

IT HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO SABENA

Early in 1948 Helen and I were in Jerusalem. Classes at the Hebrew University had been cancelled, and most of the American students were asked to volunteer for service in the Haganah. I was assigned to a unit guarding the perimeter of a Jewish sector of the city opposite Katamon, which was an Arab quarter. We kept guard during cold nights and moved weapons secretly by taxicabs or carried by women in the Haganah, as the British were trying to keep the peace, supposedly, by disarming both sides following the sporadic Arab attacks after the UN declaration in November, 1947.

The families decided to get their children out of those troubles, and we were told to make arrangements to leave Palestine. It was not easy getting the necessary passes to leave Jerusalem, as space on the infrequent Egged buses was tight. Anticipating Arab attacks; the busses were fitted with armor plate along their sides, and over the windshields in the front to protect the drivers. Even at the early time in the conflict, the bus drivers were our heroes for they kept lines of communication open despite the great hazards of constant travel through those Arab towns located on the routes to Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem. Finally, we managed to get aboard and started down out of Jerusalem bearing the guilt of leaving the city at that time. The British had a checkpoint on the outskirts and all passengers had to show their papers. I remember the acid remarks of the Tommy scanning our passports and his disbelief that Americans would want to be in that damned place. As we passed through Arab towns the way to Tel Aviv, the driver would command all to hunker down in our seats to make smaller targets, while he lowered the armor plate over his windshield which left him a small rectangular sight hole to navigate through Ramalah and the other Arab enclaves on the way. We arrived safely at Tel Aviv and then traveled the less hazardous route to Haifa, where we were to stay with Cousin Katz until we left.

We set out from the central Egged bus station in Haifa, again in a crowded armored bus taking workers back to their homes in the bay area where Sabena is located. It was getting dark and it was a cold gloomy setting with fog and mist about as we started. There is always a lot of conversation on a Jewish bus, and this time on the increasing troubles with Arabs. But the driver stopped it all with the warning that we were approaching a bridge across a wadi in the Arab part of Haifa, and that there had been some gunfire on traffic crossing this bridge. Now, the British were supposed to have patrols in this sector but that evening they were not keeping the peace between Jew and Arab and their absence.

I had crossed this bridge times before and remembered what splendid setting it was for disrupting traffic between Jewish Haifa and its suburbs in the bay area. The British understood the problem, had armored patrols in this area, and may have periodically searched the houses above the weapons, which however could be moved about and hidden as quickly and as well as we had done in the Haganah. But this darkening evening the British patrols were absent.

The driver lowered his armor plates over his windshield, which limited his visibility through the small rectangle cut out of the metal. In the dark mist he hit the abutment at the approach to the bridge, and the force of that contact was enough to shatter the windshield while he regained the open road across the wadi. The passengers reacted to this with fear for many didn't know exactly what had happened, but sitting up front I had seen it all as we moved across the bridge.

About mid point there was machine gun fire and instantly every child was covered by an older person and we all huddled down as much as we could. There were perhaps as much as five or six shots, and in all this the driver increased speed for the remaining meters of that bridge, and once over we were immediately sheltered from further firing by buildings obstructing the line of fire from the gun emplacements above the wadi.

The driver now slowed and asked if anyone had been hit. Luckily no one had and it is hard to describe the sounds of relief, deliverance, and thanks to the driver and the Almighty for getting us across in that old armored Egged bus. We still had ten minutes to the kiriyot, the thankful buzz continued and we were all live and whole. Helen and I had sat on the long bench in the front part of the bus, and I turned to caress the armor plate behind me which covered the side of the bus from the windows down. Moving my fingers over the metal in this caress of thanks, I felt two warm raised areas protruding from the flat surface of the metal. Turning around, I saw two raised circles of metal which, when I aligned myself in the original position of my seat on that bus, were exactly at the level of my kidneys. Helen joined me in examining this and by the time we got off at our stop we had pieced a story together of what had happened behind my back.

It was night now and outside the bus we stepped back to the third or fourth window from the front where we had sat. There, along with three or four more further toward the back, were two bullet holes holding two Arab projectiles that had been destined, if not for some Jewish armor plate, for my waiting kidneys. Of

course, there was much consternation then relief when we described all of what had happened to Ephraim Katz and his family.

Those were the last days that I saw Cousin Katz as we prepared to return to the States. Upon my return to Israel in 1957, and at my friend's home, Mendel Cohen, at the Weitzmann Institute I learned that Ephraim Katz had died a few days prior to my arrival.

Of course, to make arrangements for passage on a French steamship to take us to Marseilles, we had to cross that wadi again. This time it was morning and the danger of firing from the hills above the wadi vastly diminished. Even so, and with perhaps only ten passengers aboard, our bus driver said as we approached the bridge, "Chevra, bevakasha, lower all the windows, we don't want all that glass flying around if our Arab friends open up on us again."