

ARTS & LETTERS

Gangsters for Zion

Yom Ha'atzmaut: How Jewish mobsters helped Israel gain its independence

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In 1945, the Jewish Agency, the pre-state Israeli government headed by David Ben-Gurion, created a vast clandestine arms-purchasing-and-smuggling network throughout the United States. The operation was placed under the aegis of the Haganah, the underground forerunner of the Israel Defense Forces, and involved hundreds of Americans from every walk of life. They included millionaires, rabbinical students, scrap-metal merchants, ex-GIs, college students, longshoremen, industrialists, chemists, engineers, Protestants and Catholics, as well as Jews. One group, who remained anonymous and rarely talked about, were men who were tough, streetwise, unafraid, and had access to ready cash: Jewish gangsters.

The arms-smuggling operation was centered in a rented two-room suite in the Hotel Fourteen, located at 14 East 60th Street in New York. Teddy Kollek, who later became the popular longtime mayor of Jerusalem, ran the day-to-day operations of the arms procurement efforts, kept tabs on everything and oversaw all the comings and goings. Kollek was careful that those who visited the office not be people who would attract the attention of law enforcement agencies, especially the FBI.

According to Leonard Slater in his book *The Pledge*, Dan Fliderblum, a young electronics engineer from the New York suburb of Yonkers, had been recruited to set up a network of secret radio transmitters in Palestine to link isolated settlements and

forewarn them of British search parties seeking illegal arms. He recalled being in the Hotel Fourteen suite in 1947, when a group of Jewish gangsters from Brooklyn came to see Kollek. "The mobsters offered to help in any way they could. One of them said, 'If you want anyone killed, just draw up a list and we'll take care of it.' Kollek politely thanked them, but declined their offer." Fliderblum later immigrated to Israel, changed his name to David Avivi, and became a leader in the future Israeli electronics industry. After the Holocaust, the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine was seen by Zionists as a matter of life and death. Many Haganah people sent to the United States believed that anyone who could help should be approached regardless of who or what they were. Yehuda Arazi was one of those who held this view. Arazi, a close aide to Ben-Gurion had been a daring and resourceful Haganah underground agent in Romania, Hungary, and Italy during the war. Ben-Gurion sent him to America and authorized him to purchase the kinds of heavy armaments the Haganah had heretofore been unable to obtain. This included aircraft, artillery pieces, tanks, antiaircraft guns and other forms of heavy equipment.

Slater tells the following story. One morning Al Robinson, a textile converter from New Jersey and a devoted recruit to the Haganah's cause, arrived at Arazi's apartment and found him talking to two well-dressed, but hard-looking men. Arazi asked Robinson to come back the next day. Robinson quickly understood that Arazi did not want him there at that moment, so he took the hint and left. The next day when they met he asked Arazi who those men were. Arazi replied that "In my business we can't be too fussy about who we do business with. Sometimes they're not nice people." Arazi explained that he did not want Robinson to jeopardize his respectable standing in his community by meeting these people. He told Robinson that the men he met with came from a Brooklyn-based organization. "I think they're called Murder Limited." Not being an American New Yorker, Arazi had made an error in the title of "Murder, Incorporated."

At this time, the U.S. government maintained an arms embargo against Israel and the Middle East. But Egypt and the Arab countries managed to avoid the embargo and get weapons. Arazi learned that the Mafia controlled the port of New York, and he had no scruples about contacting underworld figures. He approached Meyer Lansky and asked him to help get weapons loaded onto ships bound for Israel. Lansky said he would

handle it. Lansky contacted Albert Anastasia and Joe Adonis, who controlled the longshoremen's union and the docks. They helped Israeli agents conceal the arms purchased for Israel, while arms bound for Egypt mysteriously fell overboard. Illegal consignments of military hardware, some of it brand new and still packed in oil and straw, were then secreted onto ships that happened to be bound for Israel.

Another Haganah emissary, Reuvin Dafni, who came to the United States in 1946 to raise money for the Haganah, also met with some well-known Jewish gangsters. Dafni had been born in Croatia in 1913. He immigrated to Palestine in 1936 where he became one of the founders of Kibbutz Ein Gev. In 1940, he joined the Jewish Brigade of the British army. In 1944, he parachuted with other paratroopers behind enemy lines into Yugoslavia and joined the partisans. After the war he returned to his kibbutz. He did not stay there long. In 1946, the Haganah sent him to the United States to raise funds.

When I interviewed Dafni, he told me about his meetings with Jewish mobsters. His meetings were arranged by members of the local Jewish community. His first meeting was in Miami with Sam Kay, a leading Miami Jewish gangster. "The contact was made for me by a Jewish lawyer whose office was in the same building as the gangster's. The lawyer felt it was worth seeing the man, since we had nothing to lose." The lawyer called the gangster's office and Dafni was invited upstairs. "When I entered, I faced his secretary. It was like something out of a Hollywood movie. She was blond, wore a low-cut dress with her bosom half out, and was chewing gum and filing her nails. She never even looked at me, but said, 'Go in, he's expecting you.'

When I went in, all I saw were someone's feet on the desk, a newspaper and cigar smoke curling up from behind the paper. After standing quietly for a few minutes, I cleared my throat a couple of times. The paper was lowered and Sam said, 'Sit down and tell me what you want.' So I told him. When I finished he said okay, he would help. Now this Sam was good friends with the president of Panama. They were very close. And Sam contacted him for us. From then on, all our ships carrying weapons to Israel were registered in Panama and flew under the Panamanian flag. This was a very, very, big help to us.

A few months later the Haganah sent Dafni to Los Angeles. One day he received an intriguing phone call from a man who identified himself as “Smiley” and requested a meeting. When they met, Smiley asked Dafni to “Tell me what you’re doing. My boss is interested.” Smiley’s boss turned out to be Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel. Smiley was Allen Smiley, Siegel’s right hand man.

Smiley arranged a meeting between Siegel and Dafni at the LaRue restaurant. At the appointed time, Smiley and Dafni went into an empty room at the rear of the restaurant. After a few moments, Smiley left, leaving Dafni alone. Soon two tough-looking goons entered and searched the room. When they were satisfied it was safe, they left.

Shortly thereafter, Siegel came in. He sat opposite Dafni and asked him to tell why he was in Los Angeles. As Dafni relates, “I told him my story, how the Haganah was raising money to buy weapons with which to fight. When I finished, Siegel asked, ‘You mean to tell me Jews are fighting?’ Yes, I replied. Then Siegel, who was sitting across the table, leaned forward till his nose was almost touching mine. ‘You mean fighting, as in killing?’ Yes, I answered. Siegel leaned back, looked at me for a moment and said, ‘OK, I’m with you.’ ”

“From then on,” recalled Dafni, “Every week I got a phone call to go to the restaurant. And every week I received a suitcase filled with \$5 and \$10 bills. The payments continued till I left Los Angeles.” Dafni estimates that Siegel gave him a total of \$50,000.

Later that year, Dafni was in a hotel in San Francisco. He went down for breakfast and bought a newspaper. The headline declared that Bugsy Siegel had been killed in Virginia Hill’s mansion. Dafni mused, “Thank God I took cash and not a check.”

His meetings with Jewish mobsters kept the FBI monitoring Dafni until he left the country. In 1948, Dafni was appointed as the first Israeli consul to Los Angeles. From 1953 to 1956 he served as Israel’s consul general in New York.

Murray Greenfield had been in the merchant marines during WWII. In my conversations with him he told me that after the war he became involved in the illegal immigrant movement, Aliyah Bet, that brought Holocaust survivors to Palestine from ports in Europe. The British caught him and sent him to a camp in Cyprus that had been built to house Nazi prisoners. He escaped and made it to Palestine. In 1947, the Haganah sent him to the United States and gave him the name of someone in Baltimore. Greenfield went to the man's house and was told to come back at midnight. As he remembers, "I thought it strange. But if it helped Israel, I would do it."

When Greenfield arrived late that evening, he was ushered into the basement recreation room and told to wait. At about 12:30 a.m. the door opened and "the strangest group I had ever seen entered. The men were all short and stocky with no necks. Their female companions were all blondes. The men sat on one side of the room, the women on the other." The host asked Greenfield to tell his story. When Greenfield finished, his host said to his guests, "OK, you know why you're here and you know what you have to do." And then he looked around the room and said, "Joe, you're giving \$5,000; Max, you're giving \$5,000; Harry, you're giving \$10,000."

Some of the participants complained that "business was tough because of the cops," and they couldn't contribute so much. One man indicated that "I can't give you a lot of cash, but don't forget I helped you last year when you needed guns." Undeterred by all the grumbling, the host ignored their pleas and continued. In no time, over \$90,000 was collected. The money, in cash, was put in a paper bag and handed to Greenfield. The host wished him good luck and ushered him out. "There I was," he recalled, "walking around Baltimore at 2 o'clock in the morning holding thousands of dollars in a paper bag." Greenfield's host was formerly one of Baltimore's leading Jewish mobsters.

In his autobiography, West Coast mobster Mickey Cohen claimed that after meeting Haganah and Irgun emissaries, he became so absorbed with Israel that he pushed aside much of his own activities and did nothing but try to help Israel in its war. "I got involved with this goddamn Israel war for three years" he said. In his memoirs, he claims that he held fundraising affairs to raise money for Israel to procure weapons. In 1947, he organized a fundraiser for the Irgun. Leading Jewish underworld figures from

California and Las Vegas attended, and according to Cohen and other attendees, thousands of dollars was collected. The money, Cohen claimed, was used to buy weapons and have them shipped to Israel.

Jimmy "The Weasel" Fratianno, a top Mafia killer who later turned government informant, attended the party. Fratianno knew Mickey very well. He recalled this event being held in Slapsy Maxie's restaurant. "The place is packed. I've never seen so many Jewish bookmakers and mob guys in one place in my life. They're all there. Famous actors, producers, bigshots in the community. It's a full house." To start things off, Mickey Cohen pledged \$25,000. "After that, forget about it. Everybody's pledging thousands. Even the bookmakers are pledging five and ten grand. They know Mickey's running the show and they're going to have to pay off."

Yitzhak Ben-Ami, who headed the Irgun's European-based illegal immigration operations, also remembered this party. In 1947, the Irgun sent him to the United States to assist the Irgun-led American League for a Free Palestine. Ben-Ami helped Cohen organize the fund-raising affair about which Fratianno spoke. Ben-Ami claimed that "between \$50,000 and \$60,000 was raised," and not the hundreds of thousands that Fratianno mentions. "The Jewish underworld contributed all together about \$120,000 for the Irgun," said Ben-Ami.

Nonetheless, not every Jewish mobster was so altruistic when it came to Israel's survival. Some thought nothing of working against Jewish interests if they could profit from doing so. In 1951 two Detroit Jews, Arthur Leebove and Sam Stein were indicted in a conspiracy to smuggle 21 American war planes from Newark, N.J., to Egypt during the Arab-Israeli war in 1948. Their scheme was to purchase American surplus military aircraft, load them with British crews in Newark and fly them to England. Once there, an Egyptian crew would be brought on board and the planes flown to Egypt. This syndicate bought 20 AT-6 airplanes and one B-25 bomber. The plot came to light in December 1948, when bad weather forced the B-25 to return to Newark. Federal agents then seized the planes before they could be delivered.

Nonetheless, most Jewish mobsters were willing to hazard being exposed in an illegal and risky effort to help Israel. Some did so out of ethnic loyalties. Meyer Lansky's

daughter said her father supported Israel's fight for independence because "he could not stand back and allow the country where his own refugee grandparents were buried to be extinguished by the Arabs." Some mobsters saw themselves as defenders of the Jews, almost biblical-like fighters. It was part of their self-image. Other commentators held that in each Jew, no matter how depraved, there existed a *pintele yid*, a spark of Jewishness that was never extinguished. And this motivated them to help.

Other mobsters sought respectability so as not to stigmatize their children, and thus jeopardize their chances for success in the legitimate world. Reuven Dafni, the Haganah emissary believes this is what motivated Sam Kay, the Miami gangster, to assist the Haganah. "He had a daughter of marriageable age, but she had a difficult time meeting Jewish boys because of what her father was. I think he helped us because it was a way for him to gain acceptance in the Jewish community. Once it became known that he was helping us, the Jewish community's attitude towards him changed. His daughter began dating Jewish boys and eventually married one."

Perhaps, helping Israel may be seen as a later version of the Jewish gangster's tradition of protecting his neighborhood from anti-Semites. After WWII, the Jewish state symbolically came to represent the Jewish neighborhood. In defending Israel against her enemies, the Jewish gangster was still defending his people against Jew-haters.