

Oct 27 2003

Native Ha-Lamed-Heh (The thirty-five martyrs on the way to Gush Etzion)

This is the story I told my daughter Ruth as the fateful year of 1948 began in Jerusalem. I was then in the Haganah. There was no formal induction for as an American citizen it was illegal to fight in the armed forces of a foreign country. To do so could forfeit my citizenship. But we American students at the Hebrew University were in a very odd situation. Let me explain:

- President Truman we felt was friendly to the aims of the Jewish settlement in Palestine. Our opinion was that he would not take action against us, even if we did enter the "illegal" Jewish armed forces
- Since the Jewish population, at that time in Palestine had not attained statehood, we would be in armed forces that did not represent a recognized nation. So it would have been hard for the United States to establish for whom we fought.
- We students joked, at that time in Jerusalem, that before going off to train in the Haganah, we would take our passports to the American counsel in Jerusalem. We would ask the staff there to keep our passports in their safe. We then would pick them up after finishing what had to be done with the Arabs to establish the Jews' place in the sun as a recognized country.

Only about half of the American students in late 1947 at the Hebrew University had been in the armed forces during the Second World War. The others had no military training nor knowledge as to how to handle and use weapons. But we were all gathered together and sent to a Haganah training base. This base was at a small farm settlement outside Jerusalem, settled partially by Jews from Yemen. We got into a bus to make this trip. The seats in the bus had been taken out, and the sides of the bus had been reinforced with steel armor plate to protect passengers from Arab gunfire. So we all sat on the floor and so began the trip, and without mishap along the way we arrived safely. The hills around Jerusalem were bleak in early winter, and the crude living quarters we were assigned did not help our cheerfulness. Now, since the British were in active control of Palestine, all training was carried out without the firing of a single weapon. Such firing would have surely alerted the British to our illegal presence and would have nullified any attempt for proper training. So those of us familiar with rifles, grenades and machine guns, along with the Haganah officers detailed to our group, instructed our innocent companions in the use of these weapons. We sharpened our skills as how to maneuver in the hilly surroundings, how to take proper cover against the

enemy, and we went on simulated night patrols. In the dark, we learned how to move in proper military formation, and how to keep from losing contact with each other at night.

I really felt sorry for those student recruits with no prior military experience, for this was a hell of a method to inculcate our comrades into the basic skills of being foot soldiers. Anyway, we did the best we could and spent about two weeks at this improvised and largely silent, undetected Haganah base.

While there, we received intelligence that an Arab group was planning an action in our vicinity. To counter their move, part of our group would go on patrol to learn what the Arabs were up to. Since I had been in the U. S. army for almost three years, I was selected among others to take part in the patrol. We spent anxious hours before the time set to move out, and I was most worried about this operation's outcome. Well, about two hours before "zero time" it began to rain heavily and the patrol was canceled. That sound of rain drumming noisily on the metal roofed barracks was, I felt, the sweetest music I had ever heard. From that night onward, I determined never to get angry with rain in my life, no matter how much of a problem or inconvenience it might make for me.

We completed our training, returned to Jerusalem in that same armored bus, and were assigned variously to Haganah units in neighborhoods closely adjacent to Arab enclaves in Jerusalem. We were quartered in regular residential homes, where during daylight hours we remained out of sight, so that the British patrols-attempting to keep peace between Jew and Arab- would be unaware of our presence. However, at night activity began. We were assigned guard duty on the roofs of the houses to which we were posted. Now, in January-February it is cold in Jerusalem at night, and to do guard duty four hours at a stretch was not easy. You're all alone on the roof, its very difficult to stay warm in the damp cold, and your continuous shivering, was a combination of weather discomfort and the inherent fear of an action or patrol by our Arab foes, just a few rooftops away.

Now, during this dismal winter, my then wife Helen was, of course, apart from me. She was staying at our room at Pension Har-Aviv in Beit Hakarem. She too had to make the best of these troubled times with the companionship of the wives and single female students from our group still trying to attend classes at the University. The fact that I was married saved my life in Jerusalem. Here is the story.

The settlement Ramat Rachel, slightly south of Jerusalem, was being besieged by the Arab Legion. The Haganah decided to send a small force of thirty-five soldiers, most from the Pal Mach's best veterans, plus a few from our group of American recruits, to try to lift the terrible threat at Ramat Rachel. I was one of the Americans selected to join the thirty-five. During the final determination of who was to go, I was on my bunk listening to the officers of our battalion discussing those to be sent. One said; " Well we can't send Shlomo Bloom, he's married." The other officer asked; "Why not?" The reply came back; "Well suppose Shlomo becomes a casualty and doesn't get back here after this action. Then we have his American wife sitting, grieving alone here in Jerusalem. We can't handle all the problems that would come up. There will be too many diplomatic and political problems if that happens; we just can't be concerned with such a problem." So I was struck from the list and Moshe Pearlstein, whom I had trained with but had no previous U. S. army experience, was selected in my place to join the thirty-five.

I will always remember how formidable- yes, how heroic- the "35" appeared in all their battle gear, as they assembled on the edge of Beit Hakarem. They were the Yishuv's best and seemed invincible in my eyes. The group went out to reach Ramat Rachel, but never made it through the Judean hills. Twenty-four hours went by and no word from the "35." Then our officers assembled a further group, I among them, to seek them out. Just before we started, the officers were listening to the news and there was this British bulletin stating that the "35" had been caught in an Arab ambush and there were no survivors. This tragedy was a terrible blow to the Haganah, the kibbutz fell to the Arab Legion a few days later and its surviving members were taken prisoner.

My dear daughter Ruth, I write this story forty-seven years after its occurrence. Being married to my first wife Helen in January of 1948 was my salvation. And what eternal gratitude I have for that Haganah officer who decided not to send me because of my marriage. That sweet soul Moshe, my good friend from training days and life together in the Haganah, became, as far as I know, one of the first Americans to fall in the war of independence for Israel. His sacrifice has given me a long eventful life- baruch ha-shem. And it was just that twist of fate that I was luckily married at that time.

Ruth, if you should ever visit Israel again, be sure to ask the location of the "Forest of the Thirty-five." Yes, there is today a forest planted to memorialize those "35" hero soldiers of Israel