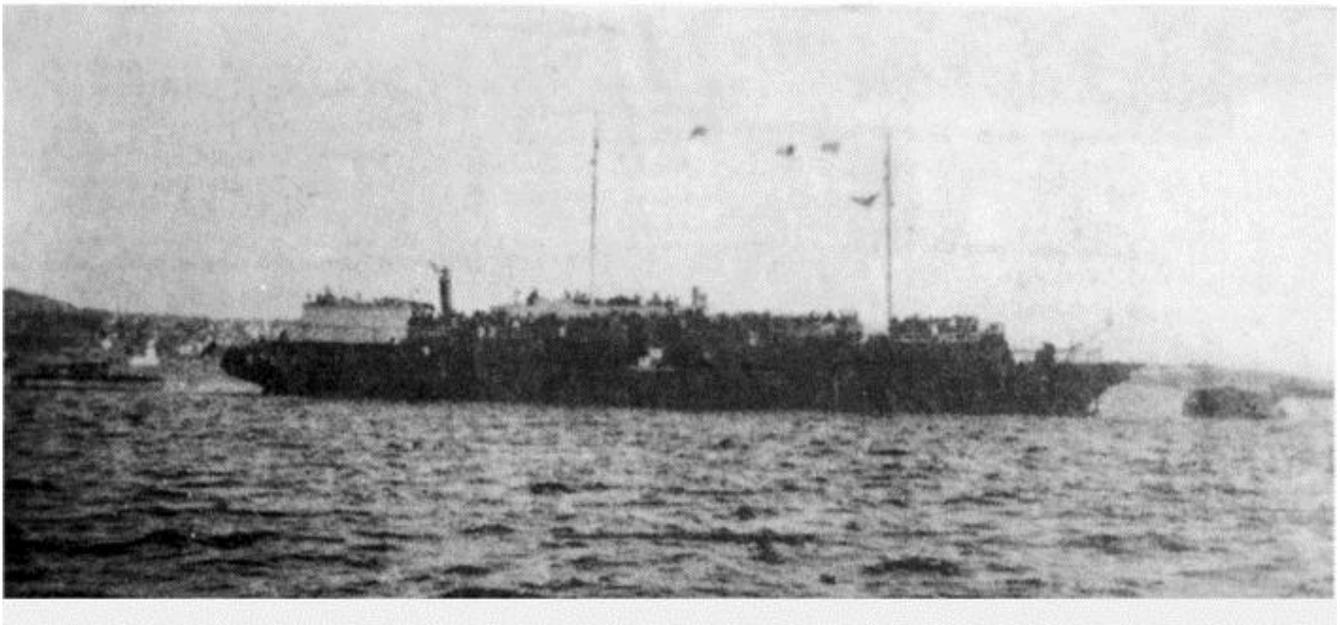
The Haganah leaders decided to sabotage the Patria in order to prevent it from leaving port. A mine was prepared at Haifa, concealed in a cloth bag and smuggled aboard the ship, where it was handed over to one of the Haganah liaison officers. On November 25, 1940, at about 9 a.m. the mine was detonated. The intention was to blast a small hole in the vessel's side so that it would slowly take in water allowing time to evacuate all those on board. However, the mine blasted a large hole and water flooded into the hold. Within 15 minutes the ship began to list with only a small portion remaining above water. Some 250 people went down with the ship. This was the largest number of victims of any single operation conducted by an organization since the beginning of British rule in Palestine.

The Patria survivors were eventually permitted to remain in Eretz Israel, but 1,584 of the Atlantic's passengers were deported to Mauritius, and returned to Eretz Israel only five years later, on August 20, 1945.

### THE "STRUMA"

On December 12, 1941, the Struma sailed from Constanza in Rumania with 769 immigrants aboard. The vessel, commissioned by the New Zionist Organization and the Irgun, was the last to leave Europe in wartime. The objective was to anchor in Turkey, and from there to await certificates for Palestine. When the ship reached its destination, the Turkish authorities prevented the disembarkation of the passengers for fear that the British would not give them certificates and Turkey would be forced to give

them refuge. Despite the despairing appeals of the captain that the ship was unable to continue on its way, the Turkish authorities sent the ship back to the Black Sea on February 13, 1942. On the following day a mighty explosion was heard and the ship went down. Only one of its passengers survived and eventually reached Eretz Israel.



The STRUMA

## THE SPLIT WITHIN THE IRGUN

The split in the Irgun occurred in June, 1940, and was rooted in the enduring differences of opinion between two schools of thought in the Irgun. The dominant group, headed by David Raziel, regarded Jabotinsky as the main leader and accepted the authority of the Revisionist party; the second group, led by Avraham Stern (Yair) held that the Irgun should determine its own political path and free itself of Jabotinsky's tutelage. In addition, Raziel believed that the Arab front was the main front, while Stern regarded the British as the principle enemy. This opinion was reinforced by the publication of the White Paper on May 17, 1939.

### THE ARREST OF DAVID RAZIEL

On Friday, May 19, 1939, Raziel was on his way from Tel-Aviv to Haifa for a meeting with Pinhas Rutenberg, one of the leaders of the Yishuv. At the time, the British were setting up roadblocks, and Raziel decided to travel by air. At Sede Dov airport near Tel-Aviv he boarded a plane headed for Haifa. The plane deviated from its route and landed at Lydda airport for a stopover. The passengers were taken to the waiting room, where they were asked, as was customary, to show identification. Several minutes later, British policemen appeared and arrested David Raziel.

After Raziel's arrest, Hanoch Kalai, his deputy, was appointed Commander in Chief. Avraham Stern, who was then in Poland, was summoned back to Palestine and appointed head of the Information Department. The other members of the General Headquarters remained in their positions. At the first meeting of the General Headquarters under Kalai, it was decided to launch a second front against the British administration in retaliation for the

publication of the White Paper. In accordance with Irgun procedure, the jailed commander was not consulted, and Raziel did not take part in decision-making.

The first operations directed against the British took place in Jerusalem. On June 2, 1939, Irgun fighters blew up three telephone network junctions. Close to 1,750 telephones were cut off, including some serving the army and the police. After the Jerusalem operations, telephone network junctions were also blown up in Tel-Aviv, and the railway line between Tel-Aviv and Lydda was attacked.

Four days later the Irgun fighters again launched an attack on British targets. This time they damaged eight telephone network junctions, and dozens of public telephone structures. They also destroyed four of the British Electricity Corporation transformers, plunging the city of Jerusalem into darkness. In all, they attacked 23 sites and dozens of fighters took part in the operation.

## **THE OUTBREAK OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR**

On August 31, 1939, the Irgun General Headquarters convened for a special session in Tel-Aviv. At the height of the meeting, C.I.D (British Intelligence) detectives and policemen burst into the room. The entire General Headquarters was arrested (Hanoch Kalai, Avraham Stern, Aharon Heichman) as well as Haim Lubinsky and Yashka Eliav, who were not members. The detainees were taken first to the Jaffa police station and later to the Jerusalem jail. They were cut off from the outside world and were unaware that the day after their arrest, the Germans invaded Poland and the Second World War broke out.

Raziel regarded Hitler as the prime enemy of the Jewish people, and therefore decided that it was essential to collaborate with the

British against the joint enemy. When war broke out, Raziel wrote a letter from his place of detention to the British Commander in Chief in Palestine, to the Mandatory government secretary and to the British police commissioner. In his letter, he informed them of his readiness to declare a truce and offered help to the Allies in their struggle against the Germans. In parallel, Raziel despatched instructions to Benyamin Zeroni, who had been appointed commander of the Irgun after Kalai's arrest, to announce the suspension of Irgun operations. Consequently, on September 11, Zeroni distributed a leaflet, which stated:

To avoid disrupting the course of the war against Germany, and in order to invest maximum effort in assisting Great Britain and its allies, the Irgun Zvai Le'umi has decided to suspend all offensive activities in Palestine which could cause harm to the British government and in any way be of assistance to the greatest enemy the Jewish people has ever known - German Nazism.

The leaflet concluded with the hope that the war would give "this tortured nation the sole recompense it deserves - the achievement of sovereign independence within the historic borders of the liberated homeland."

The members of the Irgun General Headquarters, who had been transferred from the central jail in Jerusalem to the detention camp at Sarafand, did not share Raziel's views, and were particularly surprised that he had stipulated no conditions whatsoever in return for collaboration with the British. Criticism was also levelled at his excessive intimacy with the leaders of the Revisionist party, who were also being detained at Sarafand.

In mid-October, 1939, Raziel was brought to Jerusalem for a meeting with Giles, the head of the C.I.D, the deputy government secretary and Pinhas Rutenberg, one of the leaders of the Yishuv. Raziel reiterated that, due to the emergency situation, the Irgun had decided to suspend all

hostile action, and was ready to collaborate with the British in their war against Nazi Germany. He demanded that all Irgun members who had been arrested by the British be freed. On the following day, Raziel was released and ordered to report once a week to Giles' office in Jerusalem. Eight months later (June 18, 1940), his comrades were also freed.



**Avraham Stern**

Immediately after their release, the General Headquarters held a stormy meeting in Tel-Aviv. The main confrontation took place between Avraham Stern (Yair) and David Raziel on two central

issues: the first was the question of party authority. Stern and his comrades argued that the Irgun had to extricate itself from its dependence on the Revisionist party, and deC.I.De for itself on its future political path. In their opinion, the leaders of the Revisionist movement, who enjoyed legal status and were known to the authorities, were undermining the conspiratorial nature of Irgun activity, and obstructing the struggle against the British because of their concern for the survival of their party. Raziel, on the other hand, asserted that the party was the source of public moral and financial support, and a reservoir for the recruitment of fighters to the underground. According to Raziel, the movement's leaders, headed by Zeev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, should determine the political path and the Irgun should bow to their authority.

The second issue was the question of the truce. Stern claimed that the fight against the British should continue, even though Great Britain was at war with Germany. To his mind, as long as the British ruled Palestine, they were the main foe and had to be driven out of the country. For Raziel, on the other hand, the Germans were the arch enemy of the Jewish people, and he argued that no impediments should be placed in the path of the British as long as they were fighting Hitler. On this issue, Raziel was in accord with Jabotinsky who, the White Paper policy notwithstanding, regarded the British as allies in the war against Germany. To these differences of opinion should be added personal conflicts based on character and style, which added fuel to the flames.

The split was inevitable, and on July 17, 1940, Avraham Stern seceded and founded the organization known at first as Irgun Zvai Le'umi Be'yisrael – National Military Organization in Israel. (Raziel's organization was called Irgun Zvai Le'umi Be'eretz

Yisrael (National Military Organization in Eretz Israel). Later, Stern's organization became known as Lohamei Herut Yisrael (Israel Freedom Fighters), Lehi for short. The split had a devastating effect on the Irgun and was accompanied by mutual recriminations. Many senior commanders and rank-and-file members withdrew, and the underground was exposed to the Haganah and the C.I.D, which was able, with ease, to draw up lists of names, addresses and positions of many active members. The arsenals also passed from hand to hand and some even fell into the possession of the Haganah.

At the time of the split, Jabotinsky was in the United States, where he was trying to organize Jewish units to fight the Nazis within the framework of the British armed forces. Jabotinsky, who had been suffering for years from heart trouble, spared no effort to rescue European Jewry from the imminent catastrophe. The occupation of Poland by the Germans and the destruction of the Jewish communities in Europe broke his heart, and on August 4 he suffered a fatal heart attack while at a Betar camp near New York. Word of his death stunned Jews all over the world, and there was profound mourning in Eretz Israel and in the Diaspora.

## THE DEATH OF DAVID RAZIEL

The first task of the new General Headquarters was to rally the ranks and reorganize the branches, which had been operating without a central guiding hand. In parallel, Aryeh Posek and Yitzhak Berman concentrated on establishing closer ties with British army intelligence, seeking ways of collaborating with them.

In mid 1941, the British were on the defensive. The German army was advancing in North Africa and was threatening Egypt; the French Vichy government, ruling under the auspices of the

Germans, was occupying Syria and Lebanon and constituted a threat to Palestine from the north; in Iraq, Rashid Ali al Kilani had started a revolt and had taken over the oil fields, which were vital for the war effort. To make matters worse, on May 2, Kilani directed the revolt against the British, placed the Habaniyeh airbase under siege and took the staff of the British Embassy in Baghdad hostage.

In their plight, the heads of British intelligence in Egypt turned to Berman, and asked if the Irgun could despatch a unit to blow up the refineries in Baghdad, since the fuel reserves were vital to the Luftwaffe (the German Air Force). Berman passed on the British request to Raziell, who immediately assented. He organized a four-man unit and decided to head it. His comrades tried, unsuccessfully, to dissuade him from taking part. On Sunday, May 17, 1941, the four left for the military airfield at Tel Nof. Raziell was accompanied by Yaakov Meridor, Yaakov-Sika Aharoni and Yaakov Terezi (the latter two were unaware of Raziell's true identity). At Tel Nof, they boarded an RAF transport plane, and several hours later landed at Habaniyeh. After landing, it was explained to Raziell that the plan had been postponed and that, instead, the unit was to carry out intelligence missions in preparation for the capture of Faluja (which was en route to Baghdad). The next day the unit set out, accompanied by a British officer and reached the river, which they were scheduled to cross. However, there was room for only two passengers in the sole available boat. Raziell ordered Meridor and Sika to cross the river and carry out the mission, while He himself, with Terezi and the British officer, made their way back to the car. Suddenly a German plane swooped down and bombed the area, scoring a direct hit on the car and killed Raziell and the British officer

instantly. The driver of the car was injured while Terezi, who managed to jump clear, was unscathed. That evening Meridor returned from the mission, heard the tragic news, and proclaimed:

**This is the Commander in Chief of the Irgun, David Raziel.**

Word of Raziel's death stunned and greatly confused the Irgun. It was hard to accept the loss of the leader, and many members could not understand why Raziel had gone on a mission to Iraq. The Irgun's path became unclear, and the internal debates intensified. Yaakov Meridor was chosen to head the General Headquarters and, together with his comrades, he sought ways of overcoming the crisis. It was only in the winter of 1942, about a year after David Raziel's death, that the Irgun began to recover from the blow it had suffered. This period was a turning point in the course of the war, as the Allied forces began to prevail over Germany. Information was beginning to flood in on the extermination of European Jewry by the Nazis, and it was clear that it was no longer possible to remain inactive. The reorganization of the ranks began: officer training courses were held to prepare a cadre of instructors of new recruits, and the underground newspaper Herut began to appear on a regular basis. Propaganda activities were stepped up among the young generation, and efforts were made to acquire weapons to replenish the arsenals which had been emptied during the split. More and more members favored ending the truce, which the Irgun had declared at the outbreak of the war, and terminating the collaboration with the British army. On June 17, 1943, Herut reported a change in relations with the British authorities:

When war broke out, the Jewish people declared their loyalty to the British government, to help it vanquish the enemy of the entire world and of the Jewish people. Great Britain has betrayed this friendship. The Jewish people have not been acknowledged as a fighting nation. A Hebrew army has not been established.

## THE REVOLT IS PROCLAIMED

In 1943, it was already clear that the victory of the Allies was only a question of time. The dimensions of the Holocaust were known in Palestine, but the British government adhered to the White Paper policy, and continued to bar the gates of the country to Jewish immigration. Moreover, those immigrant ships which succeeded in escaping from occupied Europe were not only prohibited from entering Palestine, but were sometimes even forced to return to Europe, although the fate that awaited their passengers was clear to all.

The conduct of the British government further infuriated young Jews in Palestine. The Irgun General Headquarters came to the conclusion that the truce it had proclaimed when war broke out had to be ended, and that it was essential to take action against the British without waiting till the war was over.

In the higher echelons of the Irgun the feeling prevailed that, in order to renew the struggle against the British, it was essential to make far-reaching changes in the leadership. According to Eliyahu Lankin, who was then a senior commander in the Irgun:

We said that we had to find a man to command us who had no connection with what had occurred during and after the split [i.e. the split with Avraham Stern], but it was hard to find such a man in Eretz Israel.

Menahem Begin, Betar leader in Poland, arrived in Eretz Israel at this point. When war broke out, he had been arrested by the Soviet authorities and sent to a detention camp in Siberia. About a year later he was released under the terms of the Soviet-Polish

treaty, which freed all Polish nationals from Soviet jails. He then joined the Polish force established in the Soviet Union (General Anders Army) and reached Eretz Israel with this army. He reported immediately to the Irgun command, but refused to desert from the ranks. Only after being officially discharged was he asked to accept command of the Irgun. Eliyahu Lankin, one of those who approached Begin, remembers that his response was:

"Gentlemen, I have been a Betarite and a soldier in the Polish army, but I have no military experience."

"We told him," Lankin recalls, "that we did not lack fighters. We needed a leader of authority to blaze our political and ideological path."



Menachem Begin

In December 1943, Begin was chosen as Commander of the Irgun. He established a new General Headquarters, which included Aryeh Ben Eliezer, Eliyahu Lankin and Shlomo Levi (Lev-Ami). (Levi was the only one who had been a member of the previous command). At its first meeting, the General Headquarters passed two important resolutions: the first one was, that an armed struggle against the British Mandatory government had to be launched without delay, and the second, that the Irgun had to detach itself from the Revisionist party and determine its own path.

On February 1, 1944, the Irgun plastered posters on the walls of buildings all over the country, proclaiming a revolt against British rule. It stated, among other things:

## TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE DEWELLING IN ZION!

We are in the last stage of the world war. We face an historic decision on our future destiny.

Each and every nation is now conducting its national reckoning. What are its triumphs and what were its losses? What road must it take in order to achieve its goal and fulfil its mission? Who are its friends and who its enemies? Who is the true ally and who the traitor? And who is proceeding towards the decisive battle?

Sons of Israel, Hebrew youth!

The armistice proclaimed at the beginning of the war has been breached by the British. The rulers of the country have chosen to disregard loyalty, concessions and sacrifice; they continue to implement their aim: the eradication of sovereign Zionism...

We must draw the necessary conclusions without wavering. There can no longer be a truce between the Hebrew nation and youth and the British administration of Eretz Israel, which is betraying our brethren to Hitler. Our nation will fight this regime, fight to the end...

And this is our demand:

Rule over Eretz Israel must immediately be handed over to a provisional Jewish government...

The establishment of a Jewish government and the implementation of its plans - this is the sole way of rescuing our people, salvaging our existence and our honor. We will follow this path, for there is no other.

Our fighting youth will not be deterred by victims, blood and suffering. They will not surrender; will not rest until they restore our past glory, until they ensure our people of a homeland, freedom, honor, bread, justice and law. And if you help them, then your own eyes will soon behold the return to Zion and the rebirth of Israel.

May God be with us and aid us!

## THE IRGUN ZVAI LE'UMI IN ERETZ ISRAEL

When the struggle began, the Irgun stipulated two restricting conditions: avoidance of individual terror as a method and postponement of attacks on military targets until the war ended.

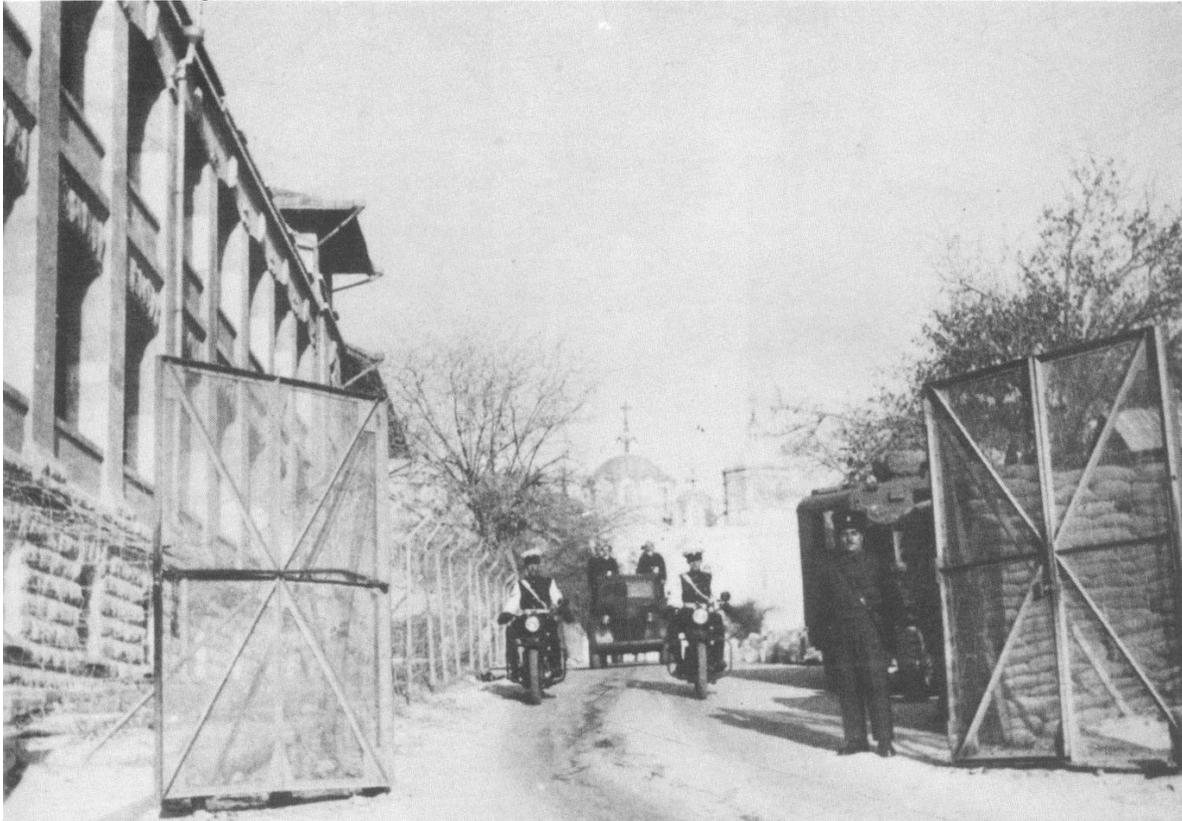
## THE BEGINNING

The first target of the Irgun fighters was the immigration offices of the British Mandatory authorities. These offices, more than anything else, symbolized the restriction of immigration and the frustration of efforts to rescue the Jews of Europe. The Immigration Office was careful to grant certificates only according to the quota fixed by the White Paper, i.e. the number of immigrants was not permitted to exceed 15'000 per year. From this tiny number were deducted those Jews who immigrated illegally and were caught by the authorities. According to the White Paper, immigration was to cease completely on March 31, 1944.

On Saturday night, February 12, 1944, Irgun fighters attacked the immigration offices simultaneously in Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv and Haifa. The operation went smoothly and without casualties. Two weeks later, the fighters set out again, this time to blow up the income tax offices, again in the three large towns. An income tax law had been introduced in Palestine in 1941 and, as anticipated, had proven highly unpopular, particularly since most of the burden fell on the Jewish population. One of the reasons for selecting this target was that even those who did not support the Irgun campaign against the British were unlikely to condemn an attempt to prevent the collection of income tax. This operation also proved successful and claimed no casualties.

After the baptism of fire, it was decided to take a more daring step and attack the nerve center of British rule, British Intelligence - the C.I.D and the police. Once again the operation was coordinated to take place simultaneously in the three large towns. In Jerusalem, the task was more difficult since the C.I.D and the police headquarters were housed in the Russian Compound,

which was well guarded. Despite the difficulties, the Irgun fighters, under Rahamim Cohen ("Gad") succeeded in infiltrating the C.I.D offices and placing the explosives. However, the duty officer that night, Sergeant Scott, on a routine patrol of inspection noticed a suspicious movement on the balcony. He was injured when fire was opened on him, but before he collapsed he succeeded in shooting one of the Irgun fighters, Asher Benziman ("Avshalom"). Despite the exchange of fire, the sappers succeeded in preparing the explosive devices and retreating. Several minutes later, there was a loud explosion and the building collapsed. Asher Benziman succeeded in escaping, but died of his wounds shortly afterwards - the first casualty of the revolt. The British officer also died as a result of his injuries.



The Entrance to the Russian Compound

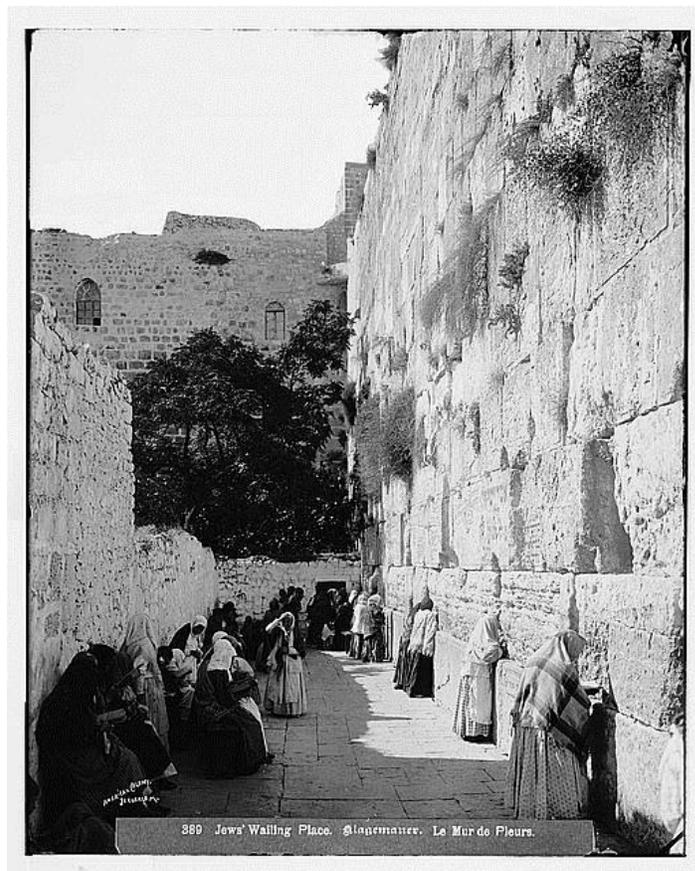
The raid on the C.I.D headquarters in Jaffa was commanded by Amichai Paglin ("Gidi") and the attack on the Haifa C.I.D was led by Yaakov Hillel. The two raids were carried out successfully.

As more operations were undertaken, the fighters gained military experience and they became increasingly daring. On May 17, 1944, some 40 fighters set out to attack and occupy the government broadcasting station at Ramallah in order to make an underground broadcast from there. The takeover was smooth and was carried out without loss of life, but the broadcast itself did not take place because of an unexpected hitch in operating the transmitters. On the other hand, two months later, the blowing up of the district C.I.D in Jerusalem was carried out without a hitch: on the night of July 13, 1944, an Irgun unit broke into the building in Mamilla Street, detonated explosive devices and retreated without suffering casualties.

## THE 'WALL' SCHEME

One of the operations which undermined the prestige of the British authorities and made them the object of ridicule was the 'Wall' scheme, which concerned prayer arrangements at the Western Wall. In the late nineteen twenties, the Arabs had already begun to complain that blowing the shofar at the Western Wall was an insult to Islam. In 1931, the King's Order in Council (the legislative authority of the Mandatory government) stipulated that the Moslems' ownership rights to the Temple Mount also encompassed the Western Wall area. As a result, Jews were banned from blowing the shofar at the Wall, despite the fact that this ceremony is an integral part of the Rosh Hashana (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) prayer services.

The ban deeply offended Jews, and the Irgun decided to act. After the imposition of the ban, Irgun and Betar members "smuggled" a shofar into the Western Wall area every Yom Kippur. There a volunteer was waiting to blow the 'Tekia Gedola', the blast which marks the end of the fast. This was not easily done, since large numbers of British policemen were stationed along the routes to the Wall and conducted careful searches of the belongings of the Jews visiting the Wall. The shofar blower was usually arrested and jailed in the Kishleh, the police building in the Old City, which had served as a jail since the Turkish era. (The building is still standing and is now used by the Israeli police).



The Wailing Wall

The blowing of the shofar at the Wall at the end of Yom Kippur was not only a religiously ceremony, but also bolstered national pride throughout the country. On Yom Kippur September 1942, Menahem Begin visited the Wall and witnessed of British policemen bursting into the area in search of the Betarite who had blown the shofar.

In summer, 1944, the question of the shofar ceremony at the Wall was raised again. This time the Irgun decided not to confine itself to bringing in a single shofar-blower to mark the end of Yom Kippur. Several weeks before the High Holydays, the Irgun began to issue warnings to the British to keep away from the Wall, and announced that any policemen found near the Wall on Yom Kippur would be punished. As the fast-day approached, the warnings were reiterated daily. Nine proclamations were issued in all; the following is the text of one of them:

## NOTICE

Any British Constable who will commit acts of violence near the Wailing Wall on the Day of Atonement and in defiance of the moral law of civilized people will disturb the worshippers assembled there and will desecrate the sanctity of prayer will be regarded and listed by the Hebrew Youth as a criminal offender. Visitors or passers-by whether Moslems or Christians, will not be disturbed in their approaching or passing the Wailing Wall.

The Irgun Zvai Le'umi in Eretz Israel

The tension mounted. The Irgun created the impression that it intended to concentrate large forces in the Wailing Wall area, to bar access by violent means. This was, however, a diversionary tactic, and the Irgun had an entirely different plan in mind. As Yom Kippur came to an end, attacks were launched at four police stations throughout the country. These buildings, known as Taggart fortresses, were large structures of reinforced concrete, built in the 1930s according to the design of the British engineer, Sir Charles Taggart. The Irgun's warnings about the Wailing Wall were examples of psychological warfare, serving to divert attention from the main military operation. Surprisingly enough, the authorities heeded the Irgun's warnings, and not a single British policeman was present in the Wall area on Yom Kippur. The traditional blowing of the shofar after the final prayer took place without interruption, and the congregation then burst into a loud rendering of "Hatikva", the national anthem. No clashes occurred that day at the Wall or en route to it, and the British detectives were disappointed by the absence of Irgun armed forces. They were unaware that the Irgun's fighting units were at that very moment conducting an operation against the Taggart fortresses in Haifa (under Rahamim Cohen), Kalkiliya (under Nathan-Niko Germant), Gadera (under Yehoshua Weinstein and Shraga Alis) and Beit Dagan (under Yaakov Sika-Aharoni).

## THE 'HUNTING SEASON'

The 'Hunting Season', or 'Season' for short, was the code name for the Haganah's persecution of the Irgun, aimed at putting an end to its activities.

As a result of the Irgun's proclamation of a revolt against British rule, military operations were launched against various government targets. The official leadership of the Yishuv, the heads of the Vaad Le'umi and the Jewish Agency, were opposed to this activity and demanded that it cease. They argued that the national institutions had been democratically elected, and that consequently the Irgun and Lehi should accept their authority.

In September 1944, Menahem Begin, Irgun commander, held two meetings with Moshe Sneh, head of the Haganah General Headquarters, and Eliyahu Golomb, one of the Haganah leaders. At these meetings, which lasted into the night, relations between the Irgun and the Yishuv leadership were discussed at length.

On the question of national authority, Moshe Sneh said, inter alia:

To expand your activities requires control of the souls and the property of the public. And it is we who control the public. We do not intend to renounce that control, because it is we who have received a mandate from the Jewish people... If you continue your activities, a clash will result.

Eliyahu Golomb was even blunter:

We demand that you cease immediately [your activity against the British]... We do not want a civil war... but we will be ready

for that as well. We will be forced to adopt our own measures to prevent your activities. The police, in our opinion, will not be able to liquidate you, but if the Yishuv rebels, it could come to that. It is clear that we are not speaking of your physical liquidation, but the developments could lead to that as well, they could lead to your destruction. And then it will not matter who started - it is a question of propaganda and information.

Begin vehemently rejected the charge that the Irgun wanted to take over control of the Yishuv and said:

We have no intention of seizing power in the Yishuv. We have said this on many occasions. We have no such ambitions... we think that Ben-Gurion is the man who can lead our youth into battle today. But in order to do so, Ben-Gurion must leave his residence in Rehavia. For as long as he is there, he cannot conduct that war. We have no party or administrative interests. We pray for the day when we can proclaim the end of the Irgun's task and disperse it. And the moment that you go out to war - we will all rally under a united leadership, in which you will constitute the decisive majority. But as long as you have not done this, we will conduct our battle.

The turning point in the struggle against the Jewish underground was the assassination of Lord Moyne in Cairo. Lord Moyne, who was known to be an anti-Zionist, had been appointed Minister of State for the Middle East, and from his place of residence in Cairo was responsible for implementing the White Paper policy. Lehi considered Lord Moyne to be responsible for the deportation of the immigrant ships, plotted to assassinate him. Two of its

members, Eliyahu Hakim and Eliyahu Bet Zuri, were despatched to Cairo, and on November 6, 1944, they carried out the assassination, but were caught shortly after carrying out their mission. On January 10, 1945 they were charged with murder. Hakim and Beit-Zuri, manacled, stood calmly beside their Egyptian guards with red fezzes. Both were, and had been since their capture, completely self-possessed. They did not take part in the proceedings, and when the testimony was completed, Eliyahu Hakim rose to his feet and said:

We accuse Lord Moyne and the government he represents, with murdering hundreds and thousands of our brethren; we accuse him of seizing our country and looting our possessions... We were forced to do justice and to fight.

After being sentenced to death, they rose to their feet and sang the national anthem. On March 23, 1945, they were dressed in the traditional, ill-fitting red burlap suit of condemned men, marched barefoot to the gallows, were blindfolded at the scaffold, and hanged.

The assassination of Lord Moyne created shock waves in Palestine and throughout the world. Even before the identity of the assassins became known, the Jewish Agency Executive convened and issued a fierce condemnation of the act. At the same meeting, it decided on a series of measures against "terrorist organizations" in Palestine.

Once the Season had been approved by the Jewish Agency Executive, the matter was submitted to the Histadrut Council, the body which, more than any other framework, determined the

conduct of the "organized Yishuv". It published an official announcement on the matter:

Jewish youth must fight terror and its perpetrators!

[...] The perpetrators of terror, who call themselves the 'Irgun Zvai Le'umi' and 'Lohamei Herut Israel' are traitors! ... They must be removed from our classrooms, banished from our workshops!

Their propaganda, whether written or spoken, must not be permitted...

No refuge must be given to these malefactors in the homes of your parents, relatives and acquaintances!

The incorrigible despoilers must be isolated and abandoned, until they are spewed out of the ranks of the Yishuv, until terror ceases and its organization is eradicated.

As regards collaboration with the British police, the announcement went on to declare:

The Jewish Agency proposes herewith that all persons who are acquainted with any of the terrorists should immediately inform the police by word of mouth, in writing or by telephone and observe the injunction: 'And thou shalt root out the evil from thy midst'. Fathers who have sons in these organizations should, in the same fashion, inform the police and observe thereby the injunction: 'If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, he must take him out to the elders and say to them: This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice. And all the men of the city shall stone him with stones.' Particularly since the English do not intend to do the

terrorists any harm. They will hold them for a year or two apart from other people until their surplus energy, which apparently results from overeating and from inactivity and sloth, has cooled down [...] ]...

It is time to act for the sake of the Jewish people and the homeland.

Two members of the Jewish Agency Executive, Rabbi Yehuda Fishman-Maimon and Yitzhak Greenboim, continued to oppose any form of collaboration with the British police, and when the decision was taken, Greenboim announced his resignation.

The following is a 1944 pamphlet published by the Irgun proclaiming the policy of non-retaliation.

### THERE WILL BE NO FRATERNAL WAR

[...] It is with gloomy face that the loyal Jew asks himself and his neighbor: Are we to suffer this as well? Will a civil war break out in Eretz Israel? Will our home be destroyed before it has been built? Will our enemies see their base aspiration fulfilled?

The air is filled with gunpowder. Orators and leaders do not cease to speak of the internal strife. One of them has said that it has already begun; the second – even more loudmouthed – has profaned his lips with the hysterical cry: blood for blood, an eye for an eye! A third has labored and labored until he has finally devised a plan to save the Jewish people. And this is the plan: to expel from their homes, to expel from schools, to starve and to hand over our fighting youths to the British Police. 'It is them or us,' it declared, 'and all means are

acceptable in order to liquidate them.' [From Ben-Gurion's speech at the Histadrut Conference].

Yes, the dread of the loyal Jew is understandable. Are we to witness our children raising their hands or aiming their weapons against one another? What will they do, those persecuted people against whom the terrible edicts are directed? How will they defend themselves? ...These are grave questions, and we feel it our duty – on our own behalf and on behalf of the Irgun Zvai Le'umi in Palestine – to provide an answer. And this is our answer: you may stay calm, loyal Jews; there will be no fraternal strife in this country...

It was not easy for Begin to persuade his subordinates to exercise restraint. There were two underlying reasons for his decision: firstly, he said, to react could result in the Yishuv being plunged into a civil war, which would spell the end of the struggle against British rule in Eretz Israel. Secondly, he felt it undesirable to exacerbate relations with the Haganah, because they might later deC.I.De to join the struggle against foreign rule. Members of the Irgun who had been trained in the spirit of 'breaking the havlaga', found it hard to accept the decision of the General Headquarters. They did not, however, violate the order, possibly in the hope that their leader's evaluation would prove correct, and that the Haganah would join the struggle against the British. (This did indeed occur a year later, when the Jewish Resistance Movement – Tenuat Hameri Ha'ivri - was established).

The entire Haganah command was preoccupied with the Season, and information on the Irgun and the Lehi was amassed by the Haganah's intelligence service, 'Shai'. The intelligence

service had some 250 Palmach fighters (the elite Haganah unit) at its disposal, who were brought to town and assigned to the Season operation. They shadowed suspects and kidnapped Irgun fighters on the basis of lists they received from the Shai. In addition, the Palmach guarded the Jewish Agency leaders for fear that the Irgun or Lehi might react by perpetrating counter-kidnappings. The Jewish Agency in Jerusalem set up a Department for Special Assignments, which maintained close contact with the C.I.D. It was this department which handed over to the British a list of names of persons suspected of being members of the Irgun.

Close to one thousand people were handed over to the British. Most of them were taken to the Latrun detention camp and several hundred were deported to detention camps in Africa (see "African Exile"). In addition, dozens of suspects were kidnapped and detained in prison cells built especially for this purpose on various kibbutzim. They were interrogated by members of the Haganah Intelligence Service and occasionally suffered torture.

A letter from the High Commissioner in Jerusalem to the Colonial Secretary in London dated March 1, 1945 reveals that the Jewish Agency exploited its collaboration with the C.I.D in order to hand over active members of the Revisionist party, who were not even members of the Irgun, and thereby to rid itself of political rivals. The letter states, among other things: <sup>11</sup>

1. [...] In all, the Jewish Agency has supplied so far details of 830 suspects, of whom 337 have been located and detained so far. Of these, 241 are being held under the Emergency Regulations; the remainders have been released either under

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<sup>11</sup> Public Recors, CO 733/457.

surveillance or unconditionally... Several useful arrests have also been made in the Irgun center in Tel-Aviv.

2. Unfortunately, the Jewish Agency's lists of so-called terrorists, continues to include numerous people who have no terror connections, but politically speaking are undesirable to the Jewish Agency. This adds to the difficulties the police has in separating the sheep from the goats [...]

The most serious kidnapping in C.I.Dent was the case of Yaakov Tavin, who was in charge of the Irgun's intelligence service and on the Haganah's most wanted list. For three months, Tavin succeeded in evading the Haganah men who were shadowing him, but at the end of February 1945, he finally fell into their hands. The kidnapping was described in Ha'aretz of March 2, 1945 as follows:

Passersby in Dizengoff and Yirmiyahu streets were greatly struck on Tuesday, February 27, 1945, by the kidnapping of a young man in the street. The kidnapping occurred at 11 a.m, and was witnessed by a large number of people. A large taxi halted at the corner of Dizengoff and Yirmiyahu streets, and several men emerged, one of them dressed in police uniform. They approached the young man, who was standing on the pavement holding a package. Shouting 'Thief!' they attacked him and began to hit him.

The crowd thought that he was in fact a thief, and several of them joined the attackers and helped them to push the young man into the taxi. He struggled with them and shouted in Yiddish and in Hebrew: 'Jews, help me! Why do you let them

hit a Jew?' He was thrown into the car, which swiftly drove away.

Tavin's kidnappers blindfolded him, tied his hands and forced him to lie on the floor of the car. He was driven to Kibbutz Givat Hashlosha and from there was taken to Kibbutz Ein Harod, where he was imprisoned in a barn which had been converted into a detention room. Tavin was held there for six months and underwent numerous interrogations, accompanied by severe torture. He was released when the Second World War ended and the Haganah entered into negotiations with the Irgun for the establishment of 'The United Resistance '.

The kidnappings were fiercely condemned in the Yishuv. The Chief Rabbinate published a strongly-worded notice which declared:

This cruel deed is utterly prohibited by the Torah, and is alien and abominable to the Jewish people and to every Jew. It desecrates the name of Israel and our settlement in Eretz Israel.

Cease these cruel and despicable acts.

The distinguished philosopher, Hugo Bergmann, who was a member of 'Brit Shalom' and a sworn opponent of the Jewish underground, wrote: <sup>12</sup>

The kidnappings are the tomb of democratic public life... a death sentence against all we hold dear in the Yishuv... These Ku Klux

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<sup>12</sup> "be`ayot", 1945, p. 155.

Klan acts are being committed lawlessly, and those accused have no opportunity to defend themselves.

The protesters were joined by civil organizations and by the Tel-Aviv Municipality, together with municipalities and local councils all over the country. Public pressure proved effective and the Season gradually lapsed.

Although the Season caused the Irgun considerable harm, it did not liquidate it. Many of the fighters were arrested, but new recruits took the place of the veterans, and in the spring of 1945 the organization began to recover. After a seven-month interval, the Irgun again went into action. In May 1945, telephone poles were sabotaged throughout the country, and home-made mortars were set up opposite various government targets in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv. In Jerusalem, mortars were put into position opposite the King David Hotel (the seat of the British military command and the government secretariat), and opposite the government printing press (alongside the railway station). In Tel-Aviv, the mortars were located near the Sarona military camp (now the Kirya government area in Tel-Aviv). The oil pipeline linking the Iraqi oilfields to the Haifa refineries was also sabotaged. On July 23, 1945, a joint unit of Irgun and Lehi fighters, under the command of Yehoshua Weinstein (Benyamin) blew up a railway bridge adjacent to the Arab village of Yibne (present-day Yavne). This was the first joint operation of the two organizations, after they had resolved to act together against British rule.

## THE UNITED RESISTANCE

As the Second World War approached its end, hopes ran high among the leaders of the Zionist movement that the British government would amend its policy towards Jewish immigration to Palestine. Such hopes, however, were soon dashed. In the summer of 1945, a general election was held in Britain. Labor pledged that if they were returned to power, they would revoke the White Paper and permit Holocaust survivors to immigrate to Palestine without delay. They also promised to act for the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine, which would gradually evolve into an independent state.

However, after sweeping victory at the polls, the new Labor government soon declared that there would be no changes in Britain's foreign policy, nor would any concessions be granted with regard to Jewish immigration. Labor's attachment to the White Paper greatly disappointed Jewish leaders in Palestine and the Diaspora. On September 23, 1945, Moshe Sneh, head of the Haganah General Headquarters, cabled David Ben-Gurion (then in London) as follows:

...it has been proposed that we stage a grave inC.I.Dent. Then we will issue a statement declaring that this is only a warning, and hint at much more serious inC.I.Dents to follow.

Ben-Gurion replied swiftly on October 1: <sup>13</sup> (from the Slik No.1, 1991, Haganah Archives)

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<sup>13</sup> Haganah Archives, From the Slik no.1, 1991.

[...] We must not confine our reaction in Palestine to immigration and settlement. It is essential to adopt tactics of S. [sabotage] and reprisal. Not individual terror, but retaliation for each and every Jew murdered by the White Paper. The S. action must carry weight and be impressive, and care should be taken, insofar as possible, to avoid casualties...

The two rival factions [Irgun and Lehi] should be invited to collaborate on condition that there is uniform authority and that total discipline is observed. Constant effort is required to ensure solidarity within the Yishuv and, above all, among the fighters, for the sake of the struggle.

Our reaction should be constant, bold and calculated for a considerable period...

Sneh regarded Ben-Gurion's letter as a warrant for the launching of military action against the British. As a first step, the Season was suspended, and discussions initiated on collaboration between the Haganah, Irgun and Lehi. The negotiations were crowned with success, and at the end of October, 1945, an agreement was signed between the three organizations for the establishment of the "Jewish Resistance Movement". The following are the main points of the agreement: <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Begin, In the Underground, vol.2, p.7.

- a. The Haganah organization has entered upon a military struggle against British rule.
- b. The Irgun and Lehi will not implement combat plans without the approval of the command of the Resistance Movement.
- c. The Irgun and Lehi will carry out combat missions assigned to them by the command of the Resistance Movement.
- d. Discussions of proposed operations will not be formal. Representatives of the three fighting organizations will meet regularly, or whenever the need arises, and will discuss such plans from a political and practical viewpoint.
- e. Once operations have been approved in principle, experts from the three organizations will clarify the details.
- f. The need to obtain the consent of the Resistance Movement command does not apply to arms' acquisition (i.e. confiscating weapons from the British). Irgun and Lehi have the right to conduct such operations at their discretion.
- g. The agreement between the three fighting organizations is based on 'positive precepts'.
- h. If, at some time, the Haganah should be ordered to abandon the military struggle against the British authorities, the Irgun and Lehi will continue to fight

The leadership of the Resistance Movement consisted of two representatives of the Haganah (Yisrael Galili and Moshe Sneh), an Irgun representative (Menahem Begin) and a Lehi representative (Nathan Yellin-Mor). It held general discussions, and the Irgun and Lehi were required to submit all plans of action to this body.

Operations were authorized by the Haganah command, after discussions between the senior operations staff: Yitzhak Sadeh

(Palmach commander), Eitan Livni (Irgun's chief operations officer) and Yaakov Eliav (Lehi's chief of operations). Later, Eliav withdrew from these meetings and asked Eitan Livni to represent him. The Haganah command had the right to veto plans on operational, political or other grounds.

In November 1, 1945, the three organizations conducted their first joint attack, the "Night of the Trains". That night, Haganah units sabotaged some 153 spots along railway tracks throughout the country, and blew up patrol launches in Jaffa and Haifa ports, while a joint Irgun-Lehi unit, commanded by Eitan Livni, attacked the main railway station at Lydda.

This operation had a strong impact in Britain. The newspapers published detailed articles on the acts of sabotage, and the government hastened to denounce the perpetrators. The Jewish Agency, in a special statement issued in London, declared, inter alia:

It is a tragedy that matters in Palestine have reached such a pass. The Jewish Agency abhors the use of violence as a weapon in the political struggle, but realizes that its ability to impose restraint has been severely tested by the continued policy [of the British government], which the Jews regard as fatal for them.

Whilst this statement did not constitute an endorsement of the operation, it did mark the first occasion on which the Jewish Agency expressed sympathy for its underlying motives.

## THE SECOND EXPLOSION AT THE C.I.D OFFICES

On December 27, 1945, a joint Irgun-Lehi force, led by Shraga Alis, launched an assault on the C.I.D offices in Jerusalem for the second time. The British had learned the lesson of the first attack (March 23, 1944), and had introduced special security arrangements in the Russian Compound in Jerusalem; despite these, however, the underground fighters succeeded in evading the British patrols, entered the building and set the explosive charges. The central C.I.D building collapsed.



The C.I.D bulding in Jerusalem after the second attack

Once again, it was demonstrated that nothing could stand in the way of the acumen and daring of the Jewish underground. The success was overshadowed, however, by the death of Zvi Aharoni – fatally injured in the attack; and the wounding of Yaakov Granek (later known as 'blond Dov'), both of Lehi. Seven British policemen lost their lives in the explosion and a large number were injured.

At the same time the district headquarters of the police and the C.I.D in Jaffa, housed in a four-storey building on the Jaffa-Tel-Aviv Road, were attacked. The force, led by Eliyahu Tamler (Yehoshua), approached the building under cover of darkness and succeeded in setting an explosive charge. Several minutes later the second storey of the building, housing the C.I.D was destroyed.

That night, another Irgun unit, under Amichai Paglin (Gidi), attacked the army camp at the Exhibition Grounds in north Tel-Aviv. In the exchange of fire, a British soldier was killed. An Irgun fighter, Dov Sternglass, lost his life, and five other fighters were injured.

## **THE 'NIGHT OF THE AIRFIELDS'**

One of the most impressive operations conducted by the Resistance Movement was the joint assault on three military airfields. The Irgun had refrained from striking military targets while Britain was still fighting the Germans. However, once the war was over, the restrictions no longer applied, and the British army, which had played an active part in harrasing the Yishuv, was no longer exempt from attack by the underground.

After the war, Palestine became an important center of activity for the RAF (Royal Air Force), and aircraft of various types were

stationed here. These aircraft were natural targets for the underground. On the cold, rainy night of February 25, 1946, a combined operation took place: a Lehi unit attacked the airfield near Kfar Syrkin and set eight aircraft ablaze. At the same time, an Irgun unit made its way on foot to Lydda airfield, seven kilometers from Kfar Syrkin. The British had installed a powerful searchlight on the control tower, which illuminated the airfield and the perimeter fences. In the center of the field were two guard tents, from which armed Bren-carriers patrolled the area. Moreover, the RAF garrison was housed in barracks across the road from the airfield, and the personnel were on constant alert against intruders.

The Irgun unit arrived at the airfield behind schedule, and as the men approached the fence, they heard from afar the echo of the explosion at Kfar Syrkin. Although they feared that the British might have had time to prepare an ambush, Dov Cohen (Shimshon), the commander of the operation, decided to proceed according to plan. One of the squads crept cautiously up to the nearby transformer, and a loud explosion plunged the entire airfield into darkness. The alarm was sounded summoning the British troops to their positions, but the Irgun fighters cut the barbed wire, advanced under cover of darkness and attached explosive charges to the aircraft. Another squad directed heavy fire at the barracks, preventing the RAF troops from emerging. After the charges had been detonated, the strike unit withdrew to the rendezvous point, and the entire force proceeded on foot through the muddy fields to the orange groves of Petah-Tikva and Ramat-Gan. The next day, it became known that the raid on Lydda airfield had destroyed 11 military aircraft.

While Shimshon and his men were proceeding towards Lydda airfield, two trucks were making their way from Rehovot to the military airfield at Kastina (present day Hatzor). The first truck was loaded with weapons and explosives, which were covered with straw and crates of vegetables. Twelve fighters, disguised as Arabs, were seated on the crates. The other fighters were in the second truck, dressed in work-clothes, like moshav farmers returning home from the field. The trucks halted not far from the airfield, weapons were allotted and the force, led by Amichai Paglin ("Gidi"), advanced on foot towards the target. They reached the airfield perimeter fence without being spotted, and cut the wire silently. The sappers slipped through the fence, and ran swiftly towards the aircraft. Using ladders they had brought with them, they positioned the charges on each plane between fuselage and wing. After setting the time fuses, they withdrew to the meeting point. The RAF personnel on the airfield were prevented from leaving their barracks by the machine-gun fire of the covering unit. While the fighters were re-assembling outside the airfield, there were loud explosions as some twenty military aircraft went up in flames. The force retreated through the orange groves, and after fifteen minutes or so, a single shot rang out. One of the fighters, Nazim Ezra Ajami ("Yehonatan"), was hit and died soon after. He was the sole victim of the widescale operation that night.

## THE DEATH SENTENCE

On March 6, 1946 at 1.30 pm, a military truck carrying 30 Irgun fighters disguised as British soldiers approached the Sarafand army camp. While the "officer" seated beside the driver was handing over the documents to the guard, several fighters climbed

down from the truck. They easily overcame the guard and the five other soldiers who were on duty in the guard tent. The truck hastened to the armory, and the "soldiers" began loading crates of weapons onto the vehicle. While they were engaged in this task, a British soldier returned from his lunch break, his suspicions aroused by the unusual activity. He opened fire and was joined by other soldiers. In the exchange of gunfire, five fighters were injured, two of them, Yosef Simchon and Michael Ashbel, seriously. The truck, loaded with the fighters and the crates of weapons, drove off at high speed, but not before the commander of the operation, Eliyahu Tamler ("Yehoshua") had detonated a mine, which blew up the remaining weapons and ammunition in the armory. The truck halted at Rishon-Lezion, where the wounded were given medical treatment and the weapons were unloaded in the dunes. The lightly-injured slipped away with the other fighters, while Simchon and Ashbel were loaded into a car escorted by Shulamit Shmueli and Zippora Flumin (who had been on duty at the first-aid station). The driver took off for hospital in Tel-Aviv. On the way they were intercepted by a British armored car, and the soldiers searched the vehicle and arrested the passengers. The two injured men were taken to Jaffa jail and, after interrogation, were transferred to a government hospital, where they underwent surgery. The two women were taken to the women's jail in Bethlehem, where they remained until the British evacuation of Palestine.

More than two months after their arrest, Simchon and Ashbel were tried by a military tribunal in Jerusalem. They refused to be represented by the lawyer, Max Critchman, who was assigned to them, and chose to use the occasion to make a political statement denying the right of the British to rule the country:

[...] You cannot break the spirit of the Jewish people nor can you destroy the desire for freedom which fires the hearts of its sons. And my proclamation, made in this place, will serve as one more testimony, one of many, to the indomitable stand of six hundred thousand Jewish citizens, who are united in the struggle for the liberation of their country from the bloody rule of the British (Statement of Michael Ashbel)

The military tribunal sentenced Simchon and Ashbel to death by hanging. After hearing their sentence, the two rose to their feet and sang Hatikva, together with the Jewish reporters in the courtroom. Kol Zion Halohemet (The Voice of Fighting Zion, the clandestine Irgun broadcasting station) broadcast the following warning:

If you hang our captive soldiers, then, as God is our witness, we will break your gallows. We will give you gallows for gallows.

On June 18, 1946, Irgun fighters were despatched to seize British hostages, in order to save the lives of their comrades who had been sentenced to death. In Tel-Aviv, two units raided the Gat Rimon and Hayarkon hotels, where British officers were billeted. In both cases, they encountered a large number of officers; they chose the five most senior among them and took them to a pre-designated hiding place. The British army conducted widescale searches of Tel-Aviv and its environs, without success. In the end, the officers were released and the High Commissioner commuted the death sentence to life imprisonment.

## THE SABOTAGING OF THE RAILWAY TRACKS IN THE SOUTH

On the night of April 2, 1946, the Irgun conducted a widescale operation, with the aim of immobilizing the railway network in the south. It was the largest operation the organization had ever planned, with about 100 participants. The same night, the Lehi blew up the Naaman bridge south of Acre.

The Irgun force, was divided into three groups: the northern force, under Menahem Schiff ("Zeev"), assembled at a packing house in an orange grove in Rehovot and proceeded from there to the Arab village of Yibne. When they reached their destination, the sappers laid explosive charges around the supporting pillars of the bridge and, after igniting the fuses, withdrew rapidly. Shortly afterwards, there were several explosions and the bridge collapsed into the wadi.

Another unit advanced towards the railway station, and while they were engaged in blowing up various installations, a British unit arrived and opened fire. The Irgun force returned fire and three British soldiers were injured. After completing its mission, the Irgun unit withdrew to the sand dunes south of Rishon Lezion, the arms were cached away, and the fighters dispersed to their homes.

The two other units assembled in another packing house, also in the Rehovot area. After being briefed, they boarded two trucks. As was the case at Kastina, the first truck carried unarmed fighters posing as workers returning from the field, while the second truck was loaded with oranges. "Arab workers" were seated on the oranges, with the weapons concealed under the fruit. The convoy moved southward, and halted at the pre-arranged spot (not far from Kibbutz Yavneh). The oranges were discarded, and the

weapons taken out and distributed. The force now split in two: one unit (the eastern force) moved towards Zarnuga (between the Arab villages of Yibne and Ashdod), while the second (southern) force headed for the railway station near Ashdod.

The three units were co-ordinated only as regards the hour of the attack, timed for 8 pm. The eastern force (under Eliezer Pedatzur) was delayed en route; as it approached the target, the fighters heard the explosions from the direction of Yibne. The guards greeted the oncoming force with a volley of flare rockets, which impeded their progress. They split into several squads, which dispersed over the terrain, placing explosive charges under bridges and water conduits and beside the tracks and telephone poles. One of the squads came under fire from the guards, and Ezra Rabia was severely injured. After detonating the devices, the squads assembled at a meeting point on a nearby hill, and the entire force withdrew across the dunes to Bat Yam, 25 kilometers away. Rabia was carried on a stretcher, while another fighter, injured in the arm, managed to walk with the help of a comrade. Rabia lost consciousness, and died shortly afterwards. He was buried in the dunes, on the assumption that the British would find him the next day and give him a proper burial in a nearby settlement. His comrades stood in silence beside the grave and one of them recited Kaddish (the prayer for the dead). The next day the British found Rabia's body and buried him at Kfar Warburg under the name of "Avraham Ben Avraham".<sup>15</sup>

The fighters continued to march through the dunes and reached Bat Yam in the early morning hours, where they handed in their

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<sup>15</sup> Ezra Rabia immigrated to Palestine from Iraq without his family, and shortly afterwards joined the Irgun. He was fluent in Arabic and took part in several operations disguised as an Arab.

weapons and dispersed. The wounded man was transferred to a maternity hospital in Tel-Aviv, which was temporarily treating Irgun casualties.

The southern force, under Dov Cohen ("Shimshon"), also reached Ashdod behind schedule. The unit which attacked the bridge encountered resistance from the guards, who took up defensive positions in the pillbox. In the exchange of gunfire, two policemen were killed. After setting the charges, the force proceeded to the railway station, overcame the five police guards and the station staff, and placed explosive devices beside various installations. They also blew up an engine, which happened to arrive. When their mission was completed, they set out for their home base. The trek through the sand-dunes was difficult, and progress was slow. It was already dawn as they approached Bat Yam and a British reconnaissance aircraft spotted them. Shortly afterwards, British troops poured into the area and surrounded the weary fighters. In the ensuing battle, Avner Ben-Shem was killed and four other fighters were injured.

Thirty-one fighters in all were arrested by the British in the Bat-Yam dunes, among them some of the Irgun's best commanders. The mass arrest was a severe blow to the Irgun's fighting force, but at the same time the detention of so large a number of the underground made a strong impression on the local and international media.

Among those arrested was Eitan Livni, the Irgun's chief operations officer. He was sentenced, together with his comrades, to 15 years imprisonment, but two years later, was freed in the Acre jail break. He was sent clandestinely to Europe to organize action against British targets there, and on May 15, 1948, he

returned home to take part in the struggle against the Arab invaders.

## HAGANAH ACTION

While Irgun and Lehi fighters were attacking military targets, the Haganah confined itself, initially, to assaults on targets connected with immigration. It attacked the coast guard stations at Givat Olga and Sidni Ali (near Herzliya), and blew up radar installations at Haifa. But as the armed struggle against the British gathered momentum, the front was extended to encompass military targets unconnected with immigration. On February 23, 1946, for example, the Haganah raided the mobile police force at Kfar Vitkin, Shfaram and Sarona (now the Kirya in Tel-Aviv). The acme of Haganah activities was the destruction, in one night, of 11 bridges linking Palestine to the neighboring countries. The operation on the night of June 17, which became known as "The Night of the Bridges", was the largest the Haganah launched within the framework of the United Resistance, and was also its final one. All four Palmach battalions (the Haganah elite units) took part in the action, stationed on all the country's borders: north, south and east. The operation achieved its objective, and the country was cut off from all its neighbors. After the Night of the Bridges, Oz, the illegal publication of Achdut Haavoda (one of the socialist parties), wrote:

The recent operations attest to the fact that the struggle has reached a more acute stage; these were no longer mere cautionary acts. They were intended to cause real damage to the authorities, and such damage was indeed inflicted. They were aimed at immobilizing transportation between this

country and its neighbors, and it was in fact suspended. These activities have demonstrated that as long as there is no Zionist solution for this country, the government will not be able to rule.

## BLACK SABBATH

The British retaliated swiftly to the blowing up of the bridges by the Palmach. The following British forces were sent to the Western Galilee to search Kibbutz Matsuba which was thought to be the base of the Palmach unit. Twenty-seven kibbutz members were arrested and sent to Acre jail. Searches were also conducted at Kibbutz Bet Haarava on the northern Dead Sea, on suspicion that it had served as the base for the group which attacked the Allenby Bridge. In the clashes with the soldiers, 12 kibbutz members were injured, two of them severely, and 70 people were arrested. The next day, military forces cordoned off Kibbutz Kfar Giladi in the north and when the soldiers broke in, the kibbutz members displayed passive resistance. Hundreds of members of nearby settlements hastened to their aid, and when they approached the kibbutz, the British troops opened fire on them. Three Jews were killed and six injured.

In total, four Jews were killed, eighteen injured and more than 100 detained in the operations carried out by the British after the Night of the Bridges. These events, however, were merely a prelude to the much larger operation which took place two weeks later and became known as "Black Sabbath".

The action against the organized Yishuv, which had been planned carefully and in great secrecy, began in the early hours of Saturday, June 29, 1946. A countrywide curfew was proclaimed, and 17,000 soldiers entered institutions and settlements in order to confiscate weapons and documents, and to arrest leaders of the Yishuv and Haganah activists. The Mandatory government announced that it was determined to uproot terror and violence,

and that the military action had been endorsed by the Cabinet in London.

Operation Agatha, as the British called it, took the Yishuv by surprise, and achieved most of its objectives. In Jerusalem, British troops entered the Jewish Agency buildings and, after ransacking the offices and in particular the archives, confiscated a large number of documents. This material was loaded onto three trucks and taken to the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, which housed the government secretariat and the military command. The documents included cables, which clearly demonstrated the role of the Jewish Agency in the leadership of the Jewish Resistance Movement. Also found was the text of the agreement between the Haganah and the Irgun and Lehi, and cables approving Irgun and Lehi operations against the British in the framework of the Resistance Movement. Another discovery was the text of broadcasts of Kol Yisrael (the Haganah's clandestine broadcasting station), stating, among other things, that everything possible would be done "to foil the transfer of British bases to Palestine and to prevent their establishment in Palestine".

In addition to the numerous documents confiscated from offices, the soldiers broke into the homes of members of the Jewish Agency Executive and arrested them.<sup>16</sup>

At 4.15 a.m on the Sabbath, a police officer, followed by an army officer with two army vehicles, arrived at the home of sixty-year-old Rabbi Fishman-Maimon. The soldiers surrounded the house. Rabbi Fishman informed them that he was unable to travel on the Sabbath and proposed that he walk, or that the house be placed under guard until the

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<sup>16</sup> Davar newspaper, July 1, 1946.

Sabbath ended, when he would be able to travel. He asked the officers to consult their superiors on this proposal, but they had received orders to take him at once. Rabbi Fishman sat down and replied that he would not budge. The soldiers tried to carry him together with the chair, but the rabbi slipped off the chair, and they then took him by force and pushed him into the vehicle.

Among those arrested were Moshe Shertok (Sharett) and Bernard Joseph (Dov Yosef) of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency, and David Remez, chairman of the Vaad Le'umi. Other public figures were detained all over the country and brought to the special VIP camp built for them at Latrun. In Tel-Aviv, a thorough search was conducted at the Histadrut Executive and at the offices of the Davar newspaper and Bank Hapoalim.

Searches and arrests were also carried out in many kibbutzim, but the British had their greatest success at Kibbutz Yagur. The search there lasted a week, and the C.I.D apparently had prior information about the arms caches there. The kibbutz members resisted passively, but were dispersed by tear gas and incarcerated in enclosures set up by the soldiers. At first it was merely a routine search, but once the first arms cache was found, the British attitude changed, and the soldiers began to dig under the floors and in all possible hiding places in their search for arms. Their find included more than 300 rifles, some 100 2" mortars, more than 400,000 bullets, some 5,000 grenades and 78 revolvers. The loot was displayed at a press conference on the spot, and after arresting all the men of Yagur, the British withdrew.

At Kibbutz Mizra, the British broke into Palmach headquarters, and confiscated a large number of documents, including the card-

index of Palmach members. The names were written in code, and even though the C.I.D (British Intelligence) did not succeed in deciphering them, the very fact that the list had fallen into their hands was a blow to morale.



### Search for Arms

During Black Sabbath, some 2,700 people were arrested throughout the country and taken to the Rafiah internment camp. Two days later, the Haganah command, headed by Moshe Sneh, convened to discuss retaliation. The opinion was that the armed struggle had to be continued in order to prove to the British that, despite the mass arrests, they had not succeeded in paralysing the United Resistance.

The Haganah command decided to carry out three operations against the British authorities. The first was a Palmach raid on the Bat-Galim army camp, in order to requisition weapons (according to Haganah Intelligence Service information, the weapons confiscated at Yagur were being stored there). The second mission entrusted to the Irgun was the blowing up of the King David Hotel, where the offices of the Mandatory government and the British military command were located. The Lehi was allotted the task of blowing up the adjacent David Brothers building, which housed government offices. In a letter to Begin, Sneh wrote:<sup>17</sup>

a) At the earliest possible opportunity, you are to carry out the operation at the 'chick' [code name for King David Hotel] and at the house of "your servant and messiah" [code name for David Brothers building]. Inform me of the date. Preferably at the same time. Do not reveal the identity of the implementing body - either by announcing it explicitly or by hinting.

b) We too are preparing something - will inform you of details in good time.

c) Exclude TA [Tel-Aviv] from any plan of action. We are all interested in preserving TA - as the center of Yishuv life and the center of our own activities. If as the result of any action, TA is immobilized (curfew, arrests), this will paralyse us and our plans as well. And the important objects of the other side are not focused here. Hence, TA is 'out of bounds' for the forces of Israel.

1.7.46. M. (Moshe Sneh).

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<sup>17</sup> Jabotinsky Institute Archives, k-4 1/11/5.

While preparations for the operations were at their height, Meir Weisgal arrived at Sneh's hideout. Weisgal was on a personal mission from Chaim Weizmann, President of the World Zionist Organization (Weizmann himself was then ailing at his home in Rehovot). Weisgal told Sneh that Weizmann urged that the armed struggle against the British be halted. Among other things, Weisgal quoted Weizmann as saying:

In other countries it is accepted that the president is the commander in chief of the armed forces. I have never sought this authority nor has it ever occurred to me to interfere in your affairs. For the first and only time, I am exercising this right and demanding of you that you cease all this activity.

Weizmann demanded an immediate answer, and announced that if his request was rejected, he would resign and publicly announce the reasons for his resignation. Sneh, who was opposed to stopping the armed struggle against the British, informed Weisgal that he could not decide this matter alone, and would submit Weizmann's request to the X Committee<sup>18</sup>. The Committee debated the question of the powers of the president of the World Zionist Organization, but eventually decided, by majority vote, to accede to Weizmann's request. Sneh, who opposed the resolution, resigned from his post as head of the Haganah General Headquarters, but remained liaison officer with the Irgun and Lehi. Sneh met with Begin, did not inform him of the X

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<sup>18</sup> The X Committee was the supreme political committee to which were submitted the operational plans of the Jewish Resistance Movement (without specification of the target and exact date). The plans were implemented only after approval by the Committee.

Committee's resolution, and merely requested that the assault on the King David Hotel be postponed. Sneh then decided to leave for Paris to attend a meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive, which was to discuss the continued struggle against the Mandatory government. Before leaving the country, on July 19, he sent Begin another note:

Shalom!

I have heard from my comrades about the recent conversation. If my personal appeal still holds weight with you, I beg you to delay the scheduled actions for another few days.

As a result of Sneh's appeal, the attack on the King David Hotel was scheduled for July 22, 1946. Because of coordination problems, the Lehi decided to cancel its plan to blow up the David Brothers building.

## THE BOMBING OF THE KING DAVID HOTEL

The King David Hotel in Jerusalem was built by the Moseri family, one of the wealthy and influential Jewish families in Cairo and Alexandria. They set up a shareholding company to finance its construction, consisting mainly of Egyptian businessmen and wealthy Jews from all over the world. The luxurious seven-storey building, with 200 rooms, was opened to the public in 1931. In 1938, the Mandatory government requisitioned the entire southern wing of the hotel, and housed the military command and the Mandatory government secretariat there. The British chose the King David for its central location and because it was easy to guard. They built a military communications center in the hotel basement and, for security reasons, added a side entrance linking the building to an army camp south of the hotel. Less than a third of the rooms were reserved for civilian use.

It will be recalled that after Black Sabbath (Saturday), Menahem Begin received a letter from Moshe Sneh (chief of the Haganah General Headquarters) with instructions to blow up the King David (see "Black Sabbath"). After preparatory work and several postponements, Irgun fighters gathered on Monday, July 22, 1946, at the Bet Aharon Talmud Torah seminary in Jerusalem. They arrived one by one, gave the password and assembled in one of the classrooms. They realized that they were being sent on a mission, but none of them knew what the target was. Shortly afterwards, the senior command arrived and it was only when the briefing began that the assembled fighters discovered that they were going to strike at the King David Hotel.

After the weapons had been distributed, the first unit, the group of "porters" (commanded by Yosef Avni) set out. Their assignment was to reach the hotel by bus and to wait at the side entrance so as to assist in unloading the explosives from the van when it arrived. All six "porters" were disguised as Arabs so as to avoid arousing suspicion. The strike force left next in a van loaded with seven milk-churns, each containing 50 kilograms of explosives and special detonators. Israel Levi ("Gidon"), the commander of the operation, was dressed as a Sudanese waiter, while the other members of the unit, were dressed as Arabs. The van drove through the streets of Jerusalem, its tarpaulin cover concealing the milk-churns and the passengers, and halted at the side entrance of the hotel, through which foodstuffs were brought into the basement 'La Regence' restaurant. The fighters easily overcame the guards by the gate and hastened to the basement, where they searched all the rooms, and assembled the workers in the restaurant kitchen. They then returned to the van, brought the milk-churns into the restaurant, and placed them beside the supporting pillars. Gidon set the time fuses for 30 minutes, and ordered his men to leave. The staff gathered in the kitchen were told to leave the building 10 minutes later to avoid injury.

During the withdrawal from the basement, heavy gunfire was levelled at the group and two fighters were injured. One of them, Aharon Abramovitch, later died of his wounds.

After exiting the hotel, Gidon summoned two women fighters who were waiting nearby, and ordered them to carry out their mission. They ran over to a nearby telephone booth, and delivered the following message to the hotel telephone operator and to the editorial office of the Palestine Post:

I am speaking on behalf of the Hebrew underground. We have placed an explosive device in the hotel. Evacuate it at once - you have been warned.

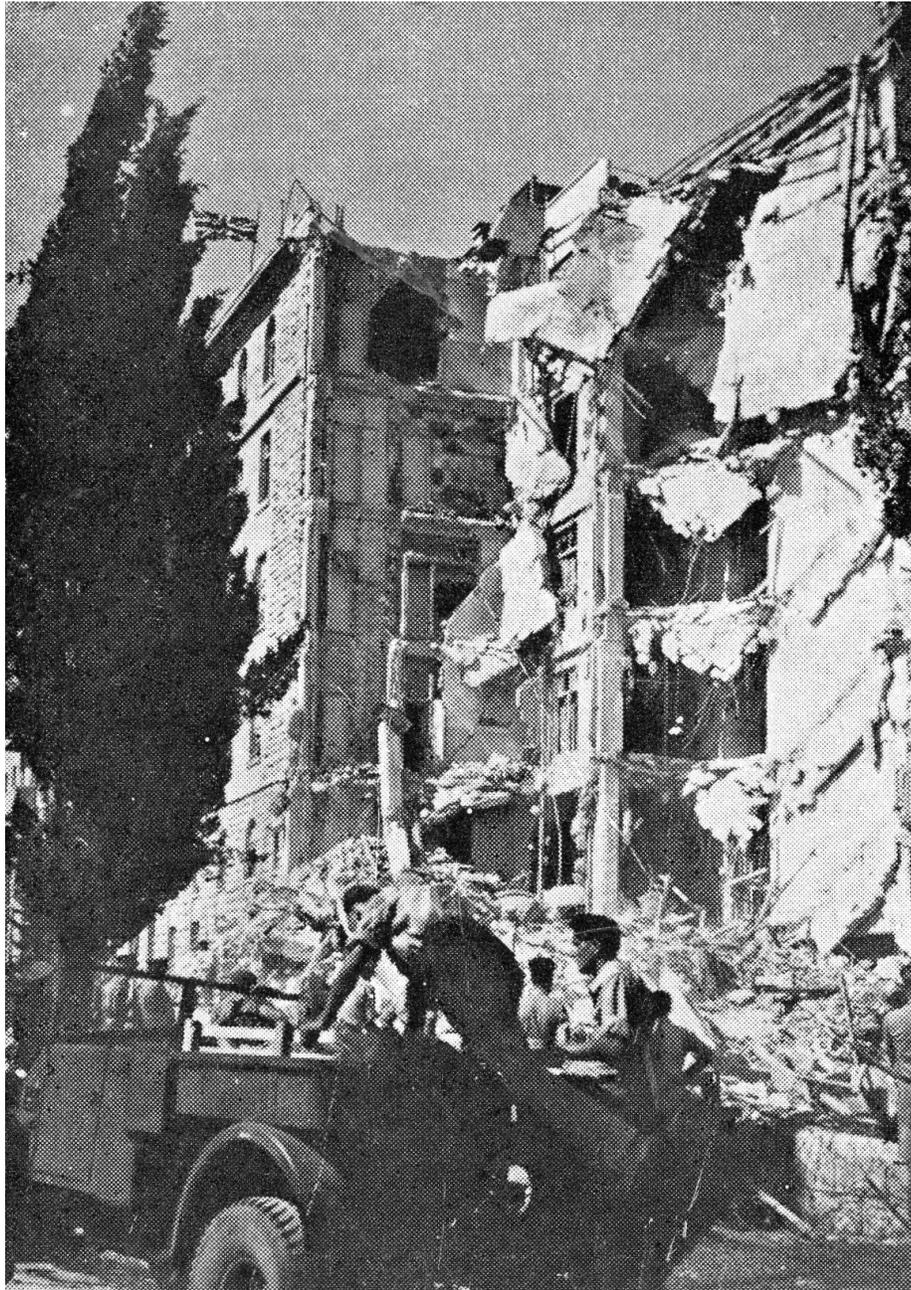
They also delivered a telephone warning to the French Consulate, adjacent to the hotel, to open their windows to prevent blast damage. The telephone messages were intended to prevent casualties.

Some 25 minutes after the telephone calls, a shattering explosion shook Jerusalem, and reverberated at a great distance. The entire southern wing of the King David Hotel, all seven storeys, was totally destroyed. For reasons unclear the staff of the government secretariat and the military command remained in their rooms. Some of them were unaware of events, and others were not permitted to leave the building, thus accounting for the large number of victims trapped in the debris.

For ten days, the British Engineering Corps cleared the wreckage, and on July 31 it was officially announced that 91 people had been killed in the explosion: 28 Britons, 41 Arabs, 17 Jews and 5 others.

The success of the Jewish underground in striking at the heart of British government in Palestine, and the high toll of victims, sent shock waves through England and the rest of the world. At first, the Mandatory government denied having received a telephone warning, but testimony submitted to the interrogating judge made it clear beyond a doubt that such a warning had in fact been given. Moreover, the Palestine Post telephone operator attested on oath to the police that, immediately after receiving the telephone message, she had telephoned the duty officer at the police station. The French Consulate staff opened their windows

as they had been told to by the anonymous woman who telephoned them, and this was further evidence of the warning.



The King David Hotel after the attack

It is almost impossible to recapitulate what occurred in the government secretariat offices in the half hour preceding the explosion, but all the evidence suggests that there were numerous flaws in the security arrangements in the King David, and that a series of omissions occurred. The telephone warning was disregarded, and although the warning signal was given, an all-clear was sounded shortly before the explosion. These facts indicate that there were serious errors in the decision-making process and that internal communication did not function properly.

The heads of the Jewish Agency were stunned. They feared that the British would adopt even more severe retaliatory measures than on Black Sabbath, and hastened to denounce the operation in the strongest terms. The statement they issued the following day expressed "their feelings of horror at the base and unparalleled act perpetrated today by a gang of criminals." Even David Ben-Gurion, who was then in Paris, joined the chorus of condemnation, and in an interview to the French newspaper 'France Soir', declared that the Irgun was "the enemy of the Jewish People".

The denunciation by the Jewish Agency totally ignored the fact that the bombing of the King David was carried out as part of the activities of "The United Resistance", and on the explicit instructions of Moshe Sneh. At the request of the Haganah, the Irgun issued a leaflet accepting responsibility for the operation. It stated, among other things:

[...]

e. The telephone warnings were given at 12:10-12:15. And if it is true, as the British liars have announced, that the explosion

occurred at 12:37, they still had 22 minutes at their disposal in order to evacuate the building of its residents and workers.

Therefore responsibility for loss of life among civilians rests solely with them.

f. It is not true that the persons who delivered the warning spoke 'on behalf of the Resistance Movement' (as the press reported)... On this matter, we are refraining at present from making any further statement, but it is possible that – in the context of the savage and dastardly incitement – it will be necessary to issue such a statement at the appropriate time.

g. We mourn the Jewish victims; they too are the tragic victims of the tragic and noble Hebrew war of liberation...

A year later the Irgun issued the following statement:

## THE TRUTH ABOUT THE KING DAVID HOTEL

[...] On July 1 - two days after the British raid on the National Institutions and on our towns and villages -we received a letter from the headquarters of the Resistance Movement, demanding that we carry out an attack on the center of government at the King David Hotel as soon as possible...

Execution of this plan was postponed several times - both for technical reasons and at the request of the Resistance Movement. It was finally approved on July 22...

Notwithstanding this, days later, Kol Yisrael broadcast a statement – in the name of the Resistance Movement – abhorring the high death toll at the King David caused by the actions of the 'dissidents'...

We have kept silent for a whole year. We have faced savage incitement, such as this country has never before known. We have withstood the worst possible provocations – and remained silent. We have witnessed evasion, hypocrisy and cowardice – and remained silent.

But today, when the Resistance Movement has expired and there is no hope that it will ever be revived... there are no longer valid reasons why we should maintain our silence concerning the assault against the center of Nazi-British rule – one of the mightiest attacks ever carried out by a militant underground. Now it is permissible to reveal the truth; now we must reveal the truth. Let the people see and judge.

July 22, 1947.

The Hebrew press, and the Haganah publications, continued to condemn the Irgun in the strongest possible terms. They were echoed by the British press, which was briefed by the Mandatory government. However, the effect of the British denunciations was blunted to a large extent by the publication of instructions issued by General Sir Evelyn Barker (British army commander in Palestine) several hours after the explosion. He ordered all the Jewish places of entertainment, restaurants, shops and Jewish homes – “out of bounds for all British officers and soldiers”. The instructions ended by saying that:

“The aim of these orders are to punish the Jews in a way the race dislikes as much as any, namely by striking at their pockets”

Barker's letter reached the Irgun's intelligence service and was immediately made public in Palestine and throughout the world. The antisemitic tone of the letter greatly embarrassed the British government and diverted public opinion from the attack on the King David Hotel. Questions were asked in the House of Commons about the letter and the London Daily Herald wrote, among other things, that "if General Barker had in fact written the letter, he was demonstrating his unsuitability for his position."

The order was officially rescinded two weeks after it was issued, but the damage to the British cause in Palestine could not be erased.

However, as a result of Black Sabbath, the moderates now held the upper hand, and at a meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive in Paris on August 5, 1946, it was decided to terminate the armed struggle against the British in Palestine.

This marked the end of the glorious ten-month period when all the Jewish forces in Eretz Israel (Haganah, Irgun and Lehi) fought together against foreign rule.

The terminating of the armed struggle provoked considerable resentment among many members of the Haganah, and Yitzhak Sadeh (commander of the Palmach) gave vent to this emotion in his article "Proposal and Response" in *Ahdut Ha'avoda*, October 15, 1946 which he signed Noded (Wanderer).

There will be no capitulation, because there is nobody to order capitulation, and should such a person be found, he would find nobody to carry out the order.

The Haganah focused its efforts on bringing in illegal immigrants, and in order to appease those activists in the Haganah ranks who

continued to favor armed struggle, it sanctioned the sabotaging of British naval vessels which were hunting down illegal immigrants. Thus, on August 18, 1946, Palmach fighters sabotaged the Empire Haywood and two days later damaged the Empire Rival, the two ships used for deporting immigrants from Haifa to Cyprus.

When the United Resistance ceased to exist, the Irgun and Lehi continued the armed struggle alone. The Irgun was now both morally and materially stronger than ever before. Support for its cause had grown, since the United Resistance had legitimized its activities. The number of recruits increased, and its stock of weapons and ammunition was expanded as a result of its acquisitions from British army depots. Free of the restrictions imposed by the Haganah command, the Irgun now intensified its anti-British activities.

## THE RAID ON THE JERUSALEM RAILWAY STATION

When the decision was taken to attack the railway station in Jerusalem, Heinrich Reinhold ("Yanai") was appointed commander of the operation. On October 29, a day before the assault, Yitzhak Avinoam, Jerusalem district commander, and Amichai Paglin ("Gidi"), chief operations officer, came to Yanai's apartment in the Rehavia quarter of Jerusalem. There was a curfew in Jerusalem that evening, but Rehavia was one of several quarters outside the curfew area. They wanted to find out why Yanai had not arrived at that evening's scheduled meeting. They went up to the second floor apartment, where the door was opened by the landlady. Avinoam told her that they had come to visit Yanai, and they were surprised to hear that he was not at home. Their first thought was that he had been kidnapped by the Haganah, or possibly arrested by the British. In either event, he was liable to be interrogated and Avinoam decided to take precautionary measures in case Yanai broke down under interrogation and revealed the plan for the raid on the railway station. It was also essential to replace him as commander of the operation.

The following day, October 30, Avinoam and Gidi went to the room in the Sukat Shalom quarter from which the fighters set out on missions. At 7 am, they arrived one by one. Among them was Eliyahu Levi ("Aviel"), one of the senior commanders in Jerusalem, who had been privy to the preparations and knew all the details of the plan. Aviel had been appointed as Yanai's replacement, but it was decided to postpone the operation and to check on the situation in the target area. At 10 am, Salomon was

sent to the station area on a tour of reconnaissance. He set out on his motorbike and returned soon after to announce that he had seen nothing suspicious. An hour later he was sent on an additional tour and, on his return, informed Avinoam again that nothing appeared suspicious.

He was sent out later for the third time. On his return, he encountered Aviel, who was seated with his unit, in two taxis, awaiting the signal to depart.

"What's going on?" asked Aviel.

"Everything's OK" replied Salomon.

Salomon had not yet had time to report to Avinoam on his reconnaissance tour. Aviel gave the signal and the force set out in two taxis (which had been requisitioned that morning in Jerusalem). Seated in the first taxi were Yosef Levi ("Kushi") and Mas'ud Biton, disguised as Arab porters. In the second vehicle Sima Fleishhaker-Hoizman, dressed elegantly, sat beside Eliyahu Levi ("Aviel"), also in formal dress. They were posing as a young couple setting out on their honeymoon. With them were three guards, and at the wheel was Meir Feinstein. In the trunk of the car were three suitcases filled with explosives and detonators.

When the second taxi reached the railway station, the two "porters" came over to assist their "clients". Sima and Aviel emerged from the taxi, whilst all the Arab porters at the station offered their services. Aviel chose Kushi and Biton (to the annoyance of the real porters), who unloaded the suitcases from the taxi and put them down in the waiting room beside the ticket office. Aviel set the fuse connected to the devices, and Sima went over to the ticket office to buy tickets. No-one seemed suspicious

at this point. After purchasing the tickets, Sima took a large cloth sign out of her handbag and placed it on top of the cases. On it, in three languages (Hebrew, English and Arabic), was written "Danger, mines", and the Irgun symbol. An Arab policeman who was standing nearby went over to Sima, gripped her by the dress and asked: "What's this?" Sima hit him in the face and freed herself. One of the Irgun security men saw what had happened, aimed his sub-machinegun at the policeman and shot him. The fighters ran towards the two taxis waiting at the entrance to the station and jumped in. Suddenly the cars came under fire from all sides. Feinstein, who was in the driver's seat, was severely wounded in the left arm, but managed to drive with one hand. Sima, seated beside him, tore his shirt and bandaged his wounded arm. The heavy fire continued, and in addition to Feinstein, Azulai was hit in the stomach and leg, and Horovitz in the neck. Feinstein continued to drive rapidly and succeeded in shaking off the British armored car. The car halted at the entrance to the Yemin Moshe quarter of Jerusalem, where several Irgun girls were waiting to collect the weapons. Sima accompanied Feinstein to Yemin Moshe, where they found refuge in an apartment belonging to an old couple. Sima laid the wounded man on a bed, untied the temporary bandage and placed a tourniquet on the wounded arm. While she was treating Feinstein, a 14-year-old boy entered the room and told her that the police had arrived in the quarter, and were tracking the blood stains. Sima asked him to camouflage the stains with soil, while she herself went out to see what was happening. She discovered that the police had reached the house where Feinstein was hiding, and feared that they would arrest her as well. She bent over as if to tie her shoelace, thus hiding her dress, which had been torn in the

struggle with the Arab policeman. Then she slipped away and fled Yemin Moshe.

Azulai, wounded in the stomach and leg, was also taken to a house in Yemin Moshe, where his wounds were bandaged. Shortly afterwards, the entire area was surrounded by police reinforcements and placed under curfew. All the men were asked to come outside and report for an identity parade. The two wounded men were apprehended and taken, under guard, to the government hospital.

Horovitz and Biton were arrested by Arab Legion soldiers, as they walked towards Jerusalem's commercial center and were handed over to the British police. At 2 pm. large numbers of policemen reached the railway station. When the police sapper tried to lift one of the suitcases, there was an explosion which destroyed the interior of the building and killed him.

Avinoam was waiting in one of the Irgun's safe houses when he received word of the ambush which the British had prepared for the fighters, and learned of the casualties and arrests. While he was absorbing this information, he was informed that the police had seized an arms cache at Givat Shaul. Avinoam recalled that the location of the arms cache at Givat Shaul had been known to Yanai. He approached Adina Hai (the district liaison officer) and asked her to go immediately to Tel-Aviv with a note for headquarters. It consisted of only two words:

"Yanai sarakh" [Yanai has betrayed us].

Information flooded in, all of it connected to Yanai. The police had raided several rooms in Jerusalem, all known to Yanai. The vehicle used by the district command, which had been kept in a

parking lot near the Strauss clinic (a fact known to Yanai), was seized by the British. In Tel-Aviv and Haifa, the police arrested several commanders, who were hiding in safe houses, whose location was also known to Yanai.

Yanai's treachery stunned and angered the Irgun. It was the first (and only) time that a senior commander had abandoned his men before they set out on a combat mission, and the question as to why he acted as he did remained unanswered for many years.



The Jerusalem Railway Station



The Railway Station after the attack

## THE RAID ON THE JERUSALEM OFFICERS CLUB

On January 31, 1947, Kol Yerushalayim (The Voice of Jerusalem) broadcast a Mandatory government announcement to the effect that, as a consequence of the recent disturbances in Palestine, it had been decided that British women and children and other British nationals whose presence in Palestine was not essential, would be evacuated. Soon after, some 1,500 men, women and children were evacuated by train to Egypt and transported from there by sea to England.

In addition to evacuating women and children, the British army began constructing 'security zones' in the three large cities. In Jerusalem itself, four such zones were set up and the atmosphere in the city changed drastically. The central 'security zone' was set up near the Russian Compound. Local nationals, most of them Jews, were ordered to abandon their shops and offices, without being offered alternative places by the authorities. The entire area, which included the Generali building, the Anglo-Palestine Bank building and the central post office, was cordoned off by barbed wire fences and entrance was by identity card only. The police often conducted body searches of citizens who wanted to enter the fenced area. The area opposite the Yeshurun synagogue was also cordoned off, and became a 'security zone', which included the officers club in Goldschmidt House and the adjacent military depot. Additional security zones were located in the Talbieh quarter, in parts of Rehavia and the Schneller camp.

The security zones (or 'Bevingrads', as the local population called them) soon became 'internment camps' for British soldiers and policemen, who were permitted to leave only when on duty.

Places of entertainment (which were all outside the security zones) were now 'out of bounds' to the British, and contact with the civilian population gradually dwindled.



### Around the Russian Compound

The atmosphere in the Yishuv was increasingly anti-British. This was largely due to the attitude of the British authorities towards the Jewish population, and their brutal treatment of the immigrants brought from Europe by the Haganah. In that period, the Haganah stepped up its activities, and the number of illegal immigrant vessels was increased. However, in most cases the ships did not

succeed in breaking the British naval blockade on Palestine, and the immigrants were intercepted, and taken aboard British vessels, which conveyed them to internment camps in Cyprus. Those immigrants who resisted were taken by force and many of them were injured in the struggles. This brutal treatment of defenceless people, who had come from the European graveyard to seek refuge in Eretz Israel, aroused a storm of protest in Palestine and throughout the world.

The Irgun was not slow to react, and the underground struck even more heavily at the British. Military targets were attacked throughout the country, and in Jerusalem plans were completed for an assault on the Officers Club at Goldschmidt House on King George Street.

On Saturday, March 1, 1947, some 15 members of the Jerusalem Fighting Force assembled at the Alliance girls school. The school janitor, who was collaborating with the underground, left the gate open and made all necessary arrangements so that the Irgun fighters could hold their meeting uninterrupted. The attack had been scheduled for Saturday, at a time when the streets would be empty, in order to avoid civilian casualties. After the briefing, the fighters were given weapons and the combat unit received British army uniforms as a disguise.

After the preparations were completed, the convoy set out, headed by a taxi with three fighters. It was followed by a van carrying the five-man combat unit, headed by Dov Salomon ("Yishai"). When the taxi reached the location, several army trucks were parked outside the club, and it drove on without stopping, followed by the van. The combat unit was forced to circle the area three times. Finally Yitzhak Avinoam (the District Commander, who was waiting nearby) gave the order to attack. One unit took

up position beside the Yeshurun synagogue, opposite the Officers Club, and aimed a Bren gun at the neighboring building to prevent the British soldiers stationed there from disrupting the operation. An additional unit took up position on King George Street with the task of maintaining a fusillade which would prevent passage of vehicles.

The van drove rapidly, broke through the barbed wire which surrounded Goldschmidt House and halted in the courtyard close to the entrance. The guards went over to the car and asked for an entry permit. In response, the fighters opened fire and all the units went into action.

The three sappers entered the building under cover of the gunfire, carrying with them three rucksacks containing 30 kilograms of explosives each. Salomon placed the rucksacks beside the building's supporting pillars, and after igniting the fuse, gave the order to retreat. The sappers ran towards the door, but one of them suddenly remembered he had left his revolver on the rucksack and started back to fetch it. His comrade pulled him by the sleeve, and together they managed to exit the building in time. They continued to run towards the Ratisbonne monastery (which lies behind the Yeshurun synagogue), and slipped through an opening in the fence which had been prepared in advance. In the Ratisbonne courtyard the weapons were thrown into a sack brought by the Irgun girls, and the fighters took off the British uniforms. They made for the Nahlaot quarters where they dispersed. At 3:30 PM, there was a loud explosion, as Goldschmidt House was blown up.

Seventeen British officers were killed in the explosion, among them several senior intelligence officers, and 27 injured.

The reaction in Britain was reported by the Haaretz correspondent in London:

### SHOCK IN LONDON

The attack in Jerusalem came as a shock to London at the weekend. The evening papers produced special editions with banner headlines as each new item of information was received. The attack reminds everyone of the King David affair. The press stresses that this is the first time the terrorists have perpetrated an attack on a Saturday, and emphasize that it took place inside the security zone.

The 'Sunday Express' printed a banner headline:

"Govern or Get out".

The blowing up of the Officers Club in Jerusalem was the culmination of a series of attacks on British targets all over the country. A number of military vehicles were mined on interurban roads; army depots at Hadera, Pardes Hanna and Beit Lyd came under mortar and machine-gun fire; and in Haifa, an army vehicle lot was attacked and 15 vehicles were destroyed. In the course of these operations, dozens of British soldiers were killed and injured.

### OPERATIONS 'ELEPHANT' AND 'HIPPO'

The reaction to the March 1 operations was swift. The same evening, Kol Yerushalayim broadcast an official announcement, stating that the High Commissioner had decided to impose martial

law on the Jewish quarters of northern Jerusalem and on the districts of Tel-Aviv, Ramat Gan, Bnei Barak and Petah Tikva. In Jerusalem, the operation was code-named 'Hippo' and in Tel-Aviv 'Elephant'.

The operation had been planned meticulously several months before, and the High Commissioner had been empowered to put it into effect at his discretion. More than 20,000 British troops took part.

The introduction of martial law came as no surprise; the High Commissioner had told the leaders of the Yishuv several times that if they did not resume full collaboration with the authorities in the fight against the underground organizations (as they had done during the Season), he would introduce draconian restrictions, and even proclaim martial law in Jewish areas. Although the heads of the Jewish Agency feared the destruction of the Zionist endeavor in Eretz Israel, they did not accede to the High Commissioner's demand.

Under martial law, all the powers of civilian government were transferred to the military. Civilian courts were replaced by military tribunals, empowered to hold rapid trials; post offices were closed and public and private transport immobilized. Use of telephones was restricted, and special permission was required for opening banks. Soldiers were granted policing powers, and were authorized to arrest suspicious individuals, and to shoot curfew breakers. Indeed, immediately after martial law was proclaimed, two Jews were shot and killed, one of them a four-year-old girl standing on the balcony of her home in the Mea Shearim quarter. The entire zone was closed to traffic and special permits were required for entry or exit.

The British set themselves two objectives in proclaiming martial law: firstly, to bring underground activity to a halt, since they believed that it was focused in the closed areas, and secondly, to undermine the economy of the Yishuv and thereby force the leaders of the Jewish Agency to resume their cooperation with the British against the Irgun and Lehi.

It was soon manifest that the population was adjusting rapidly to the new situation. Improvisation skills were brought into full play; in the absence of buses, horse-drawn carts carried passengers to their destinations. Many people rode bicycles, while others simply walked. As time passed, the British were forced to permit the supply of foodstuffs to the areas under siege, and the number of transit permits was extended. From time to time, the curfew was lifted in the areas under martial law, and the population was permitted to purchase food. At these times, crowds assembled on both sides of the barbed wire, and soldiers helped to pass parcels from one side to the other. Yosef Avni, who was in charge of the Irgun's arsenals in Jerusalem, relates that in order to prepare the attack on the Schneller camp (see below), it was necessary to bring weapons out of the closed area. He instructed the storeman to load grenades and revolvers into a sack. One of the soldiers on guard then helped lift the sack over the barbed wire fence and handed it to Avni, who was waiting on the other side.

The Irgun command decided to step up onslaughts against the centers of British government. All district commanders were ordered to take action within their areas of jurisdiction without awaiting special permission from the General Headquarters. In the first week of martial law, various targets were attacked outside the closed areas; mines were laid daily on interurban roads to damage military vehicles; army depots came under mortar and

rifle fire. In the second week, the Irgun and Lehi began to raid military targets inside the closed areas. The Lehi attacked Hadar House in Tel-Aviv (one of the headquarters of the British forces), and the mobile police camp at Sarona. The strikes against military transport continued and the British-Iraqi petroleum pipeline was blown up.

## THE ATTACK ON SCHNELLER CAMP

The Irgun's military activity during the period of martial law culminated in the attack on Schneller camp in Jerusalem.

The Schneller Syrian Orphanage was founded in 1860 by Father Johannes Ludwig Schneller, who came to Jerusalem from Germany as a Protestant missionary. At first, the institution took in children orphaned by the Druze massacre of Christians in Lebanon and Syria. In time, the compound grew and was walled in, and after the Second World War it became a closed army camp.

Schneller camp was located in the area under martial law. The camp was, in fact, at the heart of one of the security zones, and its surrounding wall had firing positions at its corners. All access roads to the camp were surrounded by barbed wire fences, and a large number of troops guarded the entire area.

On the evening of Wednesday, March 12, members of the Irgun Fighting Force assembled at an apartment in Haturim Street, which had been placed at the disposal of the underground. Yehoshua Goldschmid ("Gal"), who was commanding the operation, briefed them, and the fighters split up into four squads. Two-man squads were ordered to set up road-blocks; they placed barrels in the middle of the road, with a notice on each in Hebrew and English:

## 'Beware, mines!'

Because of the shortage of explosives, not all the barrels were full. It was assumed that the warning notices alone would deter the British troops from taking unnecessary risks. In fact, the gamble succeeded and they did not dare risk shifting the barrels.

Having completed their task, the two squads rapidly left the scene.

A third squad, under Gal, was assigned to security. The squad took up positions in a building which overlooked the entrance to Schneller camp, with the task of preventing soldiers from coming out of the camp by firing automatic weapons at the gate.

The fourth squad, under Yosef Avni, consisted of five fighters, each carrying a rucksack containing 30 kilograms of explosives. Under cover of darkness, they reached the stone wall surrounding Schneller camp and hid behind a nearby fence. They then broke through the camp wall, and crawled through the opening into the camp. After breaking into the first building under cover of tommy-gun fire, Avni lit the fuses of the mines and retreated. While he was crawling back, there was a loud explosion. The blast hurled him against the wall, stunning him momentarily. As soon as he reached the rest of the unit, the group withdrew to the area outside martial law, hid their weapons and dispersed to their homes.

One British soldier was killed in the attack and eight were wounded, three seriously. The incident was reported in Ha'aretz :

## GREAT CONFUSION

After the explosions, warning sirens went off in Jerusalem and there was a volley of gunfire. Almost all the soldiers in the

military zone fired repeatedly. There was considerable confusion and the shooting was random. While this was going on, the attackers slipped away. The firing continued for more than half an hour.

There was no loss of life in the civilian population inside the military zone.

The explosion in Schneller camp made a strong impression on the local and world press, and severely undermined the prestige of the British administration. It offered resounding proof that the British were unable to check the Jewish underground, which was operating in small units and effectively exploiting the element of surprise.



The attack on the Schneller camp

On the night of the Irgun raid on Schneller, several additional targets came under attack throughout the country: an army camp near Karkur was raided, shots were fired at the Sarona camp and a landmine exploded near Rishon Lezion.

Martial law, which lasted 16 days, was revoked on March 17 (four days after the attack on Schneller). In all, 78 persons 'suspected of membership of terror organizations' were arrested throughout the country, a tiny number in view of the scope of the operation. Martial law was a total failure; the British did not succeed in suppressing the underground organizations. The Government Information Service announced that during the period of martial law, 68 'terrorist acts' had been committed, 4 per day on average.

The leaders of the Jewish Agency did not revert to widescale informing on Irgun and Lehi fighters. The threat which had hovered over the Yishuv for so long had now receded. The most drastic weapon the British could wield had proven ineffective, since the Yishuv had easily adapted itself to the new situation. The underground movements emerged from the crisis stronger than before and with enhanced prestige.

The attack on the British Officers Club and the debacle of martial law motivated the opposition in Great Britain, under Winston Churchill, to re-double its denunciations of government policy. In one of his speeches, Churchill declared:

How long does the Secretary of State for Colonies expect that this state of squalid warfare will go on, at a cost of 30 or 40 million pounds a year, keeping 100,000 Englishmen away with the military force?

The Sunday Express wrote that:

The Palestine problem has to be solved and solved at once. British lives are being sacrificed with no objective, and terror was undermining British prestige throughout the world.

As a result of underground activities in Palestine, His Majesty's Government was forced to bring forward the debate on Palestine at the United Nations. A special session of the UN was scheduled for April 28, 1947, instead of the later original date, in September.

## THE ACRE PRISON BREAK

Acre was conquered by the Ottomans at the beginning of the 16th century. The governor of Galilee, Ahmed al-Jazzar, developed the town, building a fortress and markets and turning it into the 'main gateway' to Palestine. Under the British Mandate, the fortress served as a jail, where underground fighters were imprisoned and where eight Irgun fighters went to the gallows. Acre prison was the most highly-guarded fortress in the country; surrounded by walls and encircled to the east and north by a deep moat; the sea to the west. It was located in the heart of an Arab town with no Jewish inhabitants.

Despite these factors, the underground never ceased to plan their escape. The turning point came when an Arab inmate, in charge of supplying oil to the kitchen, related that while working in the oil storeroom (in the south wall of the fortress), he had heard women's voices. This was reported to Eitan Livni, the senior Irgun prisoner, who deduced that the south wall of the prison bordered on a street or alley in the Old City. The information was conveyed by underground post to the Irgun command, with a proposal that the wall of the oil storehouse be exploited for a break-in to rescue the Irgun inmates.

Amichai Paglin (Gidi), chief operations officer, toured Acre disguised as an Arab, and after thorough scrutiny of the area, concluded that a break-in was indeed possible. After discussions at headquarters, Livni received a letter stating that it was possible to breach the wall from outside, but that the success of the operation depended on the ability of the prisoners to reach the south wall on their own. To that end, explosives, detonators and a fuse were smuggled into the jail by the parents of prisoners, who

were permitted to bring their sons delicacies, such as jam, oil, and fruit. The explosives were smuggled in inside a can, under a thick layer of jam. A British sergeant opened the can and examined its contents. When he poked inside, he felt hard lumps (in fact gelignite), but accepted the story that the jam had not gelled properly. The detonators and the fuse were concealed in the false bottom of a container of oil, which was also thoroughly examined. The sergeant poked in a long stick to examine the level of the oil, but since the fuse and the detonators were less than one centimeter thick, he did not notice the false bottom.

At that time, 163 Jews were being held in Acre prison (60 of them Irgun members, 22 Lehi and 5 Haganah, the remainder felons) and 400 Arabs. The Irgun command decided that only 41 could be freed (30 Irgun members and 11 Lehi members) because it was technically impossible to find hiding places for a larger number of fugitives. Eitan Livni was given the task of deciding who was to be freed and who would remain in jail (the Lehi prisoners chose their own candidates for escape). The break-in was planned for Sunday, May 4, 1947 at 4 pm. The day before, the fighters met at a diamond factory in Netanya. A map was pinned up and the briefing began. The first speaker was Amichai Paglin, who explained the plan in detail. He was followed by Dov Cohen ("Shimshon"), who had been appointed commander of the operation. He revealed that the fighters would be disguised as British soldiers and instructed them to conduct themselves in Acre like 'His Majesty's troops'. After the fighters had been assigned to their units, they were all given an 'English' haircut. The next day, they were taken to Shuni, a former Crusader fortress (between Binyamina and Zichron Yaakov), then serving as a settlement for the Irgun supporters. Twenty of them wore British Engineering

Corps uniforms, while three were dressed as Arabs. After they had been briefed and armed, they set out in a convoy of vehicles including a 3-ton military truck, two military vans with British camouflage colors, and two civilian vans. The convoy was headed by the command jeep, and Shimshon, dressed as a be-medalled British captain, sat beside the driver.

When the convoy reached Acre, the two military vans entered the market, while the truck waited at the gate. Ladders were removed from one of the vehicles and the 'engineering unit' went into the Turkish bath-house in order to 'mend' the telephone lines. They climbed the ladders to the roof adjacent to the fortress wall, and Dov Salomon, the unit commander, helped his deputy, Yehuda Apiryon, to haul up the explosive charges and to hook them to the windows of the prison.

At the same time, the two blocking squads had scattered mines along the routes leading to the site of the break-in. One three-man squad was commanded by Avshalom Haviv and the second consisted of two fighters, Michaeli and Ostrowicz.

An additional three-man squad, disguised as Arabs, was positioned north of Acre, and when the operation began they fired a mortar at the nearby army camp. The command jeep halted at the gas station at the entrance to the new town, laid anti-vehicle mines and set fire to the station.

While these units were taking up positions outside the fortress, the plan was being put into effect inside the prison. At 3pm, the doors of the cells were opened for afternoon exercise. Those prisoners who were not scheduled to escape went down to the courtyard to create a diversion, while the escapees remained in their cells. They were divided into three groups, each in a separate cell.



### Prisoner in the courtyard

At 4:22 pm. a loud explosion shook the entire area, as the wall of the fortress was blasted open. The first group of escapees leapt out of their cell and ran down the corridor towards the breach in the wall. They had to push their way through a crowd of Arab prisoners who ran out of their cells in panic and blocked their path. The first escapee, Michael Ashbel, attached explosive charges to the locks barring the gate of the corridor, and lit the fuse. There was an explosion, and the gate blew open. The second gate was blown open in the same way, opening the route to freedom. At

that moment, the second group went into action; they created an obstruction by igniting kerosene mixed with oil. The ensuing fire blocked the escape route, so that the guards could not reach it. The third group threw grenades at the guards on the roof, who fled. In the confusion created by the explosion, the gunfire and the fire, 41 prisoners made their way to freedom.

The first group of escapees boarded a van and drove off, but the driver mistakenly drove towards Haifa, instead of Mount Napoleon. Near the shore, a group of British soldiers in an armoured car opened fire on them. The driver tried to turn back, but hit the wall of the cemetery and the van overturned. The escapees ran towards a gas station, the soldiers pursuing them. Dov Cohen fired his Bren at them, but was mowed down by a volley of 17 bullets. Zalman Lifshitz, at his side, was also killed. When the firing stopped, five of the first group of 13 escapees, were dead, six injured and only two were unscathed. The survivors were returned to jail.

The blocking unit, consisting of Avshalom Haviv, Meir Nakar and Yaakov Weiss, also suffered a mishap. They did not hear the bugle signal to withdraw and stayed put when the other units had already left Acre. After a protracted battle with British soldiers, they were caught and arrested. The second blocking unit, consisting of Amnon Michaeli and Menahem Ostrowicz, also failed to hear the bugle (which signalled withdrawal) and were likewise caught by the British.

The remaining escapees and members of the strike force in the truck and the second van escaped safely. They reached Kibbutz Dalia, abandoned their vehicles, and made their way on foot to Binyamina. There they were given refuge in the Nahlat Jabotinsky

quarter and the following morning they were dispersed throughout the country to pre-designated hiding places.

Haim Appelbaum of Lehi, wounded during the retreat, succeeded in boarding the last van, but died soon after. His body was left in the vehicle, and members of Kibbutz Dalia conveyed it to the burial society in Haifa the following day.

To conclude, 27 inmates succeeded in escaping (20 from the Irgun and seven from Lehi). Nine fighters were killed in clashes with the British army; six escapees and three members of the Fighting Force. Eight escapees, some of them injured, were caught and returned to jail. Also arrested were five of the attackers who did not make it back to base. The Arab prisoners took advantage of the commotion, and 182 of them escaped as well.

Despite the heavy toll in human lives, the action was described by foreign journalists as 'the greatest jail break in history'. The London Ha'aretz correspondent wrote on May 5:

[The attack on Acre jail has been seen here as a serious blow to British prestige... Military circles described the attack as a strategic masterpiece.](#)

The New York Herald Tribune wrote that the underground had carried out "an ambitious mission, their most challenging so far, in perfect fashion".

In the House of Commons, Oliver Stanley asked what action His Majesty's Government was planning to take "in light of the events at Acre prison which had reduced British prestige to a nadir".



### The Acre jail break

Shortly after the Acre jail break, Andrei Gromyko, USSR representative to the UN, caused a sensation when he informed

the stunned delegates that his country took a favorable view of the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

Three weeks after the jail break, the five Irgun fighters who had been captured after the operation were put on trial. Three of the defendants - Avshalom Haviv, Yaakov Weiss and Meir Nakar - were carrying weapons when they were caught close to the jail wall. They challenged the authority of the court and, after making political statements, were all sentenced to death. The other two, Michaeli and Ostrowicz, were captured unarmed, at some distance from the jail. Since there was a chance of saving them from the death penalty, the Irgun command decided to conduct a proper defence procedure. The counsel for the defence succeeded in producing documents proving that the two were minors, and the court sentenced them to life imprisonment.

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## GALLOWS

### SHLOMO BEN-YOSEF

As previously mention, on April 21, 1938, three members of the Beitar labor company at Rosh Pina (Avraham Shein, Shalom Jurabin and Shlomo Ben-Yosef) fired on an Arab bus on the Safed— Rosh-Pina road in reprisal for Arab violence. None of the passengers were hit. The three men fled, hid in an abandoned building nearby and were arrested some time later by the police. They were tried by a military tribunal in Haifa and charged with illegal possession of arms and with "intent to kill or cause other harm to a large number of people." Under the Emergency Regulations, each of the charges was a capital offence. The three defendants announced that they intended to exploit the trial for political purposes.

The court pronounced Jurabin mentally unstable, and he was sentenced to incarceration in a mental hospital 'at the discretion of the High Commissioner'. Shein and Ben-Yosef were sentenced to death by hanging and accepted the sentence with exceptional stoicism. The Commander in Chief of British forces in Palestine confirmed Ben-Yosef's sentence, and later commuted Shein's sentence to life imprisonment on account of his youth.

On the morning of June 29, 1938, Shlomo Ben-Yosef prepared for his final hour. He stripped off the scarlet garments of the condemned man, and dressed in shorts, a shirt and work-boots. After breakfast, he brushed his teeth and awaited the police guard. He walked erect to the gallows, singing the Beitar anthem. On the wall of his death cell, Ben-Yosef had written in his poor Hebrew:

What is a homeland? It is something worth living for, fighting for and dying for. I was a slave to Beitar to the day of my death



**Shlomo Ben Yosef**

Shlomo Ben-Yosef was born Shalom Tabachnik on May 7, 1913, in Poland. His parents raised him in a spirit of religious observance and tradition. He joined Beitar in 1928 and, two years later, after the death of his father, was forced to become the family breadwinner. In 1937 he decided to immigrate to Palestine, but failing to obtain the certificate granted by the Jewish Agency, he joined a group of 'illegal' immigrants as part of the 'Af Al Pi' project. When he reached Palestine on September 20, 1937, he joined the Beitar labor company at Rosh Pina and shortly afterwards was accepted into the Irgun. On arrival at Rosh Pina he burned his foreign passport and changed his name to Shlomo Ben-Yosef. He was 25 when he was executed.

## ELIYAHU HAKIM AND ELIYAHU BEIT-ZURI

Lord Moyne, who was known to be an anti-Zionist, had been appointed Minister of State for the Middle-East, and from his place of residence in Cairo, was responsible for implementing the White Paper policy. Lehi considered Lord Moyne to be responsible for the deportation of the immigrant ships and decided to assassinate him. Two members of Lehi, Eliyahu Hakim and Eliyahu Bet Zuri, were despatched to Cairo, and on November 6, 1944, they carried out the assassination, but were caught shortly afterwards. On January 10, 1945 they were charged with murder. Hakim and Beit-Zuri, manacled, stood calmly beside their Egyptian guards with red fezzes. Both were, and had been since their capture, completely self-possessed. They did not take part in the proceedings, and when the testimony was completed, Eliyahu Hakim rose to his feet and said:

We accuse Lord Moyne and the government he represents, with murdering hundreds and thousands of our brethren; we accuse him of seizing our country and looting our possessions... We were forced to do justice and to fight.

After being sentenced to death, they rose to their feet and sang the national anthem. On March 23, 1945, they were dressed in the traditional, ill-fitting red burlap suit of condemned men, marched barefoot to the gallows, were blindfolded at the scaffold, and hanged.

**Eliyahu Beit-Zuri** was born in 1922 in Tel-Aviv to a distinguished family which had lived in Eretz Israel for many generations. He joined the Irgun at young age and later became a

member of Lehi. He did not take part in the proceedings at his trial. When the testimony was completed, he rose to his feet and made a political statement. He said:

Millions sank in the sea of blood and tears, but the British skipper did not lift them to the ship. And if a few of the survivors held on to the bow of the ship, he, the British skipper, pushed them back into the sea. And we in our homeland had no choice but to surrender or fight. We decided to fight.

**Eliyahu Hakim** was born in 1925 in Beirut. At the age of seven his family immigrated to Eretz Israel, and settled in Haifa. He joined Lehi when he was a student at high school. Just before he died, Hakim, looking down at the red burlap suit of the condemned man said wryly:

This is the finest suit of clothes I have ever worn in my life.



**Eliyahu Hakim**



**Eliyahu Beit-Zuri**

## DOV GRUNER

On Tuesday, April 23, 1946, a military vehicle approached the Ramat Gan police station, and let off about a dozen 'Arab prisoners', escorted by 'British soldiers'. The 'prisoners' were taken into the station, and the 'British sergeant' in charge of the convoy informed the desk sergeant that the Arabs had been caught stealing at the Tel Litvinsky army camp (present-day Tel Hashomer) and were to be detained. While the desk sergeant was deciding what to do with them, the 'prisoners' and their escorts took out revolvers and ordered the policemen to put up their hands and file into the detention cell. Within moments, the unit had taken over the police station, and then moved towards the armory, blasting open the door. Meanwhile the 'porters', led by Dov Gruner, had entered the building. They removed the weapons from the armory and loaded them onto a waiting truck. A policeman on the upper storey noticed the activity, and directed machine-gun fire at the attackers. He shot the Irgun Bren gunner, who had taken up position on the balcony of the building opposite the police station, and then fired at the 'porters', who continued to load weapons while bullets whistled around them. When they had completed their task, the truck drove off to an orange grove near Ramat-Gan. The commander of the operation, Eliezer Pedatzur ("Gad"), counted his men and discovered that three were missing: the Bren gunner Yisrael Feinerman, who had been shot and killed while covering the 'porters' from the balcony of the building opposite the police station; Yaakov Zlotnik, who was fatally wounded while running to the truck (his body was discovered hanging on the barbed wire) and Dov Gruner, who had sustained jaw injury, had fallen into the trench beside the fence and was taken captive. The British took Gruner to Hadassah hospital in

Tel-Aviv, where he was operated by Professor Marcus. Gruner spent twelve days at Hadassah, with an armed guard posted outside his room around the clock. From there, he was transferred to the government hospital in Jaffa, and then to the medical division of the central jail in Jerusalem.

On January 1, 1947, seven months after his arrest, Gruner's trial opened at the military court in Jerusalem. He was charged with firing on policemen, and setting explosive charges with the intent of killing personnel 'on His Majesty's service'. When asked if he admitted his guilt, Gruner replied that he did not recognize the authority of the court to try him, had no intention of taking part in the proceedings, did not want translated into Hebrew for his benefit. Instead, he read a statement to the judges:

I do not recognize your authority to try me. This court has no legal foundation, since it was appointed by a regime without legal foundation.

You came to Palestine because of the commitment you undertook at the behest of all the nations of the world to rectify the greatest wrong caused to any nation in the history of mankind, namely the expulsion of Israel from their land, which transformed them into victims of persecution and incessant slaughter throughout the world. It was this commitment - and this commitment alone, which constituted the legal and moral basis for your presence in this country. But you betrayed it wilfully, brutally and with satanic cunning. You turned your commitment into a mere scrap of paper...

When the prevailing government in any country is not legal, when it becomes a regime of oppression and tyranny, it is the right of its citizens – more than that, it is their duty – to fight

this regime and to topple it. This is what Jewish youth are doing and will continue to do until you quit this land, and hand it over to its rightful owners: the Jewish people. For you should know this: there is no power in the world which can sever the tie between the Jewish people and their one and only land. Whosoever tries to sever it – his hand will be cut off and the curse of God will rest on him for ever.

There was a silence in the courtroom after Gruner's statement. The prosecutor delivered his address and summoned witnesses. In an unusual move, the prosecutor pointed out several factors in favor of the accused: his five year's service in the British army, his good conduct during his service, his participation in fighting on the Italian front and the severe injury he suffered, which left him disabled. This statement had no effect on the judges, and after a brief consultation, the president of the court announced that Gruner had been found guilty on two charges. On the first charge, he was sentenced to be hung by the neck. The court reserved the right to determine the punishment for the second charge. Immediately after the reading of the sentence, Gruner rose to his feet and declared:

"In blood and fire Judea fell, in blood and fire Judea will rise again"

A quotation from a poem written by the poet Yaakov Cohen after the 1903 Kishinev pogroms. The quotation became the slogan of the Hashomer organization.

Dov Gruner was taken to the death cell under heavy guard, and dressed in scarlet garments. He spent 105 days in the cell, alternating between hope and despair, while leaders and public figures in Palestine and abroad interceded with the British government to commute the death sentence to life imprisonment. Heavy pressure was also exerted on Gruner to plead for clemency, but he insisted on being treated as a prisoner of war and refused to sign the request.



Dov Gruner

Forty eight hours before the date fixed for the execution, Gruner wrote a letter from his cell to the Irgun commander, which he concluded with the following words:

I am writing these lines 48 hours before our oppressors are due to carry out the murder, and at such times one cannot lie. I swear that if I had the choice of starting again, I would choose the same path I have followed regardless of the possible consequences for me.

**Dov Gruner** was born on December 6, 1912, in Hungary. In 1938 he joined Beitar, and two years later immigrated to Eretz Israel aboard the Skaria, an illegal immigrant vessel organized by Beitar. After spending six months in the Atlit internment camp, he joined the Beitar company at Rosh Pina, and then found his way to the ranks of the Irgun. In 1941, he joined the British army in order to fight the Nazi enemy, and together with his comrades in the Jewish Brigade came to the aid of Holocaust survivors in Europe. After his demobilization, in March 1946, he resumed his activity in the Irgun and joined its Fighting Force. While still on demobilization leave, he took part in the requisition of weapons from a British army depot near Netanya, and ten days later set out on his second and last operation – the attack on the Ramat Gan police station. He was 35 when he went to the gallows, together with his comrades - Alkahi, Drezner and Kashani.

## **MORDECHAI ALKAHI, YEHIEL DREZNER AND ELIEZER KASHANI**

Benyamin Kimchi, who was arrested after the Irgun attack on the Ottoman Bank in Jaffa, was sentenced in December 1946 to 18 years imprisonment and 18 lashes. It was the first time that an underground fighter had been given this humiliating sentence. The Irgun command took a very severe view of the sentence, and

cautioned the British against carrying it out. "If it is implemented," they wrote in a leaflet which was widely distributed:



# אזהרה!

חייל עברי, שופל בשבי האוייב, נידון ע"י בית-דין של צבא הכבוש הבריטי למלקות.

אנו מזהירים את ממשלת הדכוי מפני הוצאה לפועל של עונש משפיל זה.

אם הוא יוצא אל הפועל, יופל אותו עונש על קציני הצבא הבריטי. כל אחד מהם יהיה עלול ללקות 18 מלקות.

הארגון הצבאי הלאומי  
בארץ-ישראל

בסלו תשי"ז

## WARNING!

A Hebrew soldier, taken prisoner by the enemy, was sentenced by an illegal British Military "Court" to the humiliating punishment of flogging.

We warn the occupation Government not to carry out this punishment, which is contrary to the laws of soldiers honour. If it is put into effect — every officer of the British occupation army in Eretz-Israel will be liable to be punished in the same way: to get 18 whips.

HAIRGUN HAZVAI HALEUMI (N. M. O.)  
b'Eretz-Israel

The British ignored the Irgun warnings, and on Friday, December 27, 1946, Kimchi received 18 lashes in the Jerusalem jail. Immediately afterwards, a unit of the Irgun fighters was sent into action. A captain from the Sixth Airborne Division was whipped in Netanya, two British sergeants in Tel-Aviv, and another sergeant in Rishon Lezion.

Another unit (composed of Yehiel Drezner, Mordechai Alkahi, Eliezer Kashani, Haim Golovsky and Avraham Mizrahi) set out by car from Petah Tikva on a similar mission. Not far from Wilhelma, they encountered a road-block and came under heavy fire. Mizrahi, the driver, was hit and died later. The other four were dragged out of the vehicle and taken to a nearby army camp, where they were stripped, beaten and humiliated. After five days of torture they were taken to the central prison in Jerusalem. On February 10, 1947, 43 days after their capture and arrest, their trial opened at a military court in Jerusalem. The defendants did not take part in the proceedings, refused to answer questions and did not cross-examine prosecution witnesses. When the testimony was completed, Drezner and Golovsky rose to their feet and declared that they did not recognize the authority of the court; they considered themselves to be prisoners of war and hence the authorities were empowered to detain them, but not to try them. Yehiel Drezner, the first to speak, said:

We set out to prove to you that a new Hebrew generation has arisen in this country, which will not tolerate humiliation, will not accept slavery and will fight for its honor at all costs.

We will break your whip...No longer will you whip the citizens of this country, whether Jews or Arabs, for we, the soldiers of

Israel, have rebelled against your rule and its despicable methods.

Golovsky's statement was also directed at 'the officers of the occupation army' and was devoted mainly to a description of the persecution, torture and humiliation to which the four defendants had been subjected. His aim was to inform the world, through the foreign journalists present in court, of the degrading treatment they had received at the hands of the British.

The trial was brief and the sentence was handed down on the same day: death by hanging for Alkahi, Drezner and Kashani, and life imprisonment for Golovsky on account of his youth (he was 17 years old). After hearing the sentence, the four rose to their feet and sang Hatikva anthem. They were taken to the central jail, where Dov Gruner was in the death cell. Forty-eight hours later, General Barker, who left the country the same day, confirmed the sentences.

Public figures and institutions tried hard to have the sentence commuted. A petition was submitted, signed by 800 residents of Petah Tikva (three of the defendants lived there), and an appeal was submitted to the Supreme Court, claiming errors in legal procedure, but to no avail. It should be stressed that all these steps were taken on the initiative of public figures and relatives of the defendants. They themselves authorized nobody to act on their behalf and, like Dov Gruner, refused to sign an appeal for clemency. They even issued a public statement in which they said:

Do you not understand that your requests for clemency are an affront to your honor and the honor of the entire people? It

represents servility towards the authorities reminiscent of the Diaspora. We are prisoners and we demand that they treat us as prisoners...At present we are in their hands...We cannot resist them, and they can treat us as they choose...they cannot break our spirit. We know how to die with honor as befits Hebrews.

On April 15, the British transferred the four condemned men: Gruner, Alkahi, Drezner and Kashani from Jerusalem jail to Acre prison. The move was carried out clandestinely, and the authorities hinted that they had no intention of carrying out the sentence in the near future. When their lawyer, Max Critchman, approached the Acre prison authorities, and asked why they were being moved, he was told that "...the governor has received no instructions regarding preparations for executions, and the procedure is that the jail administration receives such instructions several days before the executions."

The next day, at 2.45 am, three British policemen and one Arab policeman came to the apartment of Nehemiah Katriel Magril, the only Jew living in Acre. Magril was a scholar, who acted as emissary to the Jewish inmates of the jail and led the prayers there on the Sabbath and festivals. He had never been ordained as a rabbi, and was known among the Arabs as 'Hakham Abu Mussa'. Ha'aretz, April 17, 1947, describes the visit:

The policemen awakened Magril and asked him to accompany them to the jail. They refused to reveal the reason for their request and urged him to hurry, saying that they had no time. When Magril asked them how long they needed him for, they replied: 'About two hours'. Then he understood the meaning of

the request and replied: 'I refuse to go with you. You must contact the chief rabbinate in Haifa'.

The policemen left without him. Magril learned of the execution of Dov Gruner and his comrades only a few hours later, from a Jerusalem radio broadcast

At 4 am, Dov Gruner was roused from his sleep, and taken to the gallows. Present in the cell were the head of the prison service in Palestine, the governor of Acre jail, a physician and six British officers. As was the custom in Britain and the colonies, the governor served as hangman, but, in violation of custom – no rabbi was present. Dov Gruner went to the gallows without confession, as did Yehiel Drezner, Eliezer Kashani and Mordechai Alkahi. All four were hanged within half an hour, and each of them, as his turn arrived, sang Hatikva until he died. Each was joined in his singing by those awaiting their turn.

As the condemned men walked through the jail, all the Jewish prisoners rose to their feet and sang the national anthem.

**Mordechai Alkahi** was born in Petah Tikva on March 10, 1925 into a poor family of Turkish origin. At the age of 14, he went out to work to help support his family, and in late 1943 he joined the Irgun. After the training period, he was transferred to the Fighting Force, and his first experience of combat was at the Kalkiliya police station, during the Irgun operation on four police stations on Yom Kipur, 1945. He later took part in numerous operations, including the attack on the Ramat-Gan police station, where Dov Gruner was captured. All these operations took place at night; by day he continued to work in a factory. He was 22 when he went to the gallows.

**Yehiel Drezner** was born in Poland on October 13, 1922, to a religious Zionist family, which immigrated to Palestine in 1933. He joined the Beitar movement in Jerusalem at 13 and in 1940 he joined the Irgun. There he held many positions: first, in the intelligence service and then in the Fighting Force. Yehiel saw action many times, as a rank-and-file fighter and as commanding officer: including the attack on Lydda airbase; the assault on Yibne railway station and the attack on Ramat-Gan police station. At the time of his arrest, he was commander of the Fighting Force at Petah-Tivka, and was equipped with an identity card in the name of Dov Rosenbaum. It was under this name that he went to the gallows, and the British and the general public remained unaware of his real identity. He was 25 when he was executed.

**Eliezer Kashani** was born in Petah Tikva on March 13, 1923, into a large, working class family, which had been in Palestine for three generations. At the age of 13 he went out to work. On August 23, 1944, during the widespread search conducted by the British in Petah Tikva, he was arrested as a 'terror suspect', brought to the Latrun internment camp and then sent to Eritrea with the first group of 251 detainees. In the camp he joined the Irgun, and in February 1945 he was released. In Palestine he commenced his underground activity despite his obligation to report daily to the police. He was arrested again after the explosion at the King David Hotel, but was released shortly afterwards and returned to underground activity. He was 24 when he went to the gallows.



Yechiel Dresner



Mordechai Alkachi



Eliezer Kashani

## MOSHE BARAZANI

In March 17, 1947, the day on which martial law was lifted, the military court in Jerusalem sentenced Moshe Barazani to death by hanging. Barazani, a member of Lehi, had been arrested eight days previously in the Makor Baruch quarter of Jerusalem, not far from Schneller camp. In a body search, a grenade was found, and he was tried on a charge of bearing arms and intent to assassinate Brigadier A.P. Davis, who was in charge of implementing martial law in the city. Barazani declared that he did not recognise the authority of the court to try him, and would not take part in the proceedings. He made a political statement, in which he said that the Jewish people regarded the British as alien rulers of their country:

In this war, I have fallen captive to you, and you have no right to try me. You will not intimidate us by hangings nor will you succeed in destroying us. My people and all the people you have enslaved will fight your empire to the death.

The trial was brief; ninety minutes after it began, the judge read out the death sentence. Barazani rose to his feet and sang Hatikva, but the police guard interrupted him and dragged him away. He was chained hand and foot and taken to the condemned man's cell, where he joined Dov Gruner and his three comrades - Eliezer Kashani, Yehiel Drezner and Mordechai Alkahi, whose death sentences had already been confirmed by the British Commander in Chief in Palestine.

## MEIR FEINSTEIN

A week after Barazani's trial, on March 25, 1947, the military court convened again, this time to try the four Irgun fighters who had been caught after the explosion at the Jerusalem railway station. Two of the defendants, Mas'ud Biton and Moshe Horovitz, were apprehended at some distance from the station, and the Irgun command decided that they should deny any involvement in the deed. Horovitz was arrested with a bullet wound, but one of the traders at the commercial center agreed to testify that Horovitz had been in his store, had heard shots fired and had gone out to see what was happening and been wounded. The other two, Meir Feinstein and Daniel Azulay, announced that they did not recognize the authority of the court to try them, and would not take part in the proceedings. Before sentence was passed, the two made political statements. Feinstein said:

A gallows regime that is what you are trying to impose on this country, which was intended to serve as a beacon of light for all mankind. And in your foolishness and malice, you assume that by means of this regime you will succeed in breaking the spirit of our people, the people for whom the whole country has become a gallows. You are wrong. You will discover that you have met up with steel, steel forged in the flame of love and hatred, love of the homeland and of freedom and hatred of slavery and of the invader. It is burning steel, and you cannot shatter it. You will burn your own hands.

The court accepted the alibi of Horovitz and Biton and released them. Meir Feinstein and Daniel Azulay were sentenced to death by hanging. They were removed from court and taken to the death

cell in the central prison in Jerusalem, where they joined Gruner, Alkahi, Drezner, Kashani and Barazani.

On April 17, 1947, the day after the hanging of Gruner, Alkahi, Drezner and Kashani, the British Commander in Chief in Palestine confirmed the sentences of Feinstein and Barazani. Daniel Azulay's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

## A GRENADE BETWEEN HEARTS

In the death cell in the central prison in Jerusalem, Feinstein and Barazani resolved to blow themselves and their executioners up.

They wrote to their comrades in adjacent cells:

Brethren greetings. You have not done well in failing to send it to us. Who knows if by morning it will not be too late. Do not allow time to lapse. Send it to us as soon as possible. All you have been told was merely an emotional storm which passed swiftly. We are fully resolved. Our greetings to all. Be strong and so will we. M.F., M. B.

"It" referred to the two grenades which Feinstein and Barazani planned to hurl at the executioners when they came to escort them to the gallows. The idea was not new; it had been broached when Dov Gruner was in the death cell awaiting execution. The explosives were smuggled into the prison in parcels of food earmarked for prisoners who received "special treatment". When Dov Gruner was moved with his comrades to Acre prison, the explosives were left behind in the Jerusalem jail.

It was not easy for the Irgun and Lehi prisoners to carry out the wishes of their condemned comrades, but each of them knew that if he had been in their place, he would have asked the same. On the day on which they received confirmation of their request from the Irgun and Lehi headquarters, the prisoners started to prepare the grenades. They sliced off the top of an orange, scooped out the fruit and filled the space with gelignite and small metal strips. Into this they inserted detonators connected to a fuse. Finally, the top of the orange was replaced with thin toothpicks, so that it appeared intact.

Three times a day, the condemned men were handed food prepared by inmates who worked in the kitchen. The prison guards, who examined the food carefully, were accustomed to the sight of oranges, and passed them through without particular scrutiny. A basket of fruit was prepared, which included two 'special' oranges. The food was taken into the cell by one of the non-political prisoners, and a note on a tiny scrap of paper hidden in the leftovers was removed from the cell:

Greetings, dear friends. We have received the "press". Everything is clear to us, and we rejoice at this last opportunity to take part in avenging our four comrades. As for us, we are convinced that our organizations will avenge us to the proper degree and in the proper fashion. But they may take us by surprise and move us to Acre, and therefore please ask outside that they prepare the same thing for us in Acre, so that we can be sure of doing it. We are strong. Shalom. M. Feinstein and M. Barazani.

On Monday, April 21, 1947, about a week after the hangings at Acre, curfew was imposed on Jerusalem and it was rumored that Feinstein and Barazani were about to be executed. At 9:15 in the evening, British officers arrived at the home of Rabbi Yaakov Goldman, chief rabbi of the prison, and asked him to accompany them to the central prison. They did not give reasons, but it was clear to all that Feinstein and Barazani were about to be hanged. Rabbi Goldman was taken into the death cell, and tried to hearten the two fighters. At the request of Feinstein, they sang the Adon Olam (the most hail and praise to God prayer). Then the two condemned men together with the Rabbi sang Hatikva, and the rabbi left with the prison governor, promising to return to be with them in their final hour.

Feinstein and Barazani did not reveal their secret to the rabbi, but urged him not to return for the execution. The rabbi was adamant, and in order not to hurt him, the two decided to change their original plan and to blow themselves up before the hangman arrived. About half an hour after the rabbi's departure, two explosions were heard from the cell: Moshe and Meir stood embraced. The grenades were held between them, at the height of their hearts. Meir lit a cigarette, with which he ignited the fuses that Moshe held, and they died together as heroes.

On the instructions of the chief rabbi, Rabbi Yitzhak Halevi Herzog, the two men were buried on the Mount of Olives in the section of the martyrs of the 1929 and 1936-38 riots. Rabbi Aryeh Levin and Benyamin Feinstein, Meir's brother, eulogized them at the graveside.

The courageous stand of the underground fighters in their final hour won them great esteem in Eretz Israel and throughout the world. A new generation had emerged in Palestine, ready to sacrifice itself for the noble objective of liberating its people and country. The poet, Nathan Alterman, who was an opponent of the Irgun and Lehi, published a poem in praise of Feinstein and Barazani in 'Davar', the Histadrut newspaper.

**Moshe Barazani** was born on June 20, 1928 in Iraq. When he was six years old his family immigrated to Eretz Israel and settled in the Old City of Jerusalem. Moshe started work at an early age, first as an apprentice carpenter, and then in a soft drinks factory. He joined Lehi when still young, first putting up posters as a member of the youth division, and then taking an active part in the fighting unit. He was 19 when he died.

**Meir Feinstein** was born on October 5, 1927, in the Old City of Jerusalem to religious parents. He studied at the Etz Hayyim yeshiva but at an early age lost his father, and was obliged to support himself and help feed his family. At first he worked in Jerusalem, then in farming at Kibbutz Givat Hashlosha, where he joined the Haganah. In 1944, when he was 16, he joined the British army after obtaining a forged document from the mukhtar of Petah Tikva, stating that he was 20. After his demobilization he joined the Irgun, starting out in the propaganda unit. He was then sent on an officers course, and it was while attending this that he was chosen for the mission on which he was apprehended. He was nineteen and a half when he was executed.



Meyir Feinshtein



Moshe Barazani

## AVSHALOM HAVIV, YAAKOV WEISS AND MEIR NAKAR

On May 28, some three weeks after the Acre prison break, the British tried Avshalom Haviv, Yaakov Weiss and Meir Nakar, who had been caught just outside the prison wall carrying weapons. Haviv and his comrades did not acknowledge the right of the court to try them, and chose to exploit the forum in order to make political statements. They did not take part in the trial, which lasted nearly three weeks, with more than 35 prosecution witnesses being called. After the prosecutor's summing up, the defendants made their statements.

The first speaker was Avshalom Haviv, who compared the struggle of the Jewish underground to that of the Irish, and said, among other things:

When the fighters of the Irish underground took up arms against you, you tried to drown the uprising against tyranny in rivers of blood. You built gallows; you murdered people in the streets; you banished some into distant lands. You thought, in your great folly, that by force of persecution, you could break the spirit of resistance of the free Irish, but you were wrong. The Irish rebellion grew until a free Ireland came into being...You wonder how it came to pass that those Jews whom you thought to be cowards, who were the victims of massacre for generations, have risen up against your rule, are fighting your armies, and when they stand in the shadow of death, they scorn it... Their courage and spiritual force are drawn from two sources: the renewed contact of Hebrew youth with the land of their fathers, which has restored to them the tradition of courage of the heroes of the past, and the lesson

of the Holocaust, which taught us that we are conducting a struggle not only for our liberty but also for our very survival.

Meir Nakar, in his statement, also spoke of the 'bankruptcy' of British policy in Palestine and the collapse of a regime "whose officials are forced to live in ghettos" (an allusion to the security zones in which the British enclosed themselves).

Yaakov Weiss attacked the anti-Zionist policy of the British government and denied the legitimacy of British presence in Palestine:

Your very presence here, against which everyone protests, is illegal. This land is ours from time immemorial and for ever more. What do you, British officers, have to do with our homeland? Who appointed you rulers of an ancient and freedom-loving nation?

On June 16, the sentence was passed: death by hanging for all three.

The Irgun command ordered its Fighting Force to take hostages so as to save the lives of the condemned men, but the British ignored the warnings of the Irgun, and the pleas of leaders of the Yishuv and of many prominent people throughout the world. On July 8, the commander of the British military forces in Palestine confirmed the death sentence handed down three weeks previously. Several days later, an Irgun unit seized two British sergeants in Netanya as they were leaving a cafe. The sergeants were pushed into a waiting car and taken to a pre-arranged hiding place.

The kidnapping of the sergeants stunned not only the British, but also the leaders of the Yishuv. They knew only too well that the Irgun would carry out its threat, and feared the reaction of the British army.

As soon as the kidnapping became known, curfew was imposed on Netanya and the surrounding area, and a house to house search began. Haganah forces joined in the search, but without success. The two sergeants were held in a bunker which had been dug in a diamond factory on the outskirts of the town, with enough food and oxygen for a lengthy period. The taking of hostages by the Irgun did not deter the British government, and in the early morning hours of July 29, the three Irgun fighters – Avshalom Haviv, Yaakov Weiss and Meir Nakar – were hanged at Acre prison. It should be noted that the decision to carry out the sentence was taken at a special session of the Cabinet in London, despite the knowledge that the decision would seal the fate of the two sergeants. Rabbi Nissim Ohana of Haifa, who was asked to accompany the three condemned men in their final hour, wrote of their conduct:

They showed no sign of fear or shock. They were very brave... I stayed with them about an hour, and when I left, they asked me to send their greetings to the Yishuv, and expressed the wish for redemption for the Jewish people. I said to them: be blessed, heroes of the nation.

The British left the Irgun no alternative, and the following day, July 30, the two sergeants were found hanged in a wood near Netanya. The Irgun hoped that this action would bring to a halt the spate of executions meted out by the British. Indeed, after the

hanging of the two sergeants, no more death sentences were carried out in Eretz Israel.

The hanging of the sergeants shocked the British government and people. The press denounced the act which caused the government to re-think its attitude towards the future of Palestine. Begin writes in his book "The Revolt" that the "cruel act" was one of the events which tipped the balance in the British withdrawal from Palestine. Colonel Archer Casset, one of the senior British Mandatory officials, said in a lecture in 1949 that "the hanging of the sergeants did more than anything else to get us out of Palestine".

**Avshalom Haviv** was born on June 18, 1926 in Haifa, and moved with his family to Jerusalem when still a small child. He joined the Irgun while in high school. When he finished school, he served for a year in the Palmach as a condition for continuing his studies at the Hebrew University (a Jewish Agency ruling obliged every high-school graduate to spend a year working on a kibbutz or serving in the Palmach). When he returned to Jerusalem, he enrolled at the faculty of humanities, and resumed his activity in the Irgun, this time in the Fighting Force. He took part in numerous military operations, the last of which was blowing up of Goldschmidt House Officers Club, where he covered for the combat unit. In the raid on Acre prison, he commanded the covering force, which continued to fight until captured by the British. He was 21 when he went to the gallows.

**Yaakov Weiss**, a Betar member from his youth, was born in Czechoslovakia on July 15, 1924. During the Second World War he posed as a Hungarian officer, and thus saved his life. In 1943,

he arrived in Palestine aboard an immigrant ship which was intercepted by the British, and was interned at Atlit with the other passengers. He remained there until the prisoners were freed by the Palmach (October 9, 1945), moved to Netanya, and shortly afterwards joined the Irgun. He was assigned to the Fighting Force and took part in several operations: the assault on the army recreation camp at Netanya and the sabotaging of bridges and railroad lines. In the Acre prison-break, he was assigned to the covering unit and fought until he was captured by the British. He was 23 when he went to the gallows.

**Meir Nakar** was born in Jerusalem on July 26, 1926, to a poor family of Iraqi origin. At the age of 12, he left his studies to help support his family, and a year later he joined Betar. At the age of 17 he enlisted in the British army, after forging his birth certificate. On demobilization, in 1946, he became a member of the Irgun. At first he was active in recruitment and propaganda work, and then moved to the Fighting Force, where he took part in several operations, sometimes with Avshalom Haviv, his commander in their final operation. He was 21 when he went to the gallows.



Avshalom Haviv



Yaakov Weiss



Meir Nakar

## IN AFRICAN EXILE

### THE DEPORTATION OF THE 251

On Thursday, October 19, 1944, at 4:30 am, a large British military force surrounded the Latrun internment camp. At 6 am, a list of 239 internees was read out. They were handcuffed, searched, and taken out of the camp without being permitted to take anything with them. Loaded onto trucks which formed a convoy, they were escorted by armored cars to the Wilhelma airfield. There they were joined by 12 inmates from Acre prison, who had arrived an hour earlier. The 251 detainees were divided into 12 groups, and each group boarded an aircraft, accompanied by armed guards. When it became clear to the prisoners that they were being deported, they burst into a mighty rendering of Hatikva. The 12 planes flew to Asmara, capital of Eritrea; the following day the internees were taken from the airfield to their first place of exile in Africa – Sambel camp, two kilometers north of Asmara.

The Mandatory government continued to exile persons suspected of terrorist affiliation. In all, 439 people were deported by the end of the Mandate.

The Yishuv reacted with restraint to news of the deportation. The Jewish Agency Executive kept silent and the Vaad Le'umi responded with quiet protest. The Hebrew press did not take up arms, and 'Davar' (the Histadrut newspaper) wrote that if the underground was unwilling to abandon its separate path "it should not wonder at the fact that the Yishuv is reacting in this way". It will be recalled that in June 1944, about four months before the deportation, the Jewish Agency had resumed its collaboration with the Mandatory government and was once again informing on

underground fighters and foiling Irgun and Lehi operations. Eight days after the deportation of the 251 fighters, the Yishuv was shocked by the assassination of Lord Moyne in Cairo, and cooperation with the British police, the so-called Season, was now overt and extensive.

## **SAMBEL CAMP IN ERITREA**

The Sambel camp had served in the past as a recreation center for Italian fascist youth and the living conditions were no worse than in Latrun. But, despite the good conditions and comfortable climate, the internees suffered in the first few months from lack of clothing and everyday necessities, from the absence of books and religious articles. Two months after their arrival at Sambel, food rations were cut drastically. The move apparently stemmed from the general wartime shortage of food, but this fact did not appease the prisoners, who launched a partial hunger strike. Several weeks later, the rations were restored to their former size.

On January 21, 1945, three months after their arrival in Eritrea, the internees made their first escape attempt. The weak spot was the sports ground outside the camp, which was open to the internees all day, but locked in the evening and unguarded all night. The rain had created a trench in one corner of the sport ground which was the inmates excavated further. On the day of the escape, Benyamin Zeroni, Haggai Lev and Shimon Sheiba hid in the trench and covered themselves with soil. When the sports ground had been locked and darkness fell, they emerged from their "tomb", climbed the fence and headed for Asmara. They spent the first night in a field near the town and the next day boarded a bus and asked the driver to let them off at the synagogue (there was a Jewish community in Asmara, consisting

of fifty families of Yemenite origin). There they met Haim Gamliel, who gave them money, and hid them in his house. The aim of the three fugitives was to reach Ethiopia. Near the border, a local patrol checked the identity of the passengers; the three came under suspicion, and were handed over to the British, who returned them to the camp and imposed a month's solitary confinement on them.

Three days after the escape the internees were evacuated from Sambel and taken to Massawa port. There they were put aboard an Italian vessel and, under intolerably crowded conditions, transferred to Carthage in the Sudan.

### **THE INTERNMENT CAMP AT CARTHAGE, SUDAN**

The Carthage camp was located in the heart of the desert and endured a harsh climate. Water was in short supply – drinking water was transported in scant quantities by car from dozens of kilometers away. The piped water was salty, and its consumption restricted. Khartoum, the nearest town with a military hospital, was 600 kilometers away. Carthage was much tougher than Sambel in terms of accommodation, sanitation and climate.

In addition to the problem of poor nutrition, a controversy raged on the issue of kosher food. At the beginning of November, 1944, the authorities cancelled the supply of kosher meat which they had been purchasing from the Jewish community in Asmara, and offered instead canned non-kosher meat from British army rations. The internees launched a protest against this change, which offended both the religious and secular alike. Echoes of the protest reached Palestine, and the chief rabbinate, with the aid of the Jewish Agency, appealed to the High Commissioner to send a rabbi and a ritual slaughterer ("shohet") to the camp. On March

15, Rabbi Yaakov Shraibom and the "shohet", Rabbi Rosenberg, reached the camp. They were housed outside the fence and were permitted to come and go at will. Their free movement was exploited by the internees to get information from, and establish contact with, the outside world, which was vital to their escape plans.

On September 26, 1945, three Irgun members (Yaakov Yundof, Yaakov Meridor and Shimon Sheiba) left the camp concealed in a tanker which had brought in water. The driver, who had been bribed, brought them to a spot close to the railroad station, and left them there. They spent the night in a field, and the next day boarded a train for Port Sudan, where they planned to rent a boat to take them to Aqaba. They posed as Polish intelligence officers working for the British, and were equipped with wooden revolvers (which looked just like the real thing) and forged documents. Their comrades in the camp covered their escape and hindered the search after their absence was discovered. As was customary in internment camps, all the inmates were counted every evening. The count was not conducted simultaneously in all the huts, but consecutively. The interval between the counts enabled three inmates to slip out of a hut which had already been inspected, and to be counted again in other huts. They moved from hut to hut through windows whose bars had been sawn through in such a way that they could be lifted out and replaced without detection.

The escapees reached Port Sudan as planned, and spent three days searching for a vessel which would transport them to Aqaba (the Irgun command had sent them a considerable sum of money). However, they aroused the suspicion of the hotel owner where they were staying, and were forced to leave. They contacted a Jewish merchant, but he was unwilling to risk helping

them. They had no alternative but to travel to Khartoum by train. At one of the stations, British officers boarded the train and recognized them. On September 26, six days after their escape, they were handed back to the authorities.

## **BACK TO SAMBEL CAMP, ERITREA**

The internees spent nine months in the Sudan. On October 9, 1945, they were evacuated from Carthage and, after a four-day journey by train and truck, found themselves back at Sambel. Two months later, 35 new internees joined them and were housed in a special camp several hundred meters from the veterans. On January 17, 1946, a dispute broke out between one of the internees, Eliyahu Ezra, and a Sudanese sentinel, resulting in Ezra being shot and wounded. The injured man was carried to the gate for transfer to the first aid station outside the camp. When the guards refused to let them out, the internees began banging on the gate, and fire was opened on them from all sides. Eliyahu Ezra and Shaul Haglili were killed, and 12 others were injured. Only then was the gate opened. The medical officer and several medical orderlies hastened to the aid of the injured, who were then taken to a military hospital. Ezra and Haglili were buried in the cemetery of the Jewish community in Asmara.

The incident caused great agitation among the prisoners, who demanded that an external committee of enquiry be set up to investigate the events. The Yishuv, which was united at that time within the framework of the Jewish Resistance Movement, was in uproar. In contrast to previous occasions, the Hebrew press was unanimous in its demand for an investigation into the murder, and the return of the internees to Eretz Israel. The Irgun, as well as

Lehi, refrained from initiating reprisals in order to avoid undermining the solidarity of the Jewish Resistance Movement.

A month after the return to Sambel, on November 10, 1945, four internees (Yaakov Gurevitz, Benyamin Zeroni, Eliyahu Lankin and Rahamim Mizrahi) escaped at night via the unguarded sports ground. Their objective was to seek out escape routes for a larger group, which would break out by digging a tunnel. Two months after their escape, on January 13, 1946, Gurevitz and Zeroni set out by bus for Ethiopia. They were disguised as veiled Arab women, and were accompanied by a Jew who lived in Asmara and posed as an Arab travelling with his two wives. At one of the Ethiopian border towns, the three entered a hotel to rest, but aroused the suspicion of the bellboy, who summoned the police. The three men were arrested and interrogation revealed their true identity. The British asked the Ethiopian authorities to extradite them, but encountered objections. After seven months of negotiations, they were finally handed over and sent back to Sambel.

Eliyahu Lankin, who set out in mid-June (about six months after the escape) from Asmara to Addis Ababa, was more fortunate. After five adventurous months he reached Djibouti by plane and on January 7, 1947, sailed aboard a French boat to Marseille and from there travelled to Paris. Lankin was the first escapee to succeed in reaching his destination.

Rahamim Mizrahi remained in Asmara, where he tried to create suitable conditions for the absorption of the large group scheduled to escape via the tunnel.

## THE ESCAPE OF THE 54

The inmates spent five months digging two tunnels: the first 32 meters and the second 70 meters long. Both had a diameter of 45 cm, sufficient for a man to crawl through. The work was carried out in three shifts, and two-thirds of the internees took part. The problem of disposing of the sand was solved by packing it in cloth bags and scattering it during the exercise walk in the sports ground. The excavation created numerous technical problems, such as introducing an electrical wire for illumination, supports for the roof to prevent a cave-in, ventilation etc. However, the main problem was how to conceal the work in the tunnel from the camp guards, who conducted routine checks of the huts.

The internees managed to overcome all these obstacles and on Saturday night, June 29, 1946, they were ready for action. That evening, 54 inmates escaped from the camp in two groups: 30 through the large tunnel, and 24 through the smaller one. The two groups emerged from the tunnels equipped with maps, and knapsacks packed with food and first aid kits. The larger group was disguised in British army uniform – sewn by the inmates, who scrupulously copied every detail, from insignia to rank. The "soldiers" took over an Italian bus which was returning soldiers to the camp, and drove off towards the Ethiopian border. An engine problem forced them to continue their journey on foot, and the following day they were discovered by armed villagers and handed over to the authorities. The second group, in civilian clothing, succeeded in reaching a pre-designated hiding place in Asmara. For three months they sought further escape routes, but all their attempts to leave Asmara were unsuccessful. Finally, on September 24, their hiding place was surrounded by British

security forces, and the last escapees were returned to the internment camp.

The prisoners made further escape attempts, but all ended in failure. As a result of these attempts, which greatly embarrassed the camp command and army headquarters in Eritrea, the British government decided to transfer the prisoners to Kenya.

### **THE INTERNMENT CAMP AT GILGIL, KENYA**

On March 2, 1947, all the internees were evacuated from Sabel, loaded onto trucks and transferred under heavy guard to Massawa port. There they boarded a ship and sailed to Mombasa, Kenya, under conditions of intolerable heat and overcrowding. From the port they were taken on a twenty-hour train journey in freight cars to the internment camp at Gilgil.

Gilgil camp had been used in the past as a jail for soldiers serving sentences for criminal offences and the living conditions and sanitation were very poor. There were no windows in the dormitories, apart from a tiny barred aperture under the roof, and the sewage conduits were open and crisscrossed the camp. The climate was harsh and mosquitoes swarmed everywhere. The internees refused to accept the situation and some two weeks after arriving, they rebelled. They tore openings in the walls and covered the sewage conduits with stones which they had removed from the walls. The camp commander subsequently improved conditions and the camp became tolerable.

The British authorities hoped, vainly, that the remote location of the camp would preclude escape attempts. Shortly after their move to Gilgil, however, the prisoners began to excavate a tunnel and made various further attempts.

The last successful escape took place on March 29, 1948. During the evening, six inmates (Yaakov Meridor, Nathan Germant, Reuven Franco and Yaakov Hillel of the Irgun, and Shlomo Ben Shlomo and David Yanai of Lehi) crawled through an eighty-meter tunnel and emerged on the other side of the camp fence. They proceeded towards their meeting place with "Wilson" (one of the two emissaries who had come from South Africa to help them), who was waiting for them in a rented car. They crossed the border to Uganda with passports brought from South Africa and, after a short rest, approached the Belgian consul for visas to Belgian Congo. From there they flew to Brussels, arriving two days later.

Lengthy imprisonment anywhere, but especially in a remote location, can cause physical and emotional illness. In order preclude these the internees began, from the very first days of exile, to organize social and cultural activities. A library was set up, which in Gilgil contained some three thousand volumes. A daily newspaper and a philosophical and literary journal were produced. Various courses were held, and lectures given on literature, the natural sciences and contemporary affairs. Many of the internees took correspondence courses at secondary and university levels, most of them at British institutions, and studied economics, law, accountancy and even architecture and engineering. In addition to their academic pursuits, the detainees played sport and exercised. In one of his letters, Aryeh Ben-Eliezer (a member of the Irgun General Headquarters before his arrest) described the cultural and social activities in the camp, but concluded as follows:

From the diverse activities mentioned in my letter, you could gain the impression that we are living in a paradise.

Nonetheless, I pray to the Lord above to take pity on me and send me Eve, so that I can sin and be banished from Eden.

On the morning of July 12, 1948, the drama of African exile ended, when the British ship Ocean Vigour, with 262 exiles aboard, reached Israeli territorial waters. An Israeli Navy vessel came out of Tel-Aviv port to greet them, and the captain, Mila Brenner, hailed them:

"This is the captain speaking. Welcome home! We have been sent to greet the exiles who are returning home. From now on, you are free citizens of the State of Israel".



Supervisors in Gilgil, Kenya.

A. Mehulal, R. Rubinstein, Z. Hadasi, D. Melman, S. Tamir, M. Shamgar

## THE IRGUN IN EUROPE

### ACTIVITIES IN EUROPE BEFORE WORLD WAR TWO

More than three million Jews, concentrated mainly in the large towns, lived in Poland in the 1930s. In Warsaw, for example, Jews constituted one-third of the population. The Polish government, worried by the increase in Jewish influence in the country, not only did nothing hinder the illegal immigration movement which the Revisionists organized in Poland, but actively assisted it.

In 1936, Jabotinsky met with the Foreign Minister, Josef Beck, and created the infrastructure for collaboration. The Polish government hoped that the establishment of a Jewish state would lead to mass emigration of Jews, thus solving the Jewish problem in Poland. In November 1937, Avraham Stern (Yair), then secretary of the Irgun General Headquarters, arrived in the Polish capital armed with a letter of recommendation from Jabotinsky. He met with senior government officials and laid the practical foundations for cooperation between the Polish army and the Irgun. Within the framework of this cooperation, Polish army representatives handed over to Irgun weapons and ammunition which had been kept in special ammunition depots. The weapons remained under Polish army supervision until they were despatched to Palestine. Some of the weapons were concealed in the false bottoms of crates in which the furniture of prospective immigrants was transported, or in the drums of electrical dryers. When the consignments reached Palestine, they were taken to a safe place, and the weapons were removed from their hiding place.

When in Warsaw Avraham Stern was much helped by Dr. Henryk Strasman, a well known lawyer and an officer in the Polish Reserve force. His wife Alicja (Lilka) was also of great help. The Strasmans introduced Stern to the Polish intellectuals and high officials. It was in their home that the preparations for the publication of the Polish periodical "Jerozolima Wyzwolona" ("Free Jerusalem") were begun. It was Lilka who designed the cover – a map of Eretz Israel with the background of an arm holding a gun and the words in Hebrew: "רק כך" ("This Way Only"). This became later the symbol of the Irgun. (see the cover page).

In March, 1939, 25 senior Irgun commanders from Eretz Israel participated in a course held in the Carpathian mountain instructed by Polish army officers. The course took place under conditions of great secrecy, and the instructors wore civilian clothing. The participants were not permitted to establish contact with local Jews, and the letters they wrote home were sent to Switzerland, inserted in new envelopes, re-addressed to France, and finally posted from there to Palestine. The trainees received military training and were taught tactics of guerilla warfare. When the course ended, they returned to Eretz Israel, apart from three who remained in Poland: Yaakov Meridor, who was responsible for despatching the weapons received from the Polish army; Shlomo Ben Shlomo, who organized a commanders' course for selected members of Irgun cells in Poland, and Zvi Meltzer, who organized a similar course in Lithuania.

The organization of clandestine Irgun cells in Europe had begun a year previously, and was mainly conducted among members of Betar. The plan was to train a cadre of fighters, who would immigrate to Eretz Israel illegally, bringing arms with them, to become a kind of commando corps. Avraham Stern was involved

in organizing the Polish cells, and was assisted by Nathan Friedman-Yellin (member of the Irgun commission in Poland) and Shmuel Merlin (General Secretary of the New Zionist Organization in Poland).

The first course for Irgun commanders in Poland was held in the fall of 1938 and was headed by Aharon Heichman (a member of the Irgun command), who was sent specially from Palestine for this assignment. Twenty four leaders of Polish "cells" took part in the course, which was conducted in complete secrecy. The Polish police, whilst aware of what was going on, did not intervene nor did they ask questions about the gunfire heard in the area.

## POST-WAR ACTIVITY IN EUROPE

The outbreak of the Second World War, on September 1, 1939, cut short the extensive activity of the Irgun in Poland and Lithuania. Most of the arms which the Irgun had received were returned to the Polish army and Irgun activity ceased.

After the war, the Irgun General Headquarters decided to renew activity in Europe and to launch a "second front". The task was assigned to Yaakov Tavin, who was smuggled there aboard an Italian oil-tanker. The first base was established in Italy, where there were more than a thousand organized Betarites (Betar members), who had arrived with the flood of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, Germany and Austria. Among the Betarites were several members of the "cells" the Irgun had established in Poland and Lithuania in the late 1930s, and they formed the nucleus of the Italian branch of the Irgun. Irgun cells were also organized in the British zone in Germany, under Isaac Raviv.

After organization and consolidation, it was decided to commence operational activity, and the first target selected was

the British Embassy in Rome. Preparations were protracted, and the planners made every effort to prevent civilian casualties. On the night of October 31, 1946, three young men set out from a pensione in the city with two suitcases. They entered a waiting taxi, and drove to the Embassy, which they reached it after midnight and unloaded the cases. After setting the time fuse, they propped the two suitcases against the main door of the building and left the area. At 2:46 am, there was a loud explosion and the central section of the building was destroyed. The explosion was heard throughout the city and windows were broken within a radius of one kilometer. The sole casualties were two Italians who had been passing by on their way home from a nearby night club.

The incident made a strong impression throughout the world. The British press reported the incident in detail, and the public was greatly shocked. Emergency measures were adopted in London; security was increased around government ministries, senior politicians were guarded, and orders were given to tighten security in British embassies in European capitals.

As a result of British pressure, the Italian police conducted widespread arrests among Betar members, including Yisrael Epstein, who had arrived several days previously from Palestine on a mission from the Irgun command. Some of those arrested were released after interrogation, but others remained in custody for months. Epstein feared that the Italians would hand him over to the British and decided to escape. He used bribes to get drugs smuggled into his cell with which to drug the guards before escaping by rope.

On December 27, 1946, when Epstein believed his guards to be unconscious, he tied a rope to the central heating pipes and dropped the other end out of the window. As he began to climb

down, one of the guards woke up and shot him. Severely wounded in the stomach, Epstein died of his injuries the following day.

As a result of the arrests in Italy, Irgun Headquarters in Europe were transferred to Paris. Meanwhile, branches had been set up in various parts of Europe, and attempts were made to strike at British targets, such as the Sacher Hotel in Vienna, the regional British army headquarters. The explosion there caused light damage to the building, but the propaganda impact was considerable. A train transporting British troops was sabotaged, and an explosion occurred in the hotel in Vienna which housed the offices of the British occupation force. However, the blowing up of the British embassy in Rome remained the pinnacle of Irgun operational activity in Europe.

In January, 1947, Eliyahu Lankin reached Paris after his successful escape from internment in Africa. Lankin was a member of the Irgun General Headquarters before his arrest and had also served as commander of Jerusalem district. The French government, which knew of his escape from British custody, gave him an entry visa, and when he reached Paris he was appointed Commander of the Irgun in Europe.

Although most of the illegal immigration activity was carried out by the Haganah's Mossad Le'aliyah Bet, Irgun representatives played central roles in several places. Yosef Klarman, who had organized illegal immigration in the 1930s, was sent by the Irgun to Rumania in September, 1944. He succeeded in establishing close contact with the Rumanian authorities, and was even received officially by King Michael and Queen Helena. He became the liaison officer between the Haganah and the authorities, and the central figure in immigration activities. In August, 1947, for

example, the Rumanian authorities, under Soviet pressure, prevented the two immigrant vessels, Pan York and Pan Crescent, from leaving Constanza port. It was thanks to Klarman's contacts with the relevant persons in the Rumanian government that the ships were eventually permitted to sail.

Shmuel Ariel, sent to Paris by the Irgun in early 1946, was in charge of immigration. Ariel established good contacts with the French authorities, and the Haganah called on his services extensively in connection with sailings from France. Thus, for example, Ariel succeeded in negotiating with the French Ministry of Interior the granting of 3,000 entry visas to Jewish refugees arriving in France en route to Palestine. Some 650 of them left aboard the Ben Hecht, 940 on the arms vessel Altalena (see below), and the remainder were transferred to a ship organized by the Haganah. Thanks to Ariel's close contacts with the French authorities, the Irgun command was permitted to operate in Paris without interruption, and to supervise activity in the many branches all over Europe.

## ACTIVITY IN THE UNITED STATES

As noted above, the Second World War halted Irgun activity in Europe. Several of the Irgun's emissaries left Europe for the United States and joined the activities of the "American Friends for a Jewish Palestine". The mission in the United States was headed by Hillel Kook (who had been a member of the Irgun command in Palestine); the other members were Aryeh Ben-Eliezer, Yitzhak Ben-Ami, Eri Jabotinsky, Alexander Rafaeli and Shmuel Merlin. They launched independent political efforts, initiated a propaganda and information campaign and undertook fundraising activities until the State of Israel was established.

When information on the extent of the Holocaust began to arrive, the mission initiated an information campaign to bring the facts to the knowledge of the public. Full-page advertisements in the leading newspapers appealed for the rescue of European Jewry before it was too late. An "Emergency Committee for the Rescue of European Jewry" was established, with the participation of senators and congressmen, writers and public figures, both Jewish and non-Jewish. The Emergency Committee launched widespread information activities, and initiated an appeal to the President by Congress and the Senate that immediate action be taken to rescue the remnants of European Jewry. The proposal was ratified by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Senate, and President Roosevelt subsequently issued an administrative order for the establishment of a special national authority to deal with war refugees. An official emissary sent to Turkey was of considerable assistance in the rescue of Rumanian Jewry.

As the Second World War approached its end and a revolt was proclaimed against the British rulers of Palestine, the Irgun mission in the United States announced the establishment of the "Hebrew Committee for National Liberation". The committee engaged in diplomatic efforts and informed the US public of the Irgun's war against the British. The establishment of the committee was announced by Peter Bergson (Hillel Kook) at a press conference in Washington in a building which the mission had purchased from the Iranian Embassy. A Hebrew standard and the US flag were raised with a sign reading "Hebrew Embassy". After the establishment of the State of Israel, the building was donated to the Israeli Embassy in Washington.