

*To honor Israel's 60th anniversary, we asked writer EFREM SIGEL to interview soldiers who had fought in the wars for Israel's independence and to capture, in their own words, their memories of 1948. The result is the following two articles—one about the Israelis who fought for their country's survival, and the other about volunteers from the U.S. and Canada who came to offer their services for the new state of Israel. Following these two accounts is DANNY GROSSMAN's homage to Israel's first fighter-pilot hero.*

# The Road to Latrun: Veterans of Israel's War of Independence

*Efrem Sigel*

**M**oussa Yarkoni, a tall and limber 80-year old who fought in the *milchemet ha atzma'ut*, Israel's War of Independence, remembers only too well the shortage of food in Jerusalem in the spring of 1948. From the end of March until the beginning of June, local Arab fighters, backed by the British-led Arab Legion, occupied high points along the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem road, choking off supplies of food, fuel, and ammunition. The key control point on this road was the village of Latrun, overlooking the Ayalon Valley. By occupying the former British police station here, the Legion was able to pour murderous fire on any vehicle that tried to pass.

"Every week each person [in Jerusalem] got two eggs," Moussa recalls. "No coffee. No meat. Cooking oil, too, it was necessary to ration.... There was bread, but not much, because there was no flour. There was tea that they rationed.... There wasn't [enough] fuel for cooking." Soldiers were given more to eat, but Uri Barzel, who also fought in Jerusalem remembers the monotony: "Day after day we got the same porridge."

Water, too, was strictly controlled. On May 7, the Arabs cut the pipes supplying the city. Whatever could be collected from cisterns scattered through the city, "that was the water," Moussa says. The city administration harvested this water from each cistern and then distributed it, using horse-drawn water tanks.

Moussa spoke to me at length at his home in Haifa in February and then by telephone when I was back in New York. Uri Barzel received me at his home in Riverdale, NY. The two of them were among more than 30 veterans of the Independence War whom I interviewed between November, 2007 and March, 2008, most of them in Israel, several in New York and another seven or eight by telephone.

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WHEN THE ARAB ARMIES INVADED IN THE MIDDLE OF MAY [1948], HOWEVER, THE WAR CHANGED FROM A CIVIL WAR TO A WAR FOR ISRAEL'S SURVIVAL. AS HISTORIAN MICHAEL OREN PUT IT IN AN INTERVIEW: "ISRAEL WAS BEING INVADED BY HUNDREDS OF TANKS, HUNDREDS OF WARPLANES, AND COUNTLESS ARTILLERY PIECES AND MACHINE GUNS . . . AND ISRAEL DIDN'T HAVE A SINGLE TANK. . . ."

The declaration set off an invasion by five Arab armies determined to drive the Jews into the sea. The ensuing war, furious yet relatively short-lived, confirmed the reality of Israel's existence and shaped the contours of the modern Middle East with its seemingly intractable conflicts.

HISTORIANS like Alon Kadish, professor of history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and Michael Oren, author of *Six Days of War*, say there were really two wars. The first, between November 30 and May 14, was a civil war between Jews and Arabs. On the one side were the Haganah and Palmach (Palmach, an acronym in Hebrew, literally means "the elite striking force of the Haganah"), the backbone of what would soon be an Israeli army. On the other side were a collection of Arab militias and volunteers. Except for the crisis on the roads to Jerusalem and the battles in the Old City, the Jews quickly gained the upper hand in most of this early fighting, securing Jaffa, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Akko, and Tiberias.

When the Arab armies invaded in the middle of May, however, the war changed from a civil war to a war for Israel's survival.

As historian Michael Oren put it in an interview: "Israel was being invaded by hundreds of tanks, hundreds of warplanes, and countless artillery pieces and machine guns . . . and Israel didn't have a single tank. That was a thoroughly existential situation."

FIGHTING in the first war began the day after the November 29 UN General Assembly vote in favor of the partition of Palestine. Moussa, who grew up in Jerusalem, describes how he used to visit Arab towns before that November: "In summer, we were going to Ramallah to have a drink, and in winter we were going to Jericho because it was warm. No problem. . . . But in December '47, straight after the UN declaration, things were changed in one day."

One of his first assignments was to be part of the security force ("the women with hand grenades, the men with Sten guns") protecting funeral processions that had to wend their way through Arab villages on the way to the Mount of Olives.

Hannah Eshel, an Israeli sculptor, painter and photographer now living in New York, highlights for me the contrast between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem right after the vote. In Tel Aviv, "everyone was happy and dancing in the street," she says. "Then I went to Jerusalem and they were shooting on us."

Ben-Gurion thought the key to saving Jerusalem was Latrun, and between late May and mid-July at his orders the Jews attacked the stronghold four times. Each attack ended in defeat; at least 139 soldiers died (the actual toll may have been a lot higher). What finally saved the city was not capturing Latrun, but bypassing it. Led by an American colonel, David "Mickey" Marcus, the new army built an alternate road across and over the steep hills between Hulda and Jerusalem, on territory controlled by the Jews. As the road was being completed in early June, Marcus was killed by friendly fire: a Jewish sentry mistook him for an Arab.



Moussa Yarkoni, 1948



Moussa Yarkoni, 2008

## “I intend to attack the British”

BESIDES the Haganah and Palmach, another Jewish defense force was active in the months and years leading up to 1948: the Irgun, headed by Menachem Begin. The Irgun was known by its Hebrew acronym, Etzel; it spawned an even more radical offshoot, the Lechi (known in English as the Stern Gang). These groups carried out numerous attacks on the British and on Arab civilians before May 1948.

One of the Etzel veterans is Zvi Barzel (perhaps a distant relation to Uri, though neither man knows the other). His Irgun comrades nicknamed him “Cactus,” a name that stuck throughout his army career. Today he is hard of hearing, he has a bad right eye, but even so, the way his large frame flows into and around the easy chair in which he sits makes it possible to imagine him as a strapping young man with a big mouth and an ardent desire to bring about a Jewish state by kicking out the British.

It was brash talk that got him into the Irgun. As he recalls it, “I met friends in a coffee house in King George Street. They were talking about this and that. It was 1945. The news had arrived of the tragedy of the [European] Jews, [and I said to them that] I intended to attack the British. One day one of them said to me, ‘what are you talking for— do something!’” When Cactus asked where he could serve, his friend’s short answer was: “in the Etzel.”

“Twice a week in Dizengoff St.,” his wife Chava tells me, “he meets at a coffee house with the friends who are still alive.... They retell all the stories as if it happened last night.” Quick-witted and sharp-tongued, Chava often cuts in to answer my questions before Cactus can formulate his response (in which case I ask him a second time).

In the 1946 bombing of a wing of the King David hotel housing the British



*Shaul Tuval (middle), 1948*

administration in Palestine, Cactus stood in front of the YMCA, directly opposite the hotel, with a concealed Tommy gun. His instructions: “You will provide the security backup. If the police come, you fire on them.”

Both Cactus and those setting the explosives got away undetected; the bomb killed 90 British, Arabs, and Jews. Afterward, the Irgun insisted they called the headquarters staff 40 minutes before the bomb was to go off and warned them to evacuate the building; they claim that this warning was ignored. It seems a hollow excuse for an act of terrorism, but Cactus has no regrets about any of his activities.

In 1948, when the Irgun finally agreed to come under the command of a unified Israeli army, Cactus became an army officer, beginning a career that would last 25 years.

### “Why did Old Jerusalem surrender?”

SHAUL TIVAL stands in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, two body lengths from the Zion Gate. “This is where he stood,” he says, talking about Abdullah al-Tal, commander of the Arab Legion in Jerusalem in 1948.

Shaul’s family came to Palestine in the 1880s from Aleppo (Halab, in Arabic), a city in Syria that was, at one time, a center both of trade and of Torah study. When the war



*Shaul Tuval, 2008, showing where al-Tal stood.*

began, he was teaching in a Talmud Torah for Sephardim in the Old City; he soon organized and commanded a company of 90 boys and girls there. As a fluent Arab speaker, he was sent by Moshe Russnak, the Haganah commander, on May 28, 1948 to negotiate a cease-fire in the Jewish Quarter.

“Like this,” he says, showing me how al-Tal leaned against the wall, his right foot bent at the knee, the sole of his shoe pressing against the ancient stones.

TIVAL is short and white-haired, with a dry, husky voice and the brisk energy of a man with a mission. At the age of 87, he walks so quickly along the cobblestones of the Jewish Quarter that I have to step up my pace to keep abreast of him. Before our trip to the Old City, we talk in the study of his apartment on the outskirts of West Jerusalem. There, his desk is piled with papers and books; he is hard at work on a book called, *Why Did Old Jerusalem Surrender?*

Al-Tal wanted no part of a cease fire, Shaul recalls; instead, he demanded the surrender of the Jewish Quarter. Shaul balked; he had no authority to discuss surrender. He pretended to walk away, then pivoted to face the commander. “I might as well hear your conditions,” he said, and asked al-Tal to write them out



Dita (Yehudit) Perach, 2008

**A**NOTHER HAGANAH VETERAN, COURTLY JEHUDA MARGALIT, ALSO FOUGHT IN JERUSALEM—AT A TIME WHEN THE GLEAMING NEW BUILDINGS IN THE JEWISH QUARTER HOUSING THE YESHIVOT OF THE VARIOUS ORTHODOX AND ULTRA-ORTHODOX GROUPS WERE IMPOSSIBLE TO EVEN IMAGINE, LET ALONE SEE. . . . “THINGS HAVE CHANGED SO MUCH THAT IT’S IMPOSSIBLE TO RECOGNIZE. THE FIELDS WHERE THE BATTLES WENT ON, TODAY THERE ARE TOWNS, SKYSCRAPERS.”

so he could take them to his commander.

With dwindling ammunition and with no hope of reinforcements, the Jews surrendered. The old people and the women were allowed passage through the Old City gates to West Jerusalem. Shaul Tuval and the rest of the men were taken prisoner and transported to a prison in Trans-Jordan. There they remained for nine months, until they were freed

in a general prisoner exchange.

Shaul walks me past the Zion gate to show me where the narrow passageway widens into the street leading to the Armenian Quarter, and explains how Russnak, assuming that the openness of the passage constituted a danger, pulled his soldiers back and thus forfeited his best chance of defense.

The Haganah had plenty of sand and cement, he says, and could have quickly built a defensive wall overlooking the passageway: “This is a ‘topographical fortification’—this is a fortification from which you can stand and fire on those below.” He asks me to measure the width of the passageway here, and I pace it off: three, maybe four meters.

He drives home his point. “So you have a narrow passageway like this. You place our men here and here and here, and when anyone enters you fire. And you kill their soldiers.” By controlling the high points, he insists, the Haganah could have created a *shetach hashmada*—a field of extermination for the enemy and thus saved the Old City.

**“It’s impossible to recognize”**

**A**S we wend our way through the Jewish Quarter, Shaul must constantly point out what has changed: this building wasn’t here, that building wasn’t here, this spot was just a hill. Another Haganah veteran, courtly Jehuda Margalit, also fought in Jerusalem—

at a time when the gleaming new buildings in the Jewish Quarter housing the yeshivot of the various Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox groups were impossible to even imagine, let alone see. Accompanying me to and from one of the interviews, which he helped organize, he cautions me about the limitations of trying to soak up the *avira*, the atmosphere, of this or that site. “Things have changed so much that it’s impossible to recognize. The fields where the battles went on, today there are towns, skyscrapers.”

**The keeper of the photos**

**S**EVERAL times a week Dita (Yehudit) Perach catches the quarter to seven bus from kibbutz Bet Ha Shita in the Jordan Valley to the Ramat Aviv section of Tel Aviv. It’s a two-and-a-half hour trip, and at the end of the day she boards the bus for the return trip. In between bus trips, she sits at a desk in *Bet Ha Palmach*, the Palmach Museum, sorting photos.

The archives where Dita works already houses many dozens of oversized albums filled with photos of the fighters of the Palmach—young men and women, smiling as they kneel, stand, sit in half tracks or train on ropes.

“In 1910 my parents were among the first members of kibbutz Degania Alef, the first kibbutz in Israel,” Dita tells me, during my visit to the museum. “Mother was from Odessa and father was from the region of Kiev, the son of a rabbi. I was born in Degania Alef.” Dita joined the Palmach in 1943; by 1946, after marrying a kibbutznik from Bet Ha Shita, she was living there with a young son. Meanwhile her husband, a member of the Palyam, the Palmach navy, was busy transporting as many Jewish refugees as he could from Europe.

After the thousands of pictures that she has cataloged and put in albums, I can imagine that Dita’s own memories blur into those of the photos. As veterans die, their families bring still more photos to the museum. “So many photos,” she says.

## The conqueror of Eilat

IT is late in the afternoon when I reach the home of Bren Adan (his given name is Avraham, but the whole county knows him as Bren, for the Bren gun that was his favorite weapon). I am jet-lagged, tired from a day of interviewing Palmachniks and I misunderstand the directions and wind up on the wrong intersection somewhere in Ramat Ha Sharon. Mercifully, before I can get even more lost, Bren comes to fetch me in his compact Mitsubishi.

He joined the Palmach in 1943; at first they trained with sticks, made forced marches, practiced hand-to-hand combat. In the Negev in March 1949, he commanded a platoon that captured Eilat—then a village of a few huts—just prior to signing the armistice with Jordan. The action gave the new state a port on the Red Sea. Later he would fight in the Sinai campaign, the Six Day War, and the Yom Kippur War; in this last war he led his division across the Suez Canal to cut off the retreat of the Egyptian army. By the time he retired, the former platoon leader had reached the rank of major general.

Bren is thoughtful, businesslike; he speaks without hesitation, in well-organized Hebrew sentences that are both clear and evocative. Recalling the early days in the Negev, pre-1948, he says, “I remember times when we didn’t have anything; all we had was personal weapons. . . . In the beginning we didn’t even have personal weapons. We didn’t have uniforms; we didn’t have ammunition; we didn’t have experience; we didn’t have military know-how. But we had lots of motivation. And little by little we got artillery; we got tanks.” It took barely a year—from spring 1948 to spring 1949—for the Jews to create the strongest army in the Middle East.

“Fear? Yes, but so what?”

MOUSSA (Moshe) Yarkoni, ex-company commander, later a quarry manager, has a playful

voice and a laugh that fills the sitting room of his quiet house. Unlike some other veterans, he has only optimism about the future of Israel. Showing me a photo of one of his grandsons in army uniform, he says, “With ones like this it’ll be fine.”

YARKONI was born in Jerusalem in 1928, a year after his parents came to Palestine from Poland. He joined the Haganah in 1944. After his stint guarding funeral processions, he got another assignment.

On January 15, 1948 a platoon of Haganah and Palmach soldiers sent to reinforce Kfar Etzion, near Hebron, was ambushed. All 35 were killed, their bodies mutilated. Several days later when headquarters still did not know their fate, Moussa was part of a larger force dispatched to look for the missing men.

“We went on the road to Kfar Etzion, and on the way there was a small plane—a Piper. The [Jewish] pilot knew that all had been killed and dropped a note with a stone telling us what happened. That’s the way it was”—a Piper Cub with no wireless, no way to communicate except to tie a piece of paper to a stone. To avoid the same fate, the force turned back to Jerusalem.



*Bren (Avraham) Adan, 1948*



*Bren (Avraham) Adan, 2008*

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Shaul Sapir, 1948

Moussa left Jerusalem in February for an officer's training course in Netanya. "There were 150 buddies in the course. Thirty-five to forty percent were killed in the war." When it was time to return, the Arabs were firing, with deadly results, on every vehicle that tried to bring supplies from Tel Aviv.

"It was impossible to get through to Jerusalem. My parents, father and mother, didn't know where I was. No letters, nothing. The road to Jerusalem had already been closed one month. So we went by convoy, on April 13th—a convoy of 200 automobiles. We left in the night, the whole road filled with Palmach men."

This convoy made it and Moussa was once more in Jerusalem, but other veterans described to me the feeling of helpless terror as they sat in cars or half-tracks of convoys bound for Jerusalem, easy targets for Arab fighters.

"Fear?" Moussa says. "Jerusalem was our home. Of course fear, but so what? Do we go away? If I go to the hospital for an operation, isn't there fear? Yes, but it [the operation] is necessary. Fear, yes, but we knew we had to fight."

**A**NOTHER of the veterans I met, Romek Fein, tells me with barely a trace of a smile, "I had always luck." He avoided almost certain death when, after



Shaul Sapir, 2008

three months in Kfar Etzion, his unit left the settlement toward the end of March. That was six weeks before its capture by Arab irregulars, who proceeded to massacre all but a handful of those who surrendered. Afterwards, Romek returned to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv; of three large convoys at the time, he was in the only one to escape heavy damage.

Moussa's enduring memories of the independence war are not of battles but of people, especially the company of 90 *olim chadashim*, new immigrants, that he was given to lead. "They didn't know a word of Hebrew—not a word. I had to speak Yiddish to them. [Years later] I met one. He is principal of a high school in Tel Aviv. You know what this is?" Moussa repeats the lesson for me, as he often does throughout our interview, enunciating each Hebrew word for added emphasis: "He didn't know a word of Hebrew, and he is principal of a high school in Tel Aviv."

**"If you kill his camel, that's a horrible blow"**

**S**HAUL SAPIR, a happy warrior, fought in every one of Israel's wars from 1948 to the first Lebanon war in 1982. In his deep, rumbling voice, changing pitch as his excitement grows, he tells me that he comes from a very rich family in Syria. They arrived in Palestine in 1931.

Shaul joined the Palmach in 1944, at the age of 15. By 1946 and 1947 he was already in the south with a small Palmach

commando unit; they told the British they were scouts. Although Ben-Gurion, perhaps anticipating the Egyptian invasion two years later, had done his best to dot the south with settlements, most of the Negev was empty.

"There was nothing. Desert," Shaul says. "We traveled around the desert for two months, identifying places for kibbutzim or electrical stations." They had little food and water, lived out of tents, scrounged for food among the Bedouin, fought when they had to, protected themselves with knives. The Arabs called them animals, so the Palmachniks adopted the name, calling themselves "*chayot ha Negev*," animals of the Negev.

**A**T one point, Shaul recalls, "The Arab Bedouins came and blew up the water line" supplying the isolated settlements. Shaul went to headquarters and told his colonel: "Listen, here is how we fight against the Bedouins.... There is one way—not normal, not moral, but war is war. We will go out at night, enter an Arab village and we will kill there several camels, several horses, and several donkeys. An Arab Bedouin, if you kill his brother, his mother, his son, it's not terrible, but if you kill his camel, that's a horrible blow." Inside, people at headquarters told Shaul he was "nuts," but outside, Haim Bar Lev, a commanding officer and future chief of staff, asked him if his plan would really work.

"I say, 'Listen....I grew up [with Arabs]. I know what it is to kill camels.'" Then, according to Shaul, Bar Lev told him, in English: "Do it. But I didn't tell you anything." Shaul went out at night and killed 14 camels, horses, and donkeys. Afterwards, he warned the Bedouins, "Listen, the Jews will kill every camel, every horse, every donkey if you cut the water line.... There was not another blowing up of the water line."

At the museum, Shaul recounts the Palmach history time and again for visitors—soldiers and commanders. One of the officers said to him, "If today the soldiers fought the way you fought, with knives, for each soldier I would need two lawyers."



*Hannah Eshel, 1948*

“To save our lives”; “I didn’t kill myself”

**H**ANNAH ESHEL grew up in Jerusalem on Rehov Ha Neveim, the Street of the Prophets. Hers was a religious family; she joined the Haganah in 1947 at the age of 21, against the wishes of her father.

The Haganah sent her for training in radio and telephone communications. To provide communications between platoon and company commanders and headquarters, she lugged around the *Mem Kuf Esrim* (MK 20), a behemoth of a wireless radio



*Hannah Eshel, 2008*

weighing 20 kilos. She remembers the feeling of togetherness, the pain at seeing friends killed and, most of all, the absolute conviction that the Jews would win the war.

“We didn’t hate the Arabs; we had no animosity toward them, but they attacked us so we had to fight.... They said they were going to drive us into the sea. The whole fighting was really to save our lives.”

**L**IKE Hannah Eshel, Uri Barzel had an intensely personal relationship with the MK 20. When fighting broke out in late 1947, he was studying Arabic language and literature at the Hebrew

University in Jerusalem. He was immediately called up, sent to the communications course and then assigned to Jerusalem as part of a unit of 32 communications specialists. Every night, Uri would go out with a different unit as they battled for each hunk of territory in nearby villages, or sections of West Jerusalem still held by Arab fighters. By the time of the first truce in June 1948, 20 of the 32 communications specialists had been killed, and Uri explains why.

“It’s always a tremendous amount of tension.... You know people are going to be shooting, you know that you’re going to be in the thick of it and the commanders at that time were in the front.... There was no such thing as a commander saying, ‘hey you, lead.’ He would run ahead and everyone would follow and I would be with him [carrying the MK 20].... I remember a situation where we were walking on a hill, opposite Katamon [an area in south Jerusalem]. At that time it was held by the Arabs, and they were shooting at us and I could see, like in a movie, a puff of dust coming in front of me and behind me as I was running from one rock to the next to hide and wondering, what the hell do they have against me that they want to kill me.”

**T**HE only weapon Uri carried was a Beretta pistol—to kill himself if he was captured. “They didn’t catch me and I didn’t kill myself,” he says drily. Eventually he was wounded—accidentally, by explosives set off by his own unit—and



*Uri Barzel (right) with two fellow soldiers, 1948*



*Uri Barzel, 2008*

spent months recuperating. After the war he switched his studies to medicine, trained in the U.S. as an endocrinologist, and eventually became a professor at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx.

### “I will be buried in Nitzanim”

**I**N June 2008, Yitzhak Pundak will be 95. He is a stocky man, very compact, with a great head of white hair. His bluntness, his self-assurance are tangible, like a second person sitting next to him on the sofa.

When I ask about his family, he says, “I am from Poland,” speaking in accented but expressive English. “I arrived to Israel in 1933. *Chalutz* [pioneer]. With my wife, not my family. My family the Nazis killed. We arrived here without any family and had to make a living. We had to start working in agriculture, construction.”

But also in 1933, Pundak joined the underground Haganah. “They trained us in schools at night. First of all with a pistol of wood. Then with a pistol.” By 1936, he was already a commander and in 1937 he left his

job to work full-time for the Haganah.

“In 1947 I was nominated by Ben-Gurion as a battalion commander [of the 53rd battalion]; this was the Givati brigade in the south. I fought in 45 battles. I lost 145 soldiers in the war, 220 wounded. I became a brigade commander in August, 1948. We were not soldiers, we were partisans, and only this kind of soldier could win the war. If we would have a brigade [organized along conventional lines] without weapons and without tanks, then we would have lost the war.”

Manpower was the army’s biggest problem—but also its biggest asset. “I built up a unit of 450 boys from the poorest part of Tel Aviv. A boy comes, he wants to join. How old are you? More than 18? Because less than 18, I couldn’t take him in; so he’s more than 18. No papers, no checkup, no medical checkup.”

**I**CAN see how Yitzhak Pundak’s outspokenness would endear him to his soldiers, but rub higher-ups the wrong way. One of those higher-ups was Haim Laskov, a chief of staff. When Pundak returned from an overseas assignment in the late 1950s, Laskov said he could remain in the army only if he agreed to a reduction in rank. Pundak did not agree, and left

the military for a new career with the Ministry of Labor.

In the end he is as honest about his failures as about his successes. “We lost two battles and both of them are with me until today. My wife, who died, is buried in Nitzanim, in the cemetery near 33 soldiers who were killed in the battle. When I will die my grave will be there. To show you that we lost the battle.”

**T**WO days later, another Haganah veteran, Amnon Inbar, takes me in his cluttered red Suzuki on a tour of the Negev. We visit Ashdod, where his battalion—the 54th—stopped the Egyptians 20 miles from Tel Aviv, and Negba, another battle site. And we visit Nitzanim. Of 20-odd settlements in the south, this was one of a very few that the Egyptians managed to conquer; one other, Yad Mordechai, was abandoned by its defenders.

On this warm, dusty day in early February, Nitzanim is an oasis; we bask in the shade of its pine trees, their needles rising and falling gently in the breeze. In June 1948, the defenders of kibbutz Nitzanim had exhausted their ammunition, and when battalion headquarters did not answer their desperate calls for reinforcements, they surrendered to save the lives of some 100 survivors, who were taken prisoner and released a year later.

School kids are trooping through the grounds for a history lesson as we walk out from the shade of the trees and down to a series of oversized black marble sculptures. They commemorate the valor of one of the female soldiers who died here. Yitzhak Pundak personally took on the responsibility of raising \$200,000 for this memorial.



Yitzhak Pundak, 1948



Yitzhak Pundak, 2008



## Why and how they won

**T**HE Israeli War of Independence had unimagined consequences. For one, the fighting left Israel in control of considerably more territory than it would have had if the Arabs had accepted the UN's 1947 partition plan. For another, the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Arab refugees during the war created a thus far insoluble problem.

There is still a dispute over the extent to which Israel was responsible for pushing out some of the Arab refugees in 1948. It is generally accepted now that Moshe Dayan's forces expelled the Arab populations of Ramle and Lydda, two strategic towns near the Lod airport. Afterward, Ben-Gurion gave explicit orders not to disturb Arab residents in conquered areas, though here and there a commander may have pushed Arabs to leave, especially when troops came under attack from local residents.

I mention those reports to Moussa Yarkoni. "I was in Jerusalem," he says. "I know what happened there. I conquered and entered Arab neighborhoods. And a large part of them [the Arab residents] ran away. Ran away—but not all. Ten percent stayed. Their leaders, whose who were in charge, said: 'Leave your homes. The Jews will kill you.' Whoever remained got food. They got water. We did no harm to them. That's how it was."

Yitzhak Pundak says, "I can tell you for sure that in my area, a frontline of 45 kilometers [in the south], where I was from 1945 to 1947 as commander of the Haganah, the Arab leaders—the *mukhtarim*—knew me very well and I knew them. I went from one village to the other telling them to stay on, that nothing is going to happen to them. We can live together. But they run away."

Historians may say the outcome of the Independence War was in doubt: those who fought in it had no such doubts. To a person, the veterans told me they knew that the Jews would win the war. In 1948 the rallying slogan was two words in Hebrew: *ein breira*—there is no alternative. Either we win or we are dead.

If this sounds familiar to Americans, it's because we can hear in it an echo of Franklin's oft-quoted statement at the Continental Congress, just before signing the Declaration of Independence. Everyone knew what the penalty was for traitors who defied the English king, but it was Franklin who captured it in a pithy sentence: "We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."

In explaining their victory, over and over these veterans talked to me about *motivatzia*—not a difficult Hebrew word to understand. But motivation against tanks, planes, and artillery can only carry you so far. In contrast with their Arab foes, what the Jews had in 1948 was the demonstrated ability to work together, putting aside personal, family, or ethnic rivalries. Almost from its beginning, the *yishuv* had been a collective enterprise. Only a small minority of residents were kibbutzniks, but the ethos of the kibbutz—the willingness to subordinate oneself to the common good—was a central value of the society.

**E**VEN before independence, that society, small as it was—600,000 Jews in 1948—had created much of the apparatus of a modern state: schools, universities, hospitals, capable civil administrators, defense and police forces. Its members possessed scientific, technical, and management skills that were clearly superior to those of its Arab neighbors.

With substantial help from supporters abroad, especially from America, the new state was able to organize and equip its forces in a way that its foes could not match. The fruits of that organization can be seen in Israel's success in procuring the planes, tanks, and weapons that began flowing into the country after May 14, as well as in its melding separate organizations—Haganah, Palmach, Irgun—into a unified army with a central command. That would be a formidable task at any time, but Israel managed it in the midst of a war.

In their book, *O Jerusalem*, authors Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre quote Sir John Glubb, commander of the Arab

**H**ISTORIANS MAY SAY THE OUTCOME OF THE INDEPENDENCE WAR WAS IN DOUBT: THOSE WHO FOUGHT IN IT HAD NO SUCH DOUBTS. TO A PERSON, THE VETERANS TOLD ME THEY KNEW THAT THE JEWS WOULD WIN THE WAR. IN 1948 THE RALLYING SLOGAN WAS TWO WORDS IN HEBREW: *EIN BREIRA*—THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE. EITHER WE WIN OR WE ARE DEAD.

. . . **[W]**HAT THE JEWS HAD IN 1948 WAS THE DEMONSTRATED ABILITY TO WORK TOGETHER, PUTTING ASIDE PERSONAL, FAMILY, OR ETHNIC RIVALRIES. ALMOST FROM ITS BEGINNING, THE *YISHUV* HAD BEEN A COLLECTIVE ENTERPRISE. . . . THE ETHOS OF THE KIBBUTZ—THE WILLINGNESS TO SUBORDINATE ONESELF TO THE COMMON GOOD—WAS A CENTRAL VALUE OF THE SOCIETY.

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE THAT, 60 YEARS AGO, SOLDIERS TRAMPED . . . UP THE SLOPES OF LATRUN, TO BE MOWED DOWN BY THE ARTILLERY OF THE LEGION. MANY OF THOSE WHO DIED IN THE FIRST ATTACK WERE HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS WHO ONLY DAYS BEFORE HAD STEPPED OFF THE SHIP THAT CARRIED THEM TO ISRAEL FROM THE DISPLACED PERSONS CAMPS IN EUROPE. THEY HAD NO TRAINING; ALMOST NONE OF THEM SPOKE HEBREW.

MICHAEL OREN SAYS THE LESSON OF THE WAR "IS STILL VALID TODAY, THAT ISRAEL'S EXISTENCE STILL HANGS IN THE BALANCE AND THAT ULTIMATELY WE CAN'T RELY ON ANYONE OTHER THAN OURSELVES. . . . I THINK NOTHING HAS CHANGED."

Legion, on this very point. The reason the Arabs were, in the end, no match for the Jews was because "you had a modern European population opposed to a much more numerous local population which was without technical knowledge and modern skills, and which was uncontrollably excitable and emotional." The Arabs, Glubb said, "were forever splitting into little groups. No one would take orders from anyone else and then when something went wrong, somebody had to be a traitor because that was the only possible explanation."

Finally, in Ben-Gurion the Jews had a leader with a single-minded goal—statehood—and the will to pursue it whatever the cost. His instructions to his commanders—attack, attack, attack—set the tone for the conquest of the entire Galilee and the expulsion of the Egyptians from the Negev, among many other victories.

Ben-Gurion's doctrine still resonates. Michael Oren says the lesson of the war "is still valid today, that Israel's existence still hangs in the balance and that ultimately we can't rely on anyone other than ourselves. I think that was the lesson. I think nothing has changed. You don't want to fight on your territory, you want to bring the war to the enemy's territory."

Nevertheless, even a giant like Ben-Gurion makes mistakes, both strategic and tactical, and those mistakes cost many lives. In attacking Latrun not once but repeatedly, he overruled commanders like Yigal Yadin, who warned that they had neither the trained forces nor the firepower to accomplish such a mission.

#### The road to Latrun

ON a mild Shabbat afternoon in mid-February, the highway heading southeast from Tel Aviv is as empty as any in Israel. And here, just past the few farms and buildings of the village of Bin Nun, we turn off onto a dirt road, little more than a farm track really, that leads to a stone monument on which are engraved the names of victims of the first attack on Latrun.

Shraga Ben-Zvi, my guide on the excursion to Latrun, is an ex-army officer who also happens to be my cousin. Today we have the monument at Bin Nun to ourselves: the dirt road is too narrow to accommodate tour buses and, apparently, too out of the way to interest anyone else.

BEHIND the monument, we walk 50 yards through tangled brush and yellow-brown grass to a viewpoint where we can see the deserted stretch of road cutting across the Ayalon valley to a junction four kilometers away. Halfway up the hill, rising behind the junction is the *mishmeret*, the police fortress built by the British at Latrun, and above it, much farther away, the higher, steeper hills that ring Jerusalem.

It's hard to believe that, 60 years ago, soldiers tramped across these fields and up the slopes of Latrun, to be mowed down by the artillery of the Legion. Many of those who died in the first attack were Holocaust survivors who only days before had stepped off the ship that carried them to Israel from the displaced persons camps in Europe. They had no training; almost none of them spoke Hebrew.

Captured in the '67 war, Latrun today is the site of a museum dedicated to the *shiryon*, the armored corps of the IDF. On the facade of the old police station, a rectangular, reddish brown building, you can still see scars left by bullets and shells; the holes make it look as if random chunks of stone have been hollowed out from the otherwise flat exterior.

Inside the museum, a computer database enables the visitor to access a biography of each of the thousands of armored corps soldiers who died in Israel's wars. Outside is an exhibit of tanks, more than 200 of them baking in the sun, and in the shade beyond the tanks, is a wall engraved with their names. It's a very long wall.

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EFREM SIGEL'S *award-winning articles and short stories have appeared in numerous publications. His second novel, The Disappearance, is due next February from The Permanent Press.*

# They Fought for the Dream: American Volunteers in 1948

*Efrem Sigel*

**F**or every one of the nearly 1,500 Americans and Canadians who volunteered to fight for Israel in the 1948 War of Independence or who served on the *Aliya Bet* ships transporting refugees from Europe, there was a moment of decision. For Paul Kaminetzky (now Paul Kaye), that moment came early in 1947 after he got a phone call from a stranger asking, “Do you want to help your people?” At their clandestine meeting in Manhattan the next day, Paul was asked to join the crew of a ship that would pick up refugees in Europe and bring them to Palestine—despite the danger of fines and imprisonment for violating the British blockade. “Let’s go,” he said.

Paul, a U.S. Navy veteran, was third engineering officer on the *SS Tradewinds* (renamed the *Hatikva*) which sailed from Baltimore, picked up 1,450 refugees—and was seized by the British. After being interned in Cyprus and then in Atlit, near Haifa, Paul escaped and returned to the U.S. Soon he was volunteering to take another ship across. This one, the *Pan York*, picked up 2,800 Holocaust survivors and sailed without difficulty into the waters of the newly-proclaimed State of Israel.

The Americans and Canadians were part of the 3,500 foreigners called *Machal*, a Hebrew acronym for *mitnadvei chutz*

*l’aretz*—volunteers from abroad. Paul was one of a dozen American and Canadian volunteers whom I interviewed. When I ask him why he said yes, he says, “We have to go with the dream,”—the dream of a Jewish state.

“Nobody could take this away from us”

**F**OR Si Spiegelman, whose family escaped from German-occupied Belgium in 1941, the moment came in 1947 or 1948 during a visit from an aunt from Antwerp. When she told how a Belgian neighbor had betrayed the rest of the

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*Paul Kaye (Paul Kaminetzky), on the Hatikva, 1947.*



*Paul Kaye, 2008*



*Si Spiegelman, Tel Radra Outpost, 1948.*



*Ralph Lowenstein, tent camp near Nahariya, 1948*

family to the Germans—they were taken to the death camps and gassed—Si says, “I was filled with rage.” He volunteered through an organization called Land and Labor for Palestine, and was stationed in the Galilee with a unit guarding a hill called Tel Radra. “There was a spirit that I can’t describe,” Si remembers. “We knew this [land] was ours and that nobody could take this away from us.”

**F**OR Ralph Lowenstein, another 18-year-old, who was completing his first year at Columbia University at the time, signing up for a student exchange program between Britain and the U.S. was a way to get to Europe, and from there to Israel. After a month in Britain, he arrived in Paris, located the Israeli embassy (he first went by mistake to a kosher butcher, but a customer straightened him out and gave him the correct address) and enlisted. Soon he was a half-track driver in the 79th battalion of the Seventh Brigade, which fought all over the Galilee. This must be a dream, Ralph remembers thinking on his first night of combat, as bullets from Arab gunmen whistled around the half-track. “It only takes a minute or two to realize it’s not.”



*Ralph Lowenstein with his Machal exhibit, 2008*

### “It was 1776”

Ralph had grown up in an observant and Zionist family in the small town of Danville, VA. When the State of Israel was proclaimed, he recognized that this was a unique opportunity to fight in a Jewish war of independence. “It was 1776 in this country,” he tells me. After the war he went on to a career in journalism and academia. In recent years, he’s been the moving force behind the Museum Project, an exhibit at Hillel House in Gainesville, Florida, where he was dean of the journalism school. The exhibit chronicles the Americans and Canadians who volunteered in 1948.

A Canadian volunteer, Lou Laurie, fought in the 72nd battalion of the Seventh Brigade, commanded by a fellow Canadian, Ben Dunkelman. He had two moments of decision: one when he signed up in Quebec City, and the second when his ship, the Pan York, stopped to pick up refugees near Marseilles. When he saw the camp and the people who had survived the Holocaust, “I knew I had to do it as a Jew,” he says.

### “A war the Jews had to win”

**A**NOTHER Canadian volunteer, Joe Warner, spent a sleepless night at home in Toronto after the November 29, 1947 UN vote in favor of partition. “This was a war the Jews had to win,” he remembers feeling. A recruiter for the Haganah signed him up. His motivation: the conviction that if the Jews lost the war “it would be very bad for every Jew everywhere in the world.”

**N**AOMI KANTEY (née Levin), had finished nurse’s training in the U.S. Navy when she left for Palestine in late 1947. “I got there knowing that when the British left, there was going to be a conflagration,” she recalls. She already had family ties to the land: her sister was on a kibbutz; her brother-in-law was studying at the Technion. Naomi worked first in a hospital in Haifa and then on the Carmel and later in Jaffa and Ramle, tending to the wounded. One of those wounded in the fighting in Ramle and Lydda in July 1948 was Leon Kantey, a South African volunteer who commanded a tank under Moshe Dayan. After Leon was discharged, they met through friends and were married in Tel Aviv in April 1949.

When I ask Naomi why she volunteered, she says, “I was a member of a Zionist youth movement, my parents were socialist-Zionist—so it was natural.” Moreover, she says, speaking of all the volunteers, “we were terribly affected by what happened in Europe to the Jews.”

Another nurse, Hilde Goldberg, volunteered with her husband Max. Hilde is a Dutch Jew who escaped from Holland after the German invasion and worked with the underground in Belgium. After the war she met Max, a Swiss doctor, at a DP camp in Bergen-Belsen. Hilde was directing the child-care center and Max, who had come to volunteer, began to check up on the children “more and more,” she remembers with a laugh. They married, moved to Switzerland and had a child, but when the Haganah



*Lou Laurie, 1948 (right).*

asked them to come to Israel as medical volunteers, “of course we said yes.” At Mt. Gilboa near Afula, Hilde ran the ER in a converted agricultural school, while Max tended the wounded on the front lines. They came to the U.S. in 1950.

### “He was Jewish, he had to go”

**T**HE nascent Israeli air force badly needed trained pilots in 1948, and Mitchell Flint and Rudy Augarten were among dozens of foreigners who showed up to help. Mitchell, who later became a lawyer in Los Angeles, had been a Navy pilot in World War II and was studying at UCLA in 1948 when the war broke out. “Because I was a pilot and Jewish and especially because of the Holocaust, I decided to volunteer,” he says.

Rudy Augarten grew up in Philadelphia in an observant family. As a pilot in World War II, he shot down two German planes, was himself shot down over France, found shelter with a French farmer, was captured by the Germans and escaped. After making his way back to Allied lines he resumed flying. In 1948 he was a junior at Harvard when he decided to volunteer.

His sister, Tobie Specht, recalls the day that he informed his family. “He was determined to go to Israel to fly....He was Jewish, he had to go.” Given the long period during which he’d been missing in action in World War II, Rudy’s parents—especially his



Joe Warner, 1948

mother—were distraught. But Rudy’s mind was made up. “He didn’t ask us: he told us,” Tobie recalls.

During his months in Israel, Rudy shot down four Egyptian planes; one of his fellow pilots was Ezer Weizman. After graduating from Harvard in 1950, he returned to Israel for two years as flight commander at the Ramat David air base. Later he would get a graduate engineering degree and work for Rockwell for 25 years in southern California.

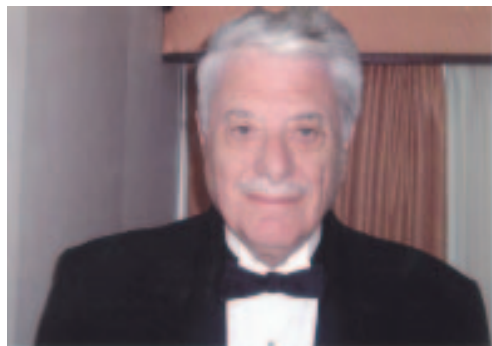
“Rudy was a hero,” says Mitchell Flint, who became a lifelong friend. “Not only did Rudy serve in ’48, but he came back and trained the early pilots. He really was a stalwart for Israel.”

He was, by all accounts, a quiet hero. “Probably the most humble man I’d ever known,” is how his younger son, Mark, describes him. “Even as a kid growing up, my dad was not a fighter pilot to me; he was very much the baseball coach.”

Rudy died in 2000. Of the three children, Mark feels his father’s influence the most strongly. He says, “When I go to synagogue today, I’m doing something that he would want me to do. And when I take my children, I think he would be very proud that Judaism is not going to die in our family.”

### “How can you not go?”

**T**HERE were several dozen non-Jews among the American volunteers; one of them is Augustine (Duke) Labaczewski, a seaman for 50 years. When a Jewish boyhood friend volunteered for the Aliya Bet ships in 1947, Duke joined him.



Joe Warner, 2007

They sailed together on the SS Tradewinds, and after the ship’s crew and passengers were interned, Duke found a way to remain in Israel; he trained with the Palmach and fought near Tiberias.

“When you see six million are killed, how can you not go?” he says.

**A**LL the American volunteers ran the risk of legal penalties for their decision to fight in the Independence War. Despite President Truman’s immediate recognition of the new State of Israel, the State Department remained strongly pro-Arab. Passports of those leaving the country were stamped, “Not valid for travel for the purpose of serving in a foreign army.”

The Justice Department did prosecute three men—Al Schwimmer, Hank Greenspun and Charlie Winters—for smuggling arms to the new state. Schwimmer and Greenspun were fined and lost their civil rights, according to Ralph Lowenstein’s Museum Project, but only Winters, a Christian, actually went to jail. His crime: selling three surplus B-17 bombers to Israel. Winters died in 1984 and to honor his wish to be buried in Israel, his remains were later transferred to the Christian Alliance Church cemetery in Jerusalem’s German Colony.

Twenty-nine Americans and 11 Canadians died in the Independence War. Unlike the Israelis fighting for their homes and families, they gave their lives for a dream—a dream that they helped bring to fruition. Their stories, and those of their comrades who returned, are little noticed or celebrated. Theirs is a generation that is fast disappearing; today only a few hundred are still alive. And yet, across the span of the decades, what they did and why seems to grow more important year by year.

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EFREM SIGEL’s *author’s identification* is on page 12.

*A nearly complete roster of the volunteers and their accomplishments, including those who perished, can be found at the web site of the Museum Project: <http://www.israelvets.com>*