Rabbi Ezra Spicehandler, C’46; Ph.D.’51

Shirley and I arrived in Palestine in the middle of November 1947. For about ten days, I attended classes at the Hebrew University. Soon I began to notice that the number of male students attending was rapidly growing very small. They were being called up by the Haganah (the militia of the official Zionist leadership). One of our fellow ordinees, a graduate of the J.I.R., evidently was charged by the Haganah to recruit American students to join its ranks. He asked me whether I was ready to enlist. Having been raised in a very Zionist home, I promptly agreed. I was ordered to report to the Haganah’s office at the Histadruth’s Jerusalem headquarters. After a brief interview, I was asked to report on the following day, dressed in warm clothing and wearing sturdy shoes. There were no uniforms yet available.

I was soon stationed with a unit comprised of American students at a small Iraqi synagogue in the Beit Yisrael section of Jerusalem – a Jewish quarter not far from the Arab neighborhood of Sheikh Jerah. We were ordered to protect the area from possible Arab attacks. The only weapons we had were two or three locally made sten-guns, a few pistols, and moldy hand-grenades. We stored this scanty armory in the synagogue’s Ark. One day, a British officer and two soldiers approached the synagogue. We hurriedly opened prayer books and pretended to be praying. The officers and his soldiers entered the synagogue and asked us what we were doing there. We explained that this was our sanctuary and politely asked him not to disrupt our service. Instead, the officer pulled the Ark’s curtain open and certainly noticed our rather meager arsenal. He turned to one of the soldiers and sternly asked: “John, do you see any arms?” The soldier reacted with a quick “No sir” and they left the synagogue, and never returned.

After a few days, we were ordered to begin our basic training. In most regular armies, this lasted for three months. Not in the Haganah. We rapidly trained for ten days. We were about thirty Americans who were studying at the Hebrew University. One-third of us were war veterans and the rest were either rabbinical students or recently ordained rab-

In celebration of Israel’s 60th anniversary, HUC-JIR alumni and faculty were invited to reflect on memories relating to the creation of the State, experiences living, working or studying there during times of war and/or peace, contributions to Israel’s defense by service in the IDF, and Zionist activism. The accounts excerpted here have been deposited in the American Jewish Archives as a permanent resource for scholars researching the role of HUC-JIR’s alumni and faculty in strengthening the State of Israel.

2008 ISSUE 71 • 29
We both noticed that the heels of our shoes were half shot away. Evidently the Jordanian bullets had ricocheted from the rock behind us and hit our heels.

Cautiously I made my way through sniper fire and arrived at the office of the British officer in command. When I issued our invitation to a football match he responded angrily, “not with you terrible people – your assassins killed a number of my fellow officers stationed in Jerusalem.” I controlled my chagrin and tried to calm his anger. “We are members of the Haganah, and deplore all forms of terrorism. Do you really know your neighbors? They are a small number of simple farmers who are subject to constant Arab attacks. They have wives and children. For God’s sake, I do hope you will come to assist them if it seems that they are about to be overwhemed.” He rose and responded, “Hell no” and bid me goodbye. Two days later, the moshav was subjected to a devastating attack. We, of course, engaged the attackers but our situation rapidly deteriorated. Suddenly, bursts of British Bren guns from the airbase rained upon the attackers and they retreated. The Captain, after all, had a heart. Atarot was evacuated a few weeks later.

Returning to Jerusalem in mid-March, our unit was sent to Maaleh Hahamishah to learn how to use machine guns. We were trained on a single, ancient machine gun that had served the Austrian-Hungarian forces during the First World War, a water-cooled, heavy remnant that was totally obsolete. Since British soldiers were camping in our vicinity, we were forbidden to shoot. Our trainer had a gadget that he used to check whether we had set the gun on target. Only when we finished our course was each of our dozen “machine gunners” allowed to shoot one bullet!

Upon returning to Jerusalem, we were stationed at a former German orphanage, named for a missionary by the name of Schneller, in an area bordering on Mea Shearith. The final withdrawal of British troops from Jerusalem was more or less completed on May 13. Haganah forces in Jerusalem were alerted to occupy all British installations in that city by our efficient intelligence units. My sister-in-law, Louise, had spent more than a month together with a crew of other “listeners” tapping the telephone calls of British officers to learn exactly the date and time of the withdrawal. I recall the excitement of my fellow soldiers at Schnellers when we were given several bottles of Cognac and Scotch whiskey abandoned at the Generali building that had served as the headquarters of the Palestine Police. Someone at Schnellers had an old radio that picked up the broadcast of Ben Gurion’s reading of the Declaration of Independence; most of us were too battle weary to be elated; some were even skeptical as to whether we would really achieve independence.

On May 14, the Arab Legion crossed the Jordan into Palestine. I had rejoined our support company early in May and served as a machine gunner in the battle against the attempts of the Arab Legion to conquer the New City. The Legion was better equipped than we in every category. They had armored cars bearing cannons – we had no cannons and no well-equipped vehicles. Fortunately, the day before their first attack, we were supplied with several first-rate Czech machine guns that had just arrived in Jerusalem. We called them Bezor because they bore an identity number beginning with the letters BZ. The battle lasted about four hours.

When the battle began, I asked T. Carmi, the American Hebrew poet who was in charge of our team: “Do you know how to strip this new machine gun?” He replied, “No, I just watched it being unpacked.” Jamming is a frequent occurrence, so I continued, “What do we do if it jams?” He answered, “I guess we’ll just kick it.” Luckily, when our gun jammed, we kicked it and Carmi’s guess worked! As the battle raged, with little trust in the reservists backing us up, I remember imploring Carmi to pull back further several times, but he kept waving me away. When the battle ended, I thanked him for his courage. He laughed, “Courage? You were courageous. If you weren’t with me, I would have run away.”

We both noticed that the heels of our shoes were half shot away. Evidently the Jordanian bullets had ricocheted from the rock behind us and hit our heels. In another skirmish when we were heavily shelled, my shoulder was hit by a piece of shrapnel.

Ordinarily a machine gun crew consists of six persons. Ours only had five. Yosef Nevo (later the Mayor of Herzlia), was the area Commander and decided to place the sole machine gun in our sector up front rather than behind our troops. We chose one of many rocks strewn in the battle field for cover. When the Legionnaires realized how forward we were, they targeted us intensely. Fortunately, the rock withstood the heavy fire. Nevertheless, two men of the five of us were hit. The first was shot in his head and died instantly. The second was heavily injured but survived. After the battle, the Ha- galah radio reported that two American volunteers had knocked out a Jordanian tank. In the melee, it was difficult to know whether we had done it. In any case, if we had, it certainly was not a tank – the Arab Legion had no tanks but only armored gun carriers. Later, Yosef Nevo and a few soldiers retrieved one of them, repaired it, and we had our first modern small cannon!

May was a very terrible month and we suffered many casualties. About a third of our company was killed and many were wounded. In mid-May we were deployed in an abandoned Arab section near the Mandelbaum Gate. I was safely (more or less)
ensconced in one of the houses, when a commanding officer ordered me to check our positions facing the Jordanians. All positions were well fortified behind sand bags except one, a machine gun post manned by Kravich, a survivor of a Nazi camp. I rushed over to him and yelled, “Kravich, are you meshugah, take your gun and find cover; do you want to get killed?” He looked at me and said, “they already killed me in Maidanek – don’t worry.” I have never forgotten Kravich’s smile!

**Rabbi Haim Asa, C ’63**

The entire Bulgarian Jewish community survived the March and May 1943 proposed “resettlement” to the East (my father had a key role in our salvation). However, he became a “marked” man in the eyes of the Bulgarian Fascist Forces. After an unsuccessful attempt on his life in December 1943, we started preparing for aliya to Palestine. Because of his contacts and prominence, in June 1944, literally four months before the Soviet Liberation, we departed legally from Bulgaria to Eretz Israel.

I was accepted as part of Aliyat Hanor, the youth aliya, in an agricultural school for young Shoah survivors from all over Europe and the East. I was one of the few kids who was not a survivor of the concentration camps. Our education was focused upon the Zionist dream that some day soon we would have our own State. In September 1946, after two years at the youth aliya school, I was accepted to the prestigious Agricultural School Mikveh Israel. In October 1946 I was sworn into the “Youth Hagana.” I spent the summer vacation of 1947 training to become a squad commander in the Hagana, and only weeks before the November 1947 U.N. partition of Palestine, we were commissioned as “Gadna Squad Commanders.”

Following the U.N. decision to partition Palestine, the War of Independence started, and we basically became full-time soldiers. We were in charge of protecting the vital highways that flowed out of Tel Aviv to the south and to the east (to Jerusalem). From December 1947 to May 1948, we were the protectors of the highways and the transports. We were demobilized on May 15, 1948 because we were younger than 18 and therefore could not be soldiers or fighters once there was an army and State.

We returned to our school and a year later, I was mobilized in October 1949, and became one of the founders of the newly created “Nabal” (Fighting Pioneer Youth). In the summer of 1950 I was sent to Officer’s Academy and after graduation, I spent 1951 in Machane Allenby in Jerusalem and Beit Daras in the south training recruits and making them soldiers. In early 1952 I volunteered to enroll in the para troopers’ school. I completed the paratroopers’ academy, but since I was an only child I was transferred from my unit to the “Shin Bei” (the Israeli Security Service) in Tel Aviv to be closer to my dying stepmother and to help my father care for her. I have been a Zionist all of my life, and it has been my task to bring Zionism to our Reform Movement at a time when Zionism was rather alien to our philosophy and way of thinking.

**Rabbi Mordecai Schreiber, N ’65**

When Israel was born I was nine years old. I was born and raised in Haifa, known in those days as the “red city,” because socialism bordering on Marxism was prevalent in this industrial town, unlike, for example, the bourgeois city of Tel Aviv. Religion was nearly taboo in pre-state Haifa. A religious Jew was hardly ever seen on the streets of Haifa in 1948, and when my six-year-old sister once saw a hasid walking by she asked my father if he was Jewish. Little did I know in those days I was destined to become a Reform rabbi.

When Israel turned 50 I published a memoir entitled Land of Dreams, Recalling the Birth of Israel. Working on this book made me realize the birth of Israel was the defining moment of my life. At nine, I saw one world disappear and another take its place. The world of the British Mandate, of Jews in their own historical land living under foreign rule, came to an abrupt end on May 15, 1948. The adults, I recall, particularly my parents and my teachers, were sending us children mixed messages. On the one hand, they were ecstatic, and I must have heard something about “the messiah has come,” for, when I asked my third grade teacher about it, she told me that before that happens, there was going to be a war with the Arabs, and we had to be prepared for hard times. For a nine year old all of this was a bit too much to absorb.

My father, who was 39 at the time, enlisted in the newly formed Israel Defense Force (IDF). Being twice the age of the average enlistee, he did not have to enlist, and my mother told him he was being reckless. My father in those years owned a truck and had a contract with the food cooperative, Tiwna, to transport the fish harvest from Haifa harbor. The IDF was in desperate need for trucks, and once my father enlisted the truck was also drafted. This left us without a source of income, and my mother opened a small grocery store in our apartment building. It was very hard work, because a well established grocery store operated across the street, and gaining customers was as hard as splitting the Red Sea, as we say in Hebrew. One night my mother, who was one of the toughest women I have ever known, was on the verge of a mental breakdown. My father was away in the Galilee, at the fierce battle of Nebi Yusha. I was now the man of the house, and I had to help her pull herself together. I did a very poor job of it, agreeing with her that things were indeed hopeless. But, bless her soul, she had more faith than I, and she did rally. I suppose it took people like my parents and their friends to pull off that miracle called Israel.

Looking back on those days, I only have one regret. In 1947 we lived in a neighborhood of Haifa bordering on the Low City, where most of Haifa’s Arabs lived. Arab families lived a few houses down the street from my house. As a child, I sometimes played with Arab