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The Last Salute

1.

At the beginning of 1946 the Jewish Agency received a report on the tragic story of a young woman who had come to Palestine from Austria, met a British soldier in Jerusalem, and married him. A while later he abandoned her; she murdered their baby and tried, unsuccessfully, to kill herself. “You should give this case maximum publicity,” the agency’s man in London wrote back to Jerusalem. He didn’t want any mention made of the fact that when the baby was born the couple had still not married, so as to avoid sullying the girl’s reputation. “But it is essential,” he wrote, “to play up the negative aspects of the story as a warning,” since the case was hardly an exception. Romantic attachments between Jewish girls and British soldiers had long been the object of scorn even before the Jewish Agency considered putting them to use in aid of the Zionist cause.

“On the face of it, you can see her point,” the editor of *Yediot Aharonot* wrote sarcastically of one exemplar. “She went out once with a Jewish boy, but he left her. You all know our boys—they are very ill-mannered. And then she met the English boy. He was so different. What a gentleman. You couldn’t begin to compare him to our boys. A real lord!” She dreamed of foreign climes, the editor went on; he promised her a life of pleasure, luxury, and respectability. She followed him home, but in England everyone humiliated her and made fun of her. Finally she understood that she would never be a lady in England because her mother-in-law hated her and in church they made fun of her foreign accent.

The girl from Tel Aviv would always be a provincial outsider. The article, headlined “Liberated Darling,” mentioned twenty women, the mothers of twenty children, whose British husbands had left them. “I would like to have a photograph of these forty lost souls and paste it up on all the notice boards in Palestine.” That would “deter Jewish girls from relations with gentiles,” he wrote.[1]*

When Lotte Geiger came to Palestine from Germany, in 1933, she was eighteen and expected to find a liberal country without class and social divisions. She worked in a number of offices, including the Public Works Department and the British military censor. Many *yekkes*, as Jewish immigrants from Germany were called, as well as lawyers and businessmen from the old, pre-Zionist Sephardic community in Jerusalem, mixed socially with the British, unlike most other Jews in Palestine.[3] Lotte Geiger’s friendship with Michael Bryant, the British director of the Jerusalem Electric Corporation, blossomed against the backdrop of a city that seemed to have become ever more cosmopolitan as the days of the British in Palestine neared their end.

Geiger, Bryant, and their friends used to meet at the Salvia Hotel, near Salameh Square in Talbieh. They were immigrants and escapists, do-gooders, plotters, terrorists, poets, and British officials, foreign correspondents from anywhere and everywhere, connoisseurs of whiskey and war stories—all spinning romance among the pines and geraniums and addicted to the intoxicating times. The final anarchic days of the British regime were much like those of the winter of 1917 when the winds of war were blowing through the city; Jerusalem is “at war with itself,” a British official wrote.[4] The city of eternity had sunk into twilight, much as it had thirty years earlier. The British were leaving, and no one had taken their place. For a brief while, there were no norms, no binding rules. Free from the grip of history, people lived only for themselves. These were fine days for a forbidden and impossible love between an Englishman and a Jewish woman.

But it was not easy for Bryant and Lotte. He was kidnapped by Etzel, which suspected him of aiding the Arabs. “I always knew,” he wrote to her, that “an Englishman would never really be accepted here unless he identified completely

with the Jews." He did identify with the Jews, but his interrogators did not believe him. "Maybe I should just tell them that I stayed because I was in love with a Jewess," he wrote.[5] Bryant's colleagues were packing up; the fate of their suitcases concerned them more than the fate of the Holy City.

2.

Along with evacuating some seventy-five thousand people and a quarter of a million tons of possessions, the British also had to decide what to do with their desks, who would get the horses, when to release criminals from the prisons, and how much food to leave behind in the mental hospitals. "The administration's task was to cut off the branch on which it was sitting," Chief Secretary Henry Gurney wrote.[6] As their departure approached, the British were unsure what to do with the dogs the police had used in their counterterrorism operations. "They 'speak' Afrikaans," one government document states—the dogs had been brought from South Africa. Several alternatives were considered, and finally the police decided to destroy the dogs rather than subject them to possible starvation.

They also destroyed documents, stamps, and paper money. Still, the British planned to take most of the equipment, from their locomotives to the last of the paper clips. Some supplies and a few buildings were put up for sale. One official proposed making a list and simply hanging it on the door before they all left, but bureaucratic tradition required a certain protocol: every rifle and typewriter had to be accounted for, with remarks on the condition of each item and its monetary value. Special forms were printed up for the purpose and had to be filled out in octuplicate. The operation was rather complex—the authorities discovered that it was easier to establish an administration than to dismantle one.[7]

The British left the country because more and more of them had come to realize that the Balfour Declaration had been a mistake—something various officials had said twenty years earlier. Sir John Hope Simpson of the Foreign Office shared the following thought with former high commissioner Chancellor: "What a lot of Jews are now in authority.… The world is no pleasant thing to

contemplate these days."[8]

This was a widespread feeling. In both Jerusalem and London people once again thought that the Jews had influence on American policy, as in World War I. Then the feeling had spurred the British to conquer Palestine; now they were inclined to leave it. "The American press and American Zionists are responsible more than anyone else for the present troubles in Palestine," Chief Secretary Gurney wrote in his diary, adding, "The sooner we go the better." Soon after, Sir Henry was left with but a single word to account for the British presence in Palestine: stupidity.[9]

The pro-Zionist lobby in the United States had in fact grown stronger since the end of World War II, and wielded greater influence than ever before. At one stage America seemed to be trying to force Britain to remain in Palestine and reaffirm its support of the Zionist movement, against its will. This additional pressure from abroad convinced the British that in leaving the country they were saving themselves from sinking even deeper into a quagmire.

For many years thereafter, Israelis conducted an agitated and sensitive debate over the question of who had really gotten rid of the British. Former members of Etzel, Lechi, the Haganah, and the Palmach vied with each other to claim credit for "ejecting" the British; all invested considerable energy in the argument, enlisting historians, educators, journalists, and other shapers of memory and myth. The political stakes were high, the assumption being that whoever had expelled the British had thereby won the moral and national right to lead Israel's government. All the warring parties completely ignored the role played by the Arabs in sending the British packing.

The Arab rebellion of the late 1930s had been cruelly suppressed, but it had brought home to the British that compromise between the Arabs and the Jews was impossible. Only war would decide the issue; whoever won would control the country, or as much of it as they could conquer. The British had drawn the right conclusion. Once the Zionist movement came to Palestine with the intention of creating an independent state with a Jewish majority, war was inevitable. All indications pointed toward a long war that would end without a clear victory. This projection greatly reduced the country's strategic value and

increased the risks to the British themselves. With hindsight they could—justly—say to themselves that they had erred in allowing the Zionist movement to drag them into this adventure. Twenty years after the Balfour Declaration, they could even claim that they had kept their commitment: at least the foundations of the Jewish national home were in place.

The Arab rebellion had made the British sick of Palestine. World War II had delayed their exit, but during the war they continued to discuss how to rid themselves of the country when the war ended. Terrorism and illegal immigration only served to intensify a feeling that had crystallized among many of the British by the end of the 1930s. After three decades of Zionism in Palestine, there was still no clear timetable for the Jewish state, but no doubt remained that Jewish independence was on the horizon. The social, political, economic, and military foundations of the state-to-be were firm; and a profound sense of national unity prevailed. The Zionist dream was about to become reality.

There is therefore no basis for the frequent assertion that the state was established as a result of the Holocaust. Clearly, the shock, horror, and sense of guilt felt by many generated profound sympathy for the Jews in general and the Zionist movement in particular. That sympathy helped the Zionists advance their diplomatic campaign and their propaganda, and shaped their strategy to focus efforts on the survivors, those Jews in displaced-persons camps demanding that they be sent to Palestine. All the survivors were Zionists, the Jewish Agency claimed, and they all wanted to come to Palestine. The assertion was not true.

The displaced persons were given the choice of returning to their homes in Eastern Europe or settling in Palestine. Few were able or willing to return to countries then in the grip of various degrees of hunger, antisemitism, and communism, and they were never given the option of choosing between Palestine and, say, the United States. In effect, their options were narrowed to Palestine or the DP camps. Many, but not all, wanted to settle in Palestine; others came because there was nowhere else for them to go or in response to the exhortations of Zionist emissaries. A secret report on the first immigrants to reach the country after the war stated that a considerable number felt let down.

“The disappointment derives from the lack of a Zionist outlook and Zionist education, on the one hand, and from the hasty, even dishonest promises, of our overseas emissaries.… The [immigrants] believe in no vision.”[10] Mutual disappointment was one of the causes of a great schism between the Jews of Palestine and the Holocaust survivors.*

The problem of the displaced persons required a solution; one of the loudest voices demanding they be allowed to settle in Palestine was that of Herbert Samuel, the high commissioner Ben-Gurion had once described as a “traitor.”[12] President Truman also supported sending the refugees to Palestine. Foreign Secretary Bevin was angry: Truman wanted to settle them in Palestine to keep them out of America, he said, in one of the acerbic comments that earned him his reputation for antisemitism.

Bevin seems, in fact, to have sincerely believed that the Jews could be repatriated, and he considered this to be part of Europe’s moral rehabilitation. His view of the world contradicted the foundations of Zionist ideology: he had been brought up as a pacifist and considered Judaism a religion, not a nation. That did not make him an antisemite; on the contrary. The speech in which he proposed that the refugees be reabsorbed in Europe expressed a deep abhorrence of all kinds of racial discrimination and a genuine concern for the future of the DPs. An Anglo-American commission of inquiry would soon be established to study the problem and recommended, among other things, that 100,000 refugees be settled in Palestine.[13]

Khalil al-Sakakini was angry at the suggestion that Palestine take in Holocaust survivors. “If this is a human problem, then let humanity solve it,” he wrote; the Jews were exploiting the Holocaust parasitically, by demanding Palestine as a homeland. When they got it, Sakakini believed, the Jews would say, “Throw the Arabs out so we can take their places!” He was aware of the Jews’ influence in the United States. Were he able, he wrote, he would divest the American Jews of their right to vote.[14]

For a brief moment, the possibility of making the United States a partner in ruling Palestine made a renewed appearance in the diplomatic world, as it had after World War I. The British were thinking principally of the financial burden

involved in continuing their control of the country.[15] The idea of establishing an American administration in Palestine was fascinating but improbable; unlike the British, the Americans generally knew to keep themselves out of such a predicament. Helplessly, seeing no way out, the British again tried to bring the two peoples of Palestine to some sort of accord, and as expected, failed.

3.

In early 1947, David Ben-Gurion held a series of talks with Ernest Bevin in which he tried to persuade the foreign secretary to turn the wheel back to the period preceding the White Paper of 1939. He entered discussions as if the various Zionist parties in Palestine were not at the same time doing their patriotic best to throw the British out. The talks with Bevin and other cabinet ministers were not merely a diplomatic trick as some of Ben-Gurion's admirers said later, trying to prove that he too had worked to get rid of the British. The Zionist movement had nothing to gain from such a deception, and Ben-Gurion could only have been hurt by it politically. Ben-Gurion wanted British rule to continue because the Haganah was not ready for a war with the Arabs. His goal was to gain time. In July 1947 he was still talking about the possibility of "international supervision" instead of independence, estimating that this supervision could last for "years."[16]

Ben-Gurion must have known that the chances of persuading the British to remain were poor, but the minutes of his conversations with Bevin reflect how hard it was for him to grasp that the British were really ready to leave. Ben-Gurion seems not to have understood the depths of Britain's postwar economic, social, and psychological crises. For many years thereafter he tended to attribute the difficulty in his relations with Britain to Bevin's personal hostility to Zionism.[17]

Ben-Gurion already felt that the focus of world decision making had passed from London to Washington, but he continued to cling to the colonial myth. Zionism had hitched itself to the British Empire, advancing under its sponsorship to the verge of independence, and Ben-Gurion wanted to revive the old alliance.

In fact, he even tried to convince the British to remain in Palestine on the basis of the original mandate. Bevin, however, proposed dividing the country into quasi-autonomous cantons and restricting immigration. The Zionists rejected the plan; the Arabs rejected it also.[18] The British were left with only one alternative: to go home.

The talks were, however, interesting, delving as they did into the roots of the Palestine conflict. Ben-Gurion maintained that a man could walk for days through the country without meeting a living soul, echoing the platitude that Palestine was a land without people for a people without a land.* He kept praising the historic friendship of the Jewish and British peoples; he spoke of the two nations' common values and even at that late stage tried to tempt Bevin with Chaim Weizmann's old promise of a European foothold in the Middle East—the Jews were the sole representative of Europe in a Muslim world, he argued, and always would be. Bevin, pessimistic and occasionally downright hostile, compared Palestine to twins sired by different fathers.

Bevin devoted many hours to his talks with Ben-Gurion. In one set of minutes he is quoted as saying, "Palestine is not vital to England but England does not want to have to admit failure," thus articulating the crux of Britain's position. He did not know how to explain to his people what their sons were doing in distant Palestine, two years after the end of the World War, he explained. Feeling was running high all over England.[20] Everywhere people were demanding that he bring the boys home. Their voices were being heard in the press, in Parliament, and in the cabinet.

"Rule or Quit," one newspaper declared; a second asked, "Must Our Boys Die?" And a third simply said, "It's Time We Get Out." The headlines reflected, among other things, the psychological effect of terrorism. Internal government correspondence also mentions public opinion as a reason for giving up Palestine.[21] One MP recounted a memory from his military service in Ireland. Putting a twist on the enlistment slogan "Join the army and see the world," the soldiers had joked, "Join the Royal Irish Constabulary and see the next world." The same slogan was now applicable to Palestine, he suggested.[22]

The man who raised the loudest voice in favor of getting out of Palestine was

Winston Churchill. He had no lack of arguments for his position but, as in the past, the thing that seemed to bother him most was the price: the 100,000 soldiers deployed there were costing the British taxpayer £30 million a year, Churchill said over and over again—£30 million in order to keep 100,000 men away from home. This huge force was necessary not only to suppress Jewish terrorism but to check the growing tension between the Jews and the Arabs. The continued British presence in Palestine would seem doubly grotesque once Britain left India. "To abandon India … but to have a war with the Jews in order to give Palestine to the Arabs," Prime Minister Clement Attlee told the cabinet, "appears to carry incongruity of thought and policy to levels which have rarely been attained in human history."[23]

Churchill at one point addressed the claim that Palestine was needed to defend the Suez Canal. This was "a very wrong idea," he said, declaring, "Let us then stay in the Canal Zone and have no further interest in the strategic aspects of Palestine." For his part, he had never believed that Britain had any strategic interest in Palestine. The army and War Office continued in the meantime to compose position papers on the country's strategic value, which the government then chose to ignore. Like Winston Churchill, the government thought that controlling Palestine cost too much: "British troops … have been the British taxpayers' liability throughout," Sir Henry Gurney noted in his diary.[24]

Attlee, Bevin, and Colonial Secretary Arthur Creech Jones did not always see eye to eye. Attlee was skeptical of Britain's economic and military ability to preserve its status as a great power in the Middle East. Bevin feared Soviet penetration and still thought in terms of international greatness and prestige; he still believed in the military value of the Middle East and was also interested in Arab oil. In the final analysis, however, he agreed with the prime minister that Palestine should be dropped. Creech Jones was inclined to support the moderate branch of the Zionist movement, but not so fervently that he would argue for the continuation of the Mandate. This was a rare moment of consensus on Palestine.[25]

The most conclusive formulation of Britain's position on Palestine was written by one of the ministers in a letter to Attlee. "The present state of affairs is

not only costly to us in manpower and money," he wrote, "but is, as you and I agree, of no real value from the strategic point of view—you cannot in any case have a secure base on top of a wasps' nest—and it is exposing our young men, for no good purpose, to abominable experiences and is breeding antiSemites at a most shocking speed."[26] Not coincidentally, the letter's author, Hugh Dalton, was serving as chancellor of the exchequer. Economics had not motivated Britain to enter Palestine or to remain there, but it was a major factor motivating them to leave.

Dalton's letter bears the date August n, 1947. Four days later, India's independence was declared, a profound trauma for Britain; if India was the jewel in the empire's crown, Palestine was hardly more than an anemone in the king's buttonhole. The Holy Land had brought joy to British hearts, but not for long. "The people are fed up with the whole business," the high commissioner told Ben-Gurion.[27]

In February 1947, the British government had decided to turn the Mandate over to the United Nations, the League of Nations' successor. The U.N. set up its own commission. Surveys and reports were prepared and witnesses were summoned and their comments recorded, producing yet more impressive documentation of positions and historic claims set down in meticulous detail. Finally, the commission decided, by a majority, to recommend to the General Assembly that Palestine be partitioned. This decision prompted a worldwide diplomatic campaign involving pressure, threats, promises, and bribes. The Jewish Agency budgeted a million dollars for its own campaign of bribery; in official parlance the money was allocated to "irregular political activity."[28]*

Until the actual vote in the United Nations there was no way to be certain how the General Assembly would decide. But on November 29, 1947, the U.N. voted to divide Palestine into two states, one for the Jews and one for the Arabs; Jerusalem was to remain under international control.

The Arabs were as unprepared for battle as the Jews, and thus also had an interest in the continuation of British rule. But they may have believed that ultimately they would win. In any case, still hostage to the rejectionist position they had adopted in 1917, they opposed partition and continued to demand

independence in all of Palestine, promising to respect the rights of the Jewish minority. The partition boundaries proposed by the U.N. assigned the Jewish state almost twice as much territory as the British partition plan of ten years previously, and the Arabs had turned down that proposal as well. “They refused at any time to sign their own death warrant,” Anwar Nusseibeh wrote.[30] But in rejecting the partition plan, the Arabs missed a chance to gain time to prepare for war. They had made a tactical error.

There were Jews who opposed partition as well. Revisionist “hawks” would not agree to give up the territories assigned to the Arabs; the binationalist “doves” decried the principal of separation, believing in one or another form of coexistence. The Zionist movement accepted the partition plan, in a wise tactical step. Even then all the players understood that geographically and demographically the U.N.’s partition plan could not be implemented. The border between the two states was long and contorted, impossible to defend; the Jewish state would include more than half a million Arabs, slightly more than the number of Jews then living within the proposed boundaries. Some ten thousand Jews, including the inhabitants of the city of Nahariya, would find themselves within the Arab boundaries. Furthermore, there was no reason to trust that international control of Jerusalem was viable.[31] No one believed in the U.N.’s map; everyone knew there would be war.*

The proposal was passed by a majority of thirty-three—including the United States and the USSR—against thirteen, with ten abstentions, including Britain. The victory was largely due to the work of the Zionist lobby. David Lloyd George would not have been surprised—he had always known that the Jews controlled the world. Sir Henry Gurney, the chief secretary, followed and analyzed the components of the Zionist movement’s propaganda carefully; his analysis was hostile, but not unintelligent. He noted that the Zionists had successfully equated anti-Zionism with antisemitism. Gurney supposed that the Americans would have been unenthusiastic about helping the Jews had they wanted to establish an independent state in New York. The pressures “the Zionist” creates, he wrote, makes the world hate him, but apparently he does not care. He has a suicidal urge. That was what made him so desperate and self-

centered, Gurney wrote.[33†]

Ya'akov Cohen sat glued to the radio all night, listening to the progress of the historic vote in New York. When he heard the result, he could hardly contain himself: "The ear cannot comprehend it, the heart does not believe it—a Hebrew state! Unbelievable!" Once again, he wrote, "the people of Jerusalem have taken to the streets, just like the time of the victory over Germany, old and young danced, sang, drank, and cheered en masse all day." The British policemen and soldiers even danced with them, he noted. No, this was not the state the Zionists had hoped for. "After all, the entire country was in our sights," he remarked. Now the Jews had a territory that did not include Jerusalem.[‡]

But when the vote was counted, there was no room for doubt. "I was happy to the depths of my soul," Cohen wrote. He ran through the streets all day, as if there were no university, as if he did not teach school. "A light has risen for the future, mass immigration, the liberation of the oppressed, intensified building, independence and freedom," he noted in his diary. At the time he was in love with a girl named Dolly. They went to concerts starring Shoshana Damari; they especially liked to hear her stirring rendition of "Anemones."[36]

4.

General Evelyn Barker felt obliged to apologize. His government had not been fair. It should not have returned the mandate to the U.N. in New York, since the atmosphere there was so pro-Jewish. On the other hand, he wrote to Katy Antonius, he could not blame the British—even Haj Amin al-Husseini, the former mufti, thought only of his own interests and not of his people, and had done the Palestinian Arabs a great disservice. The mufti sought only to augment his political power. The Arabs had only dissension and petty jealousies. Their tragedy was that they had no real leadership.[*]

The U.N. debate might have been avoided had the Arabs come forth with constructive suggestions instead of turning down all the British ideas, Barker wrote. The Arabs needed to use a Western approach in evaluating their problems, he added, and he imagined himself serving as political adviser to the

Arab Higher Committee. Katy Antonius seems to have agreed with at least some of his criticism. It was too bad the Arabs didn't listen to her, he said—maybe they dismissed her because she was a woman.[38]

Barker was serving as commander in chief, eastern command, in May 1947; Antonius had left her home in Jerusalem and moved to Egypt. "I shall always love you for your own sweet self and for your grand fighting spirit which I so much admire," he wrote her.[39] He was pained that the British were imposing such a situation on their Arab friends, he wrote a short time after the General Assembly had adopted the partition plan; he was angry at President Truman for selling himself to the Jews. But as a military man he had no doubt: the Jews would not be able to withstand the force of the entire Arab world, and in the end they would all be eradicated. They could blame their destruction only on the Zionist policy they had adopted, and on Lord Balfour, of course. Even though Barker had not been appointed adviser to the Arabs, he offered them advice through his lover. They had to unite, to be more cunning, to work according to a plan. He would willingly fight at their side in order to exterminate Zionism, he reiterated.[40]

A year had gone by since Barker had last seen his Katy, yet his heart was full of her. A lot had happened in the meantime, but his deep affection for his dear little love remained constant. He recalled one evening in particular, when they had consummated their love. Yes, he wrote, perhaps she had been right in saying he loved her more than he should, but he was so happy to have had those rapturous months in Jerusalem—her friendship was a pearl of great price. He thought of her at night when he went to sleep and in the morning when he woke, when he was in the bathtub and at work—always always he thought only of his Katy, with the white streak of hair, whom he loved and still loved.[41]

One day Barker was nearly caught. He left some letters on his desk, and his wife noticed the Egyptian stamps. Luckily, another letter from Egypt was in the pile and he was able to explain away the correspondence somehow. But the moment was very alarming for him. Now he asked Katy to send him, along with her real letters, something formal for him to show his wife. Please, do this even if you think it is cheating, he wrote her.[42] Sometimes he had friends over who

also knew Antonius, and her name would come up in conversation. One evening he had supper with Musa Alami. Barker held him in high esteem, and would have liked to see him leading the Arab movement in Palestine, despite some concern that Alami would be too uncompromising.[43]* Alami was connected to the Husseini family by marriage; for a time he had indeed been considered the chief representative of Palestine's Arabs.

Alami had been expelled from Palestine during the Arab rebellion but had since been allowed to return to Jerusalem, where he worked as a lawyer. For a time he coordinated Arab public relations in diplomatic circles, setting up liaison offices in London, New York, and Washington. This venture was financed by the Arab League, which had been established in 1945 by several Arab states, with its headquarters in Cairo. Sari al-Sakakini, who had left his job at the American consulate, was asked to direct the Arab League's office in Washington, which was in need of new and better management. He was just right for the job. While working at the consulate, he had learned how to explain Palestinian Arab politics to the Americans and how to explain American politics to the Arabs. His father was correct when he wrote in his diary that "a person like Sari has what it takes to do this work and may it be for his good and for the good of the Arab nation."[45] But the proud father seems not to have known about the powerful love that kept his son tied to Palestine.

In an effort to remain in Jerusalem, Sakakini drew up a detailed proposal for the American consulate to establish an Arab department, which he wanted to head. His letters to the consul are intimate in tone, evincing a measure of personal attachment. "I want to stay with you no matter what," Sakakini wrote, whether his preference served the Arab cause or not.[46] A similar mix of subservience and ambition marks Sari al-Sakakini's letters to Musa Alami. Again and again Alami tried to persuade him to take the job in Washington, but Sakakini made grandiose demands. He wanted a luxurious home, an unlimited entertainment budget, and freedom of action to do as he saw fit. "I have to be my own master," he wrote. Alami ran into various difficulties that also served to delay Sakakini's departure, but the impression is that Sakakini was being evasive, both wanting and not wanting to go. In one letter he said he was

remaining in Jerusalem “for personal reasons”; in another he claimed to have begun working as an English teacher and explained that his students needed him.[47]

In the end he remained with Omran and assisted Alami in the Arab office in Jerusalem. When the U.N. General Assembly decided to partition Palestine into two states, Alami believed that the plan should be accepted as a starting point for negotiations with the Jews. Alami would soon fall out with Haj Amin al-Husseini, resulting in Alami’s dismissal from all official activity.[48] One of the first Zionist diplomats, Eliahu Eilat, would later describe him as a humanist, a man of justice and peace.[49]

5.

The first shots were fired at a bus on its way to Jerusalem. Six Jewish passengers were killed. The attack occurred a few weeks after the U.N.’s vote on partition; the assailants were Arabs. Many of the city’s Jews were still celebrating the U.N. decision. In the weeks that followed, more than eighty Jews and ninety Arabs were killed.[50]

The Arab forces facing the Haganah, Palmach, Etzel, and Lechi were made up of volunteers, some of whom had participated in the Arab rebellion ten years previously. There were also youth organizations that received military training and were linked, like the Jewish youth movements, to competing political parties. Thousands of other volunteers had received military training and combat experience in the British security forces, including the police, which again employed many Arabs. There was also the Arab Legion of Transjordan, a unit the British used against Jewish terrorists similar to the Special Night Squads, which had enlisted Jews to provide protection from Arab terrorism.

In the first stages of the conflict, the Arabs attacked Jewish stores and set off bombs in city centers. The Haganah attacked Arab villages, sometimes without orders from the top command, as in the case of Khasas, a village in the Hula Valley, where two men and five children were killed in retribution for the death of a Jewish settler. Although some observers dubbed the conflict a “civil war”

the outbreak of hostilities was clearly, at that stage, a war between two distinct peoples. Soon, forces serving in the regular armies of the neighboring Arab countries joined the fighting; for some time the Arab states had been in the process of taking control of the conflict, in effect neutralizing Palestine's Arab leaders, including the former mufti.[51]

The situation in Jerusalem was particularly difficult. At one point the Jewish part of the city was under siege by the Arabs and cut off from the rest of the city. During a stay there in April 1948, Ben-Gurion recorded in his diary that morale in the city was very low. There was "great agitation," he wrote, noting that "everyone" was blaming the Haganah for the city's predicament. The extreme ultra-Orthodox Neturei Karta faction wanted to surrender, while the *yekkes* in Rehavia were helpless. People were stealing water from wells and stockpiling food; some had become war profiteers; and many were evading military service.[52] Against this background there is something grotesque in the patriotic platitudes Ya'akov Cohen recorded in his diary. He had returned to the Palmach and was stationed at Ma'aleh HaHamisha, a kibbutz near Jerusalem named after five young men who had been killed there during the Arab rebellion. Cohen belonged to the Harel Brigade, whose operations officer was Yitzhak Rabin.* Once, returning from action in an Arab village, Cohen wrote, "The operation did not always go well, but we quickly found solace … happy is the nation that has sons like these, exemplary sons, and I was proud because I was and am one of them." He also wrote, "The road to independence is strewn with alternating sorrow and joy, so we will prepare for what is to come with confidence and faith in the justice of our cause and our noble movement." There was also a girl with the soldiers, Michal. "She has captured my heart because of her great similarity to the late Bebs," Cohen wrote.[53]

From time to time, Cohen went back to Jerusalem for a quick visit to the children's institution where he had worked, in the Arnona neighborhood, located somewhere between the homes of Jane Lancaster and Shmuel Yosef Agnon. The Arab siege of the city had brought the Jewish neighborhoods close to starvation. There was no certainty the Jews would be able to hold out. Access to distant neighborhoods like Talpiot and Arnona was becoming more and more difficult.

Cohen often thought of the children who remained there and tried to reach them for a game of football. Occasionally he wondered what would become of his university studies, but wrote that he had no reservations about “devoting himself to the homeland.”[54] On January 11, 1948, he wrote, “There is no way of knowing where death lurks.” Five days later he was killed, one of thirty-five men who set out on a night march to the Etzion bloc, beyond Bethlehem.

6.

A few days after Cohen’s death Khalil al-Sakakini turned seventy. “This is the age of senility,” he wrote, but he noted that his health was excellent. He continued to take a cold shower every morning and feel as if he had been reborn. The Arab Language Academy in Cairo had elected him to membership and he decided to change his famous calling card. Instead of the motto “Human being, God willing” under his name, he would now write “Member of the Language Academy, God willing.”

In the winter months of 1947–48 Sakakini’s diary sounded more and more like his diary of the winter of 1917. Once again, the war was at his doorstep; his neighborhood of Katamon was a target of Yitzhak Rabin’s forces. Once again, his sleep was disturbed by explosions, just like the days of the British approach to the city. In early January Sakakini wrote, “The Jews slipped into Katamon on a dark and rainy night, at two in the morning, when people have let down their guard, and blew up the Samiramis Hotel, which collapsed on top of its guests and many were killed.” The building served as headquarters for the Arabs; among the casualties was the Spanish consul, Count Antonio de Ballobar’s successor.[55]*

Sakakini’s neighbors organized guard duty, gathering for lengthy discussions at his home. They tallied the weapons at their disposal and collected money to buy more and to hire guards. They positioned sand-filled barrels at the neighborhood’s entrance. There were several doctors and nurses in the vicinity, Sakakini noted proudly, and engineers checked the houses to locate their weak points and determine from which direction they might be attacked. The

neighborhood became a fortress, Sakakini wrote with sad irony; “the fortress of Gibraltar is nothing in comparison.”[56]

In a more serious mood, he despaired of withstanding the Jewish attacks. The Jews were organized, united, and well equipped, while the Katamon residents had no such advantages. “Has the time not come for us to understand that unity wins over factionalism, organization over anarchy, readiness over neglect?” Sakakini asked. To a large extent, he was telling the story of the Arab defeat. When Lechi agents penetrated Katamon and blew up several houses, Sakakini and his neighbors went to the Arab Higher Committee and demanded arms. There aren’t any, they were told. The Katamon residents demanded guards. There aren’t any of those either, they learned. “Where are the trained volunteers?” Sakakini wanted to know. “Where is the money collected from all the Arab and Islamic countries?” It occurred to him that he was witnessing the fulfillment of Proverbs 25:14: “One who boasts of gifts that he does not give is like clouds and winds without rain.”

In the midst of the siege, Sakakini hosted Abu Musa, also known as Abd al-Kader al-Husseini, one of the top Arab commanders. Sakakini set out for him some moral rules of war: the wounded must be cared for, prisoners must be treated properly, soldiers’ bodies must be returned. He quoted the words of the first Arab *khalif:* “Thou shalt not kill a child, an old man, or a woman, thou shalt not burn a tree nor destroy a house, thou shalt not pursue one who flees and thou shalt not mutilate bodies, thou shalt not harm he who is occupied in the worship of God.” He made no record of the commander’s response, but apparently Abu Musa did not encourage his host to continue. Sakakini would have liked to tell him, “Return your swords to their scabbards, there is enough room in the world for everyone.” But Sakakini assumed that no one would listen to him, so he comforted himself with the words of Jesus: my kingdom is not of this world. Husseini was a revered hero, the son of Musa Kazim al-Husseini and a leader of the Arab national movement and the Arab rebellion.

Abd al-Kader al-Husseini fired the imagination of many, including a student at the Arab high school for boys in Haifa, Adnan al-Yehiya. Adnan liked to correspond with boys and girls in the United States and Australia; he received a

98 in English. He got good grades in his other subjects as well—only a 77 in math ruined his average. Also, he liked to write to his brothers and cousins studying in various places around the country. They told each other about their teachers and classmates, about soccer and cinema. Once Adnan told a cousin about a movie he had seen called *Love Letters* and mentioned a song from the movie called "How Would You Like to Kiss Me in the Moonlight?" Adnan wanted to find the words to the song and hinted mysteriously that he would explain why he needed them when he saw his cousin. They wrote a lot about girls they dreamed of meeting and loving, and shared the vicissitudes of adolescence. But like Ya'akov Cohen in Tel Aviv, Adnan al-Yehiya lived the conflict over Palestine. Like Cohen, he internalized all the platitudes of his people's cause and regurgitated them in his letters as if they were his own invention.

Sometimes Adnan wrote poems, love poems and patriotic poems. He called on his people to unite and repel the Zionist enemy. In another poem he praised his teacher for saying that the Arabs would not allow the Jews to remain in Palestine and that Jerusalem would not fall. In a third poem, the boy thundered against Arabs who sold their land to the Jews, calling them mad dogs. His brother Mohammed, who studied in Safed, castigated him for spending entire nights at the nationalistic Muslim Brothers club instead of preparing for his exams. Mohammed also said that snow had fallen in Safed.

A friend from Jerusalem wrote that the British had closed off entire neighborhoods, out of fear of terrorism. The Jews called these areas "Bevingrads." A friend from Tulkarem reported that the Jews were shooting in all directions, as if they were having target practice with human beings. The friend was afraid, but when the time came, all his brethren would report as one to defend their country; there was no greater honor than to fall as a *shaheed*, or martyr, in a holy war for the homeland. In March 1948 a friend wrote, "I am happy, Adnan, that you know some Hebrew, so you can understand the murderous Jews."*

A pen pal from Lebanon sent good news: the Arab army is advancing, he informed Adnan, and you will soon see it before you; he was a soldier and at that

moment was training in Damascus, serving in one of the battalions established by the Arab states. He would soon arrive as well, he wrote. His battalion was named after a battle Salah a-Din had waged against the Crusaders on the Yarmouk River. From time to time, Adnan's letters mentioned the hero Abd al-Kader al-Husseini, who was fighting in the Jerusalem area.[57]

Judge Anwar Nusseibeh also admired Abd al-Kader al-Husseini; the two had gone to school together. "Even while still a student," Nusseibeh wrote, "Abd al-Kader stood out as a rebel, protesting the injustices of Western imperialism as expressed in Zionism." A natural leader, he had given up all the benefits of his origins, education, and status and had lived in the mountains among the farmers during the days of the rebellion. His comrades love him and would gladly die at his bidding, Nusseibeh wrote.

In April, Abd al-Kader fought in the battle for the Kastel escarpment and the village at its top, on the way to Jerusalem, one of the most important theaters of the war. Nusseibeh's reflections on the battle fit his thesis about the entire war: the Arabs were too few, and their equipment was minimal and outdated. Abd al-Kader fell in the battle, although the Arabs gained a temporary victory, in which they managed to capture Jewish positions. But the death of the soldiers' admired commander stupefied them; they streamed into Jerusalem for his funeral, leaving the Kastel undefended. Nusseibeh described the hysteria and madness of the mourners—people fired shots in the air as a sign of bereavement. "It sounded as if a major battle was on," Nusseibeh wrote. Some mourners were even killed at the funeral. In the meantime the few men who had remained to guard the Kastel panicked when they saw Jews approaching and abandoned their posts. "It appeared that the men could not resist the attraction of Abu Musa's funeral and had left the village to attend it," Nusseibeh wrote.

Sakakini also took part in Abd al-Kader al-Husseini's funeral. "The entire country walked behind his casket," he said.[58] District Officer James H. H. Pollock wrote to his wife that more people had been hurt during the funeral than in the battle in which Abd al-Kader had died.[59] One of Adnan al-Yehiya's pen pals, Fawzi, wrote, "He was a hero. He filled the Jews' hearts with terror and fear. The Jews murdered him. The Arabs bow their heads. He blazed a trail for

us. Our duty is to go in his footsteps." Fawzi composed a poem in this spirit, which he recited in class; he received a prize, a nice book of poetry. He was certain Adnan would also write a poem in memory of their hero and asked him to send a copy.[60]

Abd al-Kader had died as a patriot and idealist and as such perhaps his death had been inevitable, Anwar Nusseibeh wrote, but he also died a victim of the politicians' cynical careerism and intrigue. "The entire operation was thus for nothing," Nusseibeh reflected, referring either to the battle for the Kastel or the entire war. "All and entirely for nothing—a complete waste." Nusseibeh left the funeral and sadly went home.[61]*

The battle over Katamon grew ever more fierce. "The whistle of the bullets and the thunder of the shells do not stop day or night; we heard nothing like this in the past world wars," Sakakini wrote. Every time he entered his home he expected it to explode, and on the streets he stayed close to the walls, afraid that a stray bullet might find him. Sakakini's telephone did not stop ringing. Relatives and friends in other parts of the city were worried because everyone knew that Katamon was like the crater of a volcano. Lava was flowing, smoke was blowing, and the flames were rising. "In this situation it is no wonder the residents are thinking of moving to another area or another city," Sakakini wrote, listing the names of neighbors who had already gone. On April 7 Sakakini found a bullet on his balcony. It had hit the right doorjamb, leaving a faint mark, he noted, adding that had anyone had been sitting on the balcony at the time, he would have been killed. He tried to comfort himself, saying, "The believer is not hit twice by the same stone."

On April 13, Sakakini felt like he was on a battlefield. "Night comes and we cannot close our eyes. We say that if we live to see the day, we will leave this neighborhood, Katamon, for another, or leave this country completely." A week later he and his two daughters left, taking only their clothes. They thought they would be coming back.

"Every time I recall that horrible hour when we left the house like thieves in the night, with the shells falling around us and bullets flying over our heads," he wrote a few months later, "I hit myself and think: How could we have forgotten

to take all the bottles in the cupboard?" He imagined the Jewish soldiers finding his liquor and saying that a good drink made all the fighting worthwhile. He had forgotten his nargileh as well, but above all he mourned the loss of his books. "Are you safe, my books?" he wrote. "I don't know what your fate was after we left. Were you ruined? Were you burned? Were you respectfully transferred to a library, public or private? Or did you end up at a corner grocery store, your pages wrapped around onions?"[63]*

Hala Sakakini later wrote that her father's decision to leave Katamon was influenced not just by the shells that fell on his home but also by the massacre in the Arab village of Deir Yassin, an hour's walk from the Sakakini home, in April 1948.[65] In coordination with the Haganah, an Etzel and Lechi force attacked the village, killing dozens of civilians, including women and children. The Jewish Agency condemned the action, and a senior British official described the atrocities at Deir Yassin as a "beastly Holocaust." Chief Secretary Gurney wrote that Belsen "pales" beside the bestialities of Deir Yassin.[66]

In contrast with his previous exile to Damascus, Sakakini left for Egypt in an automobile, with his two daughters; Sari had gone earlier. They drove to Cairo. Being a refugee was painful for him, but he lodged comfortably in the Victoria Hotel. "We are living in Egypt as we lived in Jerusalem," he wrote. He liked to sit at Groppi, a well-known café, and was visited in Cairo by Haj Amin al-Husseini. Sometime later his son Sari wrote to a friend from his college days in America, "Living in Cairo is rather pleasant and has its advantages. There is quite a season of opera, ballet, theater and music during the winter. But this is quite expensive entertainment and we are compensated with the many movie theaters we can go to."[67]†

A few days after the death of Abd al-Kader and the massacre at Deir Yassin, Arab forces attacked a convoy of vehicles traveling from the Jewish side of the city to Mount Scopus. Most of the passengers were Jewish civilians, employees of the Hebrew University and Hadassah hospital, including doctors and nurses. The ambush took place not far from the Antonius house. Of the 112 passengers in the convoy, 78 were killed.[68]* Anwar Nusseibeh claimed that the convoy had been taking arms and military gear to the Haganah outpost on Mount Scopus.[70]

The Zionists' plans for the new state were based on the assumption that a large Arab minority would remain.[71] But the tragedy of the Arab refugees from Palestine was a product of the Zionist principle of separation and the dream of population transfer. The tragedy was inevitable, just as the war itself was inevitable. The number of refugees reached approximately 750,000. Some planned their departure, some fled, and about half were expelled.[72] "People left their country," Sakakini wrote, "dazed and directionless, without homes or money, falling ill and dying while wandering from place to place, living in niches and caves, their clothing falling apart, leaving them naked, their food running out, leaving them hungry. The mountains grew colder and they had no one to defend them." As always, Sakakini did not shrink from self-criticism. "What breaks our hearts is that the Arab countries see and hear and do nothing," he said.[73] Luckily—and in some ways catastrophically—they had places to flee to, which weakened their resolve. Possibly, the lives of many Arabs were saved because they fled their homes, but the mass flight destroyed their national fabric for many years to come.

Anwar Nusseibeh also wrote about the refugees. First the rich left, in part because they feared being forced to finance the war, as they had in the rebellion. Jews who could afford to also left when the war broke out, Nusseibeh remarked. As the war escalated, so did the stream of emigrants. In many places, their departure was necessary. One family in Nusseibeh's own neighborhood, Sheikh Jarah, left only after their home was shelled and collapsed. The Deir Yassin massacre prompted more people to flee, and Arab leaders could not halt the process. They had no right to do so, Nusseibeh believed, since they lacked the ability to protect civilians, including women and children. Nusseibeh found no fault with the Arabs who left: no one thought the war would last so long or end as it did. Everyone believed they would be able to go home after the victory of the Arab armies, and take control of the country, he wrote.[74]

By the end of the Mandate, May 15, 1948, the Haganah, Palmach, Etzel, and Lechi forces had won a series of victories, including the conquest of Tiberias, Safed, and Haifa. By the time Ben-Gurion visited Haifa, the city had emptied of most of its Arab population. It was "a frightening and fantastic sight," Ben-

Gurion wrote of his tour of the abandoned Arab neighborhoods. “A dead city, a carrion city … without a living soul, except for stray cats.” He wondered what had happened that tens of thousands of people had left their homes “without good reason.”[75] Apparently, the Yehiya family was among those who fled, because Haganah forces entered their home and confiscated Adnan’s letters. A few days later Jaffa was conquered, and it, too, emptied of its Arab inhabitants.

The battle for Jaffa produced an absurd document, typical of the last days of British rule. Chief Secretary Gurney wrote to Ben-Gurion that if the fighting in Jaffa did not cease, the RAF would bomb Tel Aviv. Ben-Gurion did not even bother to answer; the chief secretary received his reply from a junior Jewish Agency official.[76]

7.

The war caught the Arabs unorganized and leaderless. They had not recovered from their defeat during the rebellion, and they had fewer combatants than the Jews and those they had were inadequately equipped.[77] Anwar Nusseibeh described a supply of weapons the Arab Higher Committee sent to Jerusalem from Cairo. The rifles were secondhand. Most were junk, Nusseibeh wrote. Efforts were made to repair them in Jerusalem but the rifles came from a large variety of sources—England, Germany, Italy, France, and other countries that could not be identified. There was no ammunition in Jerusalem that fit all these types of rifles. Often soldiers were left without ammunition, making their rifles useless.[78] At one point, the Arabs in Jerusalem decided to purchase weapons at their own expense and took up a collection for this purpose. Compared to the success of the Jewish appeal in New York, the results of the Arab collection were pathetic, according to Nusseibeh.[79]

Scion of one of the most respected families in Jerusalem, Nusseibeh had read law at Cambridge and served as a magistrate upon his return. He had gone on to work in the government lands department, but resigned in 1945 to join Musa Alami’s Arab office in London. In 1946 he returned and worked as a lawyer, and in May of that year was brought into the Arab Higher Committee. When the

fighting broke out he was a prominent leader in Jerusalem, whose activities included organizing local defense initiatives. He was then in his mid-thirties. At the beginning of the 1950s he composed a book of memoirs, in English, but his political involvement—he was soon to serve as a senior minister in the Jordanian government—apparently induced him to file his manuscript away, and it was never published. Nusseibeh wrote openly about the incompetence, corruption, and treason of the Arab politicians. He also took the British to task: they had weakened the Arabs and strengthened the Jews, who, Nusseibeh believed, were plotting to take over the world.

The Arab Higher Committee, he argued, had been too centralized, which hurt the local population largely because the committee was located in Cairo. The Arabs of Palestine were for all intents and purposes left to flounder alone. Attempts to organize local defense began too late. The committee's leaders, as well as the top Arab League officials, were at odds with one another and preoccupied with internal rivalries. None of them were aware of the real situation in Palestine. "Obviously, they thought of the Palestine adventure in terms of an easy walkover for the Arabs, and the only point that seemed to worry them was credit for the expected victory. Neither group was anxious to share the credit with the other and both were determined that the Palestine Arabs should at all costs be excluded." Indeed, historical research reveals that at the height of the war Arab leaders were bickering about the size of their salaries, among other things.[80] They besmirched Haj Amin al-Husseini and left him without influence. The mufti had succeeded as a symbol, Nusseibeh wrote, but failed as a leader. There was also rivalry and personal, family, and political competition between the two principal leaders of the war against the Jews, Fawzi al-Qawuqji, who fought in the north, and Abd al-Kader al-Husseini, who fought in the Jerusalem area. Almost every Arab plan was leaked to the Jews by traitors, Nusseibeh noted. The Jews were also good at psychological warfare. They deployed noisy machines to frighten the Arabs.

Nusseibeh believed that some of the commanders of the local army thought in terms of the revolt against the British in the 1930s. The rebels had often retreated to the mountains, which made sense, as the British had not sought to

take control of the country. But the Jews were fighting for complete domination, so the fighters had erred in withdrawing from the villages instead of defending them, Nusseibeh wrote. He blamed himself as well. “I underestimated the strength of my enemy and overestimated the strength of my own people,” he wrote. He had believed in the glory of the past and had ignored the difficulties of the present. His central thesis, however, was that the Palestinian Arabs could have won the country had their leaders not sabotaged the war effort and known how to cooperate. He also believed that had supreme authority of the Arab army been given to a local commander instead of officers from the Arab countries, the Palestinian tragedy might have been averted.[81]

Sometime after the war, during which he lost one of his legs, Nusseibeh considered the larger historical context of the conflict between the Jews and the Arabs. He had read *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and knew the book had been discredited as a fabrication, but he, Nusseibeh, could not determine that with certainty. In any case, it could not be disregarded, he wrote.

Nusseibeh had read Chaim Weizmann’s autobiography. Was it only a coincidence that Weizmann was of Russian origin and that communism was first adopted in Russia? Nusseibeh wondered. So many Jews were implicated in the Russian Revolution. Had Zionism and communism sprung up independently or were they two branches of the same tree? And was it just coincidence that the *Protocols* had been fabricated, so it was said, in Russia?

Either way, Nusseibeh wrote, if the *Protocols* really were a plan for the domination of the world, the methods it advocates could be successful. True, Zionism was a national movement and communism international, but perhaps the two were part of a single plan, that of the elders of Zion. Thus there was no room for compromise between Arab nationalism and Zionism. Like Nazism, Nusseibeh wrote, Zionism is an aggressive, dynamic movement. However much the Arabs might try to appease it, they will always fail.[82] Like the pro-Nazi sentiments that Khalil al-Sakakini recorded in his diary, and along with some other antisemitic remarks in Nusseibeh’s book, his theories document the vast gulf separating the two national movements.*

8.

The British were supposed to bear responsibility for preserving law and order until midnight, May 14, 1948; on several occasions they defended Jewish settlements and neighborhoods, among them the Jewish Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem.[84] They did not, however, attempt to prevent the advance of the Haganah or the flight and expulsion of the Arabs; in some cases they even helped the Arabs leave their homes. At the same time, they coordinated the transfer of many aspects of government with the Jewish Agency. This effort at a smooth handover was Britain's final contribution to the Jewish national home.

Evacuating the army and dismantling the administration were both as carefully planned as a military operation, and were carried out in stages.[85] Sometime before the U.N.'s partition vote Ben-Gurion asked Chief Secretary Gurney to transfer a series of services, such as the telephone exchanges and Jerusalem's water supply, to the Jewish Agency. The agency had equipped itself with a precise list of thirty-seven government departments, divided them into groups according to their importance—from the auditor general and the radio station to the statistics, surveys, and urban planning offices—and constructed a detailed system for taking control. The agency believed the best policy would be to continue employing the existing officials.[86]

Gurney replied to Ben-Gurion that Britain could not set up a state for the Jews. He was very angry, according to Ben-Gurion, who declared, with all the munificence of the victor, that the Jewish Agency was interested not only in an "honorable" parting of the ways but also in a "cordial" one. The Jews wanted to maintain friendly relations with the British, he insisted; perhaps this is not important for you, he told Gurney, but for us it is.[87]

The Jewish Agency then considered two scenarios: either the British would transfer control in an orderly way to ensure continuity, or they would leave in sudden panic, creating chaos in their wake. In the latter case there would be a Jewish-Arab race to grab control, with the prize going to the swiftest. The Jews' working assumption was that the British would choose the second option. One of the agency's intelligence operatives stated that clearly the British would do

everything to keep the Zionists from taking over; he predicted a scorched earth policy.[88]

The British were thinking in other terms. Their concern was to notify government employees of their dismissal and guarantee that they would receive an advance on their continued employment elsewhere, and to organize the shipment of furniture and other equipment to England. Making arrangements for the widows' and orphans' pension fund was at the top of their list of sixty-two tasks, set down in a fourteen-page document.[89]

They could, of course, have left without giving any thought to what would happen after—but their bureaucracy was too dear to them. Edward Keith-Roach wrote, "High commissioners come and high commissioners go. To them Palestine is an incident in their official careers; to me and other officials here it is our lives."[90] Having been in the country for twenty-five years, having invested considerable work in building the administration, they could not watch its demolition without pain and distress, James Pollock wrote. Pollock and others like him wanted the state administration to continue to function properly, and so they did in fact make a great effort to transfer it to the Jews. Some functions were handed over to the municipalities, others to the Jewish Agency.[91] In addition, the evacuation plan, from south to north, left responsibility for Jewish population centers in British hands almost to the very last minute, thus impeding Arab war plans.[92]

It was not sympathy that motivated the British to perform this service for the Zionist movement—it was their mentality as rulers. The day after they left someone would have to remain in charge of the courts and the veterinary service and the antiquities department and the train schedule.[93] How the administration would have acted had the Arabs also had a government-in-waiting remains an open question.

9.

Chief Secretary Gurney felt as if he were sitting on a razor's edge. In the twilight days of the Mandate, he was in a rather lunatic mood, making nonsensical

remarks on the situation in his diary. He cabled Isaiah 37:32 to the Colonial Office in London: “For out of Jerusalem shall a remnant go out, and they that escape out of Mount Zion: the zeal of the Lord of hosts shall do this.”[94] In the midst of the general collapse of order and murderous violence raging through the city, administration officials held tightly to their work routines; the situations that resulted were often absurd. Bernard De Bunsen, director of the education department, found himself conducting a heroic operation to receive the government high school examination papers. They were being held at the home of Juda Leib Bloom, an official in the education department, who lived in the Rehavia neighborhood. At that point, getting around the city was no longer easy; barbed-wire fences sectioned off different areas, and permits were required to move from one to the other. De Bunsen managed to get from his office on Princess Mary Street as far as Gaza Street in Rehavia, near where Bloom lived. The two men met at a sandbag-and-barbed-wire barrier and soldiers helped Bloom pass the forms from one side to the other.[95]

This reverence for exams was doubly absurd because, after thirty years of ruling Palestine, the British had still not instituted compulsory school attendance. Education standards differed for city and village children and for boys and girls, and only three out of every ten Arabs went to school. The other seven, mostly in the villages, grew up illiterate.[96] They were a lost generation. The result of this loss for the Arab community was catastrophic. A nationwide system of education would have forged national cohesion. But the war of 1948 found the Arabs rent by regional, social, and economic divisions, with profound differences between city dwellers and villagers.[97] The Hebrew education system, by contrast, formed the Jews into a national community, prepared them for their war of independence, and led them to victory. Had Britain limited its support for Zionism to nothing other than perpetuating Arab illiteracy, His Majesty’s Government could still claim to have kept the promise enshrined in the Balfour Declaration.*

The British had come with good intentions and had set the country on a course to the twentieth century, Chief Secretary Gurney claimed. Palestine had become rich. It had first-class roads and water supplies, schools, hospitals, and

electric power. There were agricultural research stations, ports, and railways. There was a judicial system unique in the Middle East for its freedom from corruption. “In spite of mistakes we have done an extremely good job,” said one member of Parliament. High Commissioner Cunningham had only to look out his window to see what had been accomplished in Jerusalem in the last twenty-five years. He regretted, however, that out of a yearly budget of £24 million he had had to spend £8 million on security, and he never stopped thinking about what might have been done with this money for the betterment of the country. Chief Secretary Gurney believed that the problems in Palestine were more fundamental. From the outset, the British edifice had been built on sand. “I thought today,” he wrote, “if Palestine has to be written on my heart, must it be written in Arabic *and* Hebrew?”[99]

James Pollock, now stationed in Haifa, weighed a crucial decision—whether to send his china and silver in a separate shipment or have them packed together with the furniture. During the thirty years since his arrival in Jerusalem in the wake of Allenby’s army, he had spent a short time in Nigeria, but had been back in Palestine for some time. As always, he wrote home every day. His wife had left a few months previously, with the rest of the civilians, and Pollock made her party to his dilemma. If he sent the silver and china separately, he was liable to incur greater costs, because the rest of their belongings, including the furniture, were going at government expense.

He wrote to his wife about a ceremony to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the British conquest. Everyone was there, Pollock related, in their colorful robes and elaborate headgear, just like the first ceremony. He added details about the gang warfare going on in the city.

“I think when we go there will be an almighty cheer,” Pollock noted. He believed the British would be leaving on May 1, a day with a history of disturbances. And this year May 1 happened to fall on a Saturday; it was also the day of the holy fire ceremony at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Nebi Musa procession. “It does not matter as we will not be responsible,” he wrote with great relief. “Well,” he concluded after the U.N. voted for partition, “the Jews have won.… What else is there to write about?”[100]

From time to time, he provided news of the terrorist campaign as well, telling his wife that this person had been killed and that one wounded, the Rex cinema had been set ablaze, the city was under curfew. He told her about a golf game in Jerusalem, British civilians versus the army, with gunfire from Kibbutz Ramat Rachel in the background. One of the soldiers rode a horse over to see what was going on. He returned, on foot, very frightened, muttering only, “Isobel has been shot.” With some effort, the players were able to make out that he meant his horse.

On another occasion in Jerusalem a shock wave from a huge explosion that shook Ben-Yehuda Street nearly threw Pollock out of bed. Ten people were killed. “The Jews firmly believe it was done by British police,” Pollock wrote to his wife. He did not rule out the possibility, merely noting that the event had overshadowed the news that Palestine had been removed from the bloc of countries whose currencies were linked to sterling. The *Palestine Post* editorial office had been attacked a few days previously, and the Jewish Agency building was a target some weeks later—all three occurrences could have been British acts of retaliation, but they could just as well have been carried out by Arabs or even by Jews seeking to create provocation; Jewish agents sometimes operated in British uniform.[101]*

Absurdities abounded. One policeman, D. Drakeford, asked the Jewish Agency to write him a letter of recommendation, pointing out that during the previous seven years he had worked “in close cooperation” with the agency. He did not know what he would do next—perhaps move to New Zealand or South Africa. The Jewish Agency gave him the letter of recommendation and wished him all the best. A British soldier wrote to Golda Meyerson that he had decided to remain in Palestine and become a farmer. He was 100 percent pro-Jewish, he said; his duty as a believing Christian demanded nothing less. One day Palestine would be all Jewish, because that is what the Bible says and he believed in the Bible, he wrote.[103]

Michael Bryant also wanted to tie his fate to Palestine. Like General Barker, the director of the Jerusalem electric company seems to have shaped his political views under the influence of his love. Bryant had settled in Jerusalem in 1936,

with his wife and son, when he was twenty-five. During his twelve years at the electric company, he had become well-assimilated in local society, and when he was accused of spying for the Arabs, he wondered why. After all, he had sympathy for the Jews and was known to both the Haganah and the Jewish Agency.

In a diary that came into the hands of Lotte Geiger, Bryant documented his efforts to ensure a steady supply of electricity to Jerusalem under siege, no easy task. His fuel reserves began to diminish, and he had no way of replacing them. The electricity company also began to run out of money because Jerusalem's residents had stopped paying their bills. In addition, Bryant worried about the security of the company's facilities and the safety of its workers, most of whom were Arabs. On May 12, he summed up a meeting with Dov Yosef, appointed by the Jewish Agency as governor of the city's western sector and an old friend of Bryant's. To save electricity, Bryant suggested immediately instituting "double summer time," but Yosef, a sour-faced attorney, dressed, as always, in a pin-striped suit, said that he could not move the hands of the clock because the Jewish Agency would be accused of trying to advance the end of the Mandate by two hours.

On May 13 Bryant searched for a country or organization that would allow him to fly its flag above the electric company's facilities to symbolize its neutral status in service of the public. The representative of the International Red Cross immediately acceded, and then tried to put the Red Cross in charge of the whole city. Both the Jewish Agency and the Arab Higher Committee rejected the idea. So Bryant went to the U.N., which gave him permission to fly the international organization's flag but recommended against it. The U.N. flag was blue and white, and the Arabs were liable to think that it was Israeli. Bryant did not want to fly the Union Jack because he knew that both Jews and Arabs detested it. In the end, several foreign consuls in Jerusalem gave permission for Bryant to fly their flags together. Once again, thirty years after the British conquest, the siege of Jerusalem was also the hour of the consuls.[104]*

The Haganah held a farewell dinner for the last of the British officials; the atmosphere was gloomy.[106] The government's offices were already empty; the

police had locked up the last of its gear, valued at £1 million, in a warehouse and wanted to hand the keys over to the U.N. The U.N. refused to accept them. So on his last evening Chief Secretary Gurney went to U.N. headquarters and placed the keys on the steps. He didn't sleep that night; gunfire began at midnight and continued, as usual, until 4:00 A.M.; he thought the fighting foolish.

At 7:15 A.M., Gurney left the King David Hotel with seventeen members of his staff. One of them lowered the flag on the roof of the damaged hotel and raised the Red Cross flag in its place. The BBC correspondent was there, as were many other journalists and photographers. Then Gurney and his staff left in a convoy of two civilian vehicles, a bus, and four armored police cars. Tanks were stationed at Allenby Square and all along the way to nearby Kalandia airport. A few people were out on the streets; some of them waved good-bye.

At Government House, the high commissioner surveyed his last honor guard; with the raising of the Red Cross flag he left also, a few minutes after 8:00 A.M. In Kalandia he bade farewell to the rest of his people and left for Haifa, where he attended a few other parting ceremonies; he was to be at sea by midnight.[107] Bernard De Bunsen was in another convoy that departed the country from the airport at Lydda. The passengers boarded their plane and were about to take off when someone noticed the Union Jack still flying over the airport building. One of them ran over to fetch the flag. "We were quite worn out," De Bunsen wrote, "and not even the eggs and bacon at 4:00 A.M. in Malta could rouse us until we stumbled half-awake into England."[108]

That is the end of the story, although there is a postscript, one that is somewhat absurd. On Friday, May 14, 1948, James Pollock wrote in his diary, "A very sad day, the Jews … have proclaimed their independent state."[109] He was to remain in Palestine for a while longer, along with a British general named MacMillan. For several weeks after David Ben-Gurion read the Jews' declaration of independence, the British continued to control a small enclave around the Haifa port to ensure the evacuation of their equipment and final personnel. In his papers, Pollock, who managed the enclave, sounds as if he were setting up a little country of his own. He divided his officials into

departments: one for finance, one for justice, one each for transport and ports, in the plural, as if he were planning a second. His staff included two special advisers, for Arab and Jewish affairs. General MacMillan issued a historic statement declaring the enclave's jurisdiction, as if he were General Allenby himself.[110]*

Pollock's own title was "chief civil adviser." He and his men helped the last of Haifa's Arabs leave the city, but spent most of their time directing the dissolution of the administration and the sale and packing of equipment. A report summing up his activity indicates that the operation was carried out well and without mishaps. Pollock revealed the calamities he suffered only to his diary: at the very last minute someone managed to make off with three Cromwell tanks that were parked at the Ramat David airfield. One was found abandoned, but two disappeared. "A real flap," Pollock noted. He also had to bear one final ignominy: in honor of the departure of the army commander, a battleship fired a fifteen-gun salute, followed by another ship firing an additional, superfluous round. "The final salute was a mistake," Pollock noted. He hated slips like that. With great relief, he finally cabled his wife that he was looking at "a perfect sea, with Palestine fading into a haze behind us."[112]

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The war for Palestine went on at full force. One day, in the midst of the battle at Kibbutz Ramot Naftali, a small airplane appeared in the sky. A woman sat beside the pilot: Lorna Wingate, the widow of Orde, "the friend." She circled for a time above the Hebrew boys fighting for their lives and their homeland, and then, to raise their spirits, she tossed down her husband's Hebrew Bible. Arthur Koestler loved the story and included it in his book about Israel's independence, in a chapter called "David and Goliath." Perhaps the story is nothing but wishful thinking; there are those who say Mrs. Wingate was persuaded at the last minute to forgo her aerial adventure.[113] But among the dreams and illusions, the fictions and myths, this story, too, has its place.