

The "Season"

What was I to do about my friends at the *Brith Hashmona'im*? Sooner or later I would have to give up my membership there and leave the club. This wasn't going to be as easy as it sounded for I spent all my evenings there, from the moment I left work and took off my blue uniform till I was due at my underground assignations. At that time I was busy from morning till late at night yet never felt tired, slept better than ever before, got up fresh in the morning and had never felt better in my whole life. No longer did I cuddle down into the bedclothes for "just one minute more" on cold mornings, a habit that had plagued me ever since I could remember.

I loved those hours at the *Brith Hashmona'im*. I knew that many of the members were *Lehi* men, but there were some who weren't and our clandestine activities were never mentioned, of course.

Summer came, the war went on and on. By now the Allied Forces had overrun Germany's villages and towns and there was no room any more for doubt: all the rumors about the genocide of the Jewish people in the death factories were true. Each day brought new revelations of the destruction of European Jewry, more horrifying than the last. It was a fearful holocaust – a whole tree of life had been cut down and uprooted. Fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters, uncles and aunts – a whole nation had gone up in smoke.

And what was the main preoccupation of the Jewish community in Palestine while this was going on that kept the press busy? The major and most troublesome problem seemed to be the final liquidation of the "terrorist movements."

That winter representatives of all the Jewish Agency controlled youth movements, were exhorted to identify themselves with the campaign against the "terrorist movements" and assist it actively. Ben-Gurion, whose passionate rhetoric against the British Government was never backed by serious action, was more than ready to fight the underground organizations to the death. He called upon all *Histadruth* (General Federation of Labor)

members as well as the community at large to mobilize against these 'charlatans' and 'maniacs' whose only objectives were 'murder, robbery, stealing and corruption.' Moshe Shertock (later Sharett) cried out to fight with 'any means' at their disposal and save the nation from the plague of terrorism. Special units were created to infiltrate the underground, kidnap and torture its members and finally hand them over to the British. This unholy war was named the 'Season,' based on the various British hunting seasons.

We knew that not all those participating in the 'Season' were wholehearted about it. Some were even opposed to it but were acting under orders. However, there was one group that truly derived enjoyment from the hunt and were completely identified with the ideas behind the orders: the *Hashomer Hatza'ir* members who regarded themselves as 'the men of the future.' They accepted the spiritual leadership of Stalin while at the same time classed themselves as Zionists, unwilling to admit that these last were reactionaries in the communist world, partners of the hated bourgeois imperialism which Stalin considered anathema. The *kibbutzim* (collective farms) of the *Hashomer Hatza'ir* volunteered to provide prison quarters for the kidnapped members of the underground, to torture them there until they told everything they knew, after which they would be handed to the British.

Neither did the younger members of the *Hashomer Hatza'ir* disgrace their elders. Refusing to be satisfied with spying for the *Hagana* they used their own initiative to widen the scope of their activities to include school rooms and playgrounds in every district. With indescribable enthusiasm and devotion they set out to catch any youth whose behavior was in any way suspicious and opinions unconventional, handing him over to their leaders, there to receive suitable treatment.

Old Hillel

Eitan asked me to go to Hillel's room one day – my first visit to an actual underground place indoors. I followed him through the maze of alleys comprising the Beith Israel quarter, tortuous narrow lanes in which only a local could find his bearings. A stranger, even if he had the exact address of the underground, would never get there. The place seemed to be ideal for undercover work and it must have been some “genius” who had discovered it. I had no idea at the time just how hard pressed our organization was for rented rooms nor could they pick and choose, as the choice was almost non-existent. They were undesirable tenants, to say the least, and if they somehow did manage to get a room, there was always the danger of some neighbours reporting them to the police the moment they got wind of the real nature of the new tenants. The only place where they sensed support and felt secure was in quarters such as these, among their own.

To get to the room we had to pass through an inhabited apartment. Once there, Eitan produced a written list of names and addresses. “We are about to publish *The Front*,” he told me. “This time it's going to be printed properly, not just mimeographed. The people on this list have expressed their national feelings and are also socially influential, so we want them to get it and understand our policies.” I was instructed to familiarize myself with the addresses on the list, learn the exact location of the houses and the letter boxes in the entrances so that as soon as the booklets were available they could be distributed without any loss of time. I told Eitan that the reconnaissance was unnecessary as there wasn't a house I didn't know in Jerusalem because of my work as a telegram delivery boy. As I was talking Eitan suddenly made a sign for me to be quiet. I stopped talking and in the ensuing silence we heard a Yemenite cantor somewhere outside trilling an air from the prayer service, Yemenite style.

As we stood there in silence I wondered what could have happened and if the British were on to us. But the only sound was that of the cantor, singing loud and clear. Suddenly the melody changed and Eitan exhaled in relief, taking up the conversation

approached the room while we were there he would warn us by praying a Yemenite chant. The "all clear" would be given as a melody sung in a completely different style.

I got to know the singer in time – Old Hillel, head of a family with many children and the beadle of a local synagogue. He boasted a reddish beard, reminding me of another Yemenite boy who had once told me that the Messiah, son of David, would be a Yemenite. I hadn't believed him then as it was inconceivable to me that the Yemenites were descendants of David for they were all dark-skinned and dark eyed, while everyone knew that King David was "red-haired with bright eyes (Sam. 16:12)." But the sight of Hillel's red hair made me change my mind. Perhaps the Messiah would indeed be a Yemenite!

In giving the organization a room in his home, permitting it to be turned into an arsenal, Hillel was endangering his own life and that of his children. Not satisfied with that, he requested and received many other assignments from us, ranging from collecting information, reconnoitering the area and keeping watch for us while we were conferring inside, to the more dangerous task of transferring arms from one cache to another whenever searches were going on for freedom fighters hiding in the labyrinthian quarters and their cached ammunition.

Old Hillel and all he stood for warmed our hearts and stimulated our imagination. In appearance he was just another undersized, dark-skinned old Yemenite, a mite of a man. Who could believe that this small, gentle person was actually a terrorist, nay, an arch-terrorist!

Not only had Hillel's home long been serving as a storehouse of illegal arms and ammunition but so had the synagogue he worked in. His apartment was a safe house to which underground members would repair after an operation, with the police hot on their heels. Needless to say, such safe houses were few and far between at the time, and people like Hillel rarer still. His very existence seemed miraculous to us, putting himself and his family at risk for our sakes, and we trusted him implicitly. It was

awesome and rather frightening how convinced we all were that this man would withstand censure, arrest and torture without ever breathing a word to inform on us.

In the course of my work at the Post Office I often saw letters marked "Opened by Censor" I now inaugurated a new censorship, that of the underground. A letter from the London Central Office or, indeed, any other letter that seemed of any importance, would find its way to the underground censor, something I found highly gratifying. But I wanted to participate in some real fighting operation, like the grown-ups, or, if not, then at least to be allowed to paste the wall proclamations, like the other youngsters. Weeks had gone by since Eitan told me about *The Front* in Old Hillel's house, and I was eager to see it, the articles and notices for once in bright, legible print instead of the usual blurred typing on the yellow stencilled sheets. But according to Eitan "there was a hitch or two" and the publication was being delayed.

Eitan and I still met regularly and sometimes I would be given an assignment. My work in the Post Office had made me a real find for the organization and I now belonged to Section 6 – the *Lehi* information service.

One assignment he gave me was to follow a young couple, an English detective and his Jewish mistress who used to frequent the Reviah café near the Zion cinema. Never before had I ever sat in a café and only went in to deliver a telegram or an express letter and I feared that I would stick out like a sore thumb. Then I remembered that long ago my parents had taken my brother and me to one called 'Ginati' for ice cream. Thus encouraged I went in, sat down and ordered coffee and cake. To my confusion the waiter placed a plate containing not one but three cakes before me. I said nothing as perhaps he hadn't heard my order properly and I didn't want to appear a greenhorn in matters of café behavior. Chewing slowly and carefully to draw out the time, I demolished all the cakes. But my Englishman had failed to show up and I didn't know what to do. I waited for what seemed an interminable time then gave up and left.

When I reported all this to Eitan he told me to be there again

next day at the same time.

The minute I entered I saw that luck was with me. He was there in the company of a Jewish girl whom I identified at once from Eitan's description: "Black hair and a face covered with acne."

Taking a near-by table, I again ordered coffee and cake, this time stipulating that I meant one only. As before, the waiter presented me with three, but this time I had the courage to protest: "Sir, I ordered only one cake!" Very politely he explained that I need not eat all three of them, just the one I liked best.

I sat there, leafing through the illustrated magazines and trying hard to catch some of the conversation of the two, but there was nothing of interest, just some talk about a party. As a matter of fact, they didn't talk much at all, just sitting there, looking at each other. This went on for about two hours with me straining to catch a word here, an expression there, and they just sitting there, facing each other in silence. I almost fell asleep and it seemed to me that they had become stuck to their seats, becoming a part of them like statues. Dammit, how long was this to go on and what were they doing, sitting together if they had nothing to say to each other?

I had the bitter thought that if ever I suspected anyone of following me I would lead him to a café and just go on sitting there for hours and hours – till he exploded! Could it be they knew I was following them and had chosen this method to punish me?

Time crept along and in order to keep awake I began nibbling at the second cake. Only the fear that the waiter would think me a nut prevented me from eating the third one too.

Bored to death I went on turning the pages of the periodicals, now and then throwing a glance at my couple. At times I thought they were talking of leaving and hopefully prepared to follow them, but no, still sitting, stuck to their seats.

Another hour passed and I became hopelessly resigned to this aimless hanging around. Then suddenly he was on his feet! I was in a panic. By the time I paid the waiter I would probably lose them, and that would be the last straw... Hurriedly I called the waiter, asked for the bill, paid him and flew outside. But I hurried in vain, they hadn't left. There they were in their seats again, sitting...

Finding myself in the crowded street I met some acquaintances and got into conversation with them, keeping my eyes riveted on the Reviah café where my "friends" were calmly sipping their beer. What if they chose this moment to leave, disappearing while I was idly chatting away? I walked to the corner of the street from where watching would be easier. Finally they came out but, to my consternation, they decided to separate outside the café. The Englishman turned towards the direction of the Generali Building while the girl walked up Ben Yehuda Street. What was I to do and whom was I to follow? Eitan had not prepared me for such a contingency.

I decided to go after the girl. For twenty minutes I waited till she came out of a boutique and continued sauntering up Ben Yehuda, stopping to stare at every single shop window. At the corner of Hillel Street she stopped, as if unable to make up her mind whether to go into any more shops and then went into one of the houses, not coming out although I waited there for an hour. Deciding that this could be her home or that of friends who would detain her for a long time, I decided to go and report to Eitan. Imagine my chagrin when he upbraided me for letting her go. I should have gone on tailing her, he said, till I had learnt every significant detail about her – her address, the people she met with and so on.

A Legend Called Ya'ir

My meetings with Eitan continued. Gradually I learnt about "the black days and red nights," when the members of the underground were hunted like animals. Eitan told me about the tragedy at 30 Dizengoff Street in Tel-Aviv. There were four comrades sitting in the room when someone knocked on the door. As they were expecting a friend they opened it. Some British policemen rushed in, their guns at the ready and firing. Avraham Amper got three bullets in his stomach. Zelig Jacque was hit by three and Moshe Svora'i by two. Ya'acov Levstein (Eliav)