With A Little Help From Our Friends

View PDF



Henry Rieser, a member of our Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, gave a talk at his synagogue in connection with Yom haZikaron and Yom haAtsmaut. He reflects on the role of Americans in Israel's war of independence in 1948.

My remarks are dedicated to my paternal cousin, Shlomo Guttman and to my wife’s paternal uncle, David Teitlebaum, who both fell in Milchemet HaShichrur. May their memories be for a blessing.

I would also like to thank Dr Jeffrey Gurock, professor of American-Jewish history at YU for his leads and encouragement in my research.

This presentation will focus on two Americans, who each had a significant role in the establishment of the State of Israel. David (Mickey) Marcus served as a military advisor to David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister. He was given the title of aluf, the first Jewish general since Yehoshua ben Nun. Charles (Charlie) Winters, a Protestant, who sold two cargo planes to Palestinians, i.e. Israeli agents and flew one of them from the U.S. to Czechoslovakia, where they were turned into fighter planes before flying on to Palestine. His activities in helping the fledgling state first received wide notoriety when President George W Bush issued a posthumous pardon in his name. Without the assistance of Marcus and Winters, along with many, many other Americans, it is doubtful that Israel would have emerged victorious from its War of Independence

I remember always being interested in the subject of how Americans, both Jewish and others assisted Israel in its War of Independence. As a teenager and in later years, I would see references to gun smuggling operations associated with the gangster, Meyer Lansky and how Paul O’Dwyer, a lawyer, who would become the president of the NYC Council, would defend some of those who had been arrested for such activities. In addition, there was MACHAL (mitnadvei chutz la’aretz or

volunteers from abroad), for which approximately 5,000 volunteers from abroad came to help defend the future Jewish state.

However, at the time I never came across any comprehensive account of the activities of the above. It was only when I began to research this area that I found out why. What was being done in the case of sending war material was outright illegal under U.S. Federal law at the time and what American MACHAL volunteers had to consider was the potential loss of U.S. citizenship. This however, did not deter the approximately 1,500 U.S, volunteers, many of whom were WWII vets who did go to fight and played a crucial role in Israel's winning the war.

David Marcus was born on New York's Lower East Side in 1902 and was accepted at West Point in 1920, graduating four years later. He left service in 1927, earning a law degree and working in the U.S. Attorney General's office and later under NY's Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia in the department of corrections, where he was appointed to Commissioner of Corrections in 1940. However, with the outbreak of WWII, Marcus re-enlisted in the army as a lieutenant colonel, with duties as a division judge advocate. Later he was commandant of the army's ranger school in Hawaii. Marcus parachuted into Normandy, France on D-Day, June 6, 1944, which was the major allied offensive of the war, and essentially marked the beginning of the end of the Third Reich. In 1947, Marcus left service with the rank of colonel, having been awarded a number of U.S. and British decorations.

Shortly after November 29, 1947, when the United Nations voted to partition Palestine, dividing it into Arab and Jewish states, the Haganah sent Shlomo Shamir to recruit high-ranking U.S military officers and technical experts in order to create a modern army for what would become the State of Israel. Shamir contacted Marcus, who began to look for such individuals. To his chagrin, he found none were willing to go, citing the need for assurances that their military status, citizenship or careers would not suffer as a result. This led Marcus to conclude, 'I may not be the best man for the job, but I'm the only one willing to go.'

The Haganah was in no way prepared to fight the type of war it would be confronted with once Israeli statehood was declared. Aside from lacking sufficient arms for its troops, it also did not possess the organizational structure required to be successful in such an endeavor. Most of its leadership was composed of veterans of the Jewish Brigade, who did not have any training in large-scale operations. Therefore, before going to Palestine, Marcus memorized information from U.S. Army training manuals. While this material was not classified, it would not pass the scrutiny of British customs when he arrived at Lod. In addition, to

avoid causing a diplomatic flap between the U.S. and its British ally, Marcus travelled incognito, under the alias of Michael Stone.

Unfortunately, David Marcus was killed by ‘friendly fire’, when he did not respond to a sentry, who addressed him in Ivrit, asking for the password. Aluf Marcus’ remains were returned to the United States and interred in the cemetery at West Point. The only American soldier buried at the military academy who died while in defense of another country.

On December 23, 2008, The New York Times ran the following headline: ‘Jailed for Aiding Israel, but Pardoned by Bush’. The article went on to describe the circumstances under which the 43d President of the United States took this step. What made this action unique is that it is only the second time that a presidential pardon has been issued posthumously. The pardon was issued on behalf of Charlie Winters, who was involved with the smuggling of three B-17 bombers to Palestine on behalf of the Haganah. At the time, this was in violation of the United States Neutrality Act along with an embargo on weapons to what was to become the Jewish state.

At this point, I’d like to give some background information that will help you understand what was going on in this country, right after WWII. The United States had been at war for four years and had converted its industrial complex to the making of materials for that purpose. Now with the end of hostilities, all these manufacturing facilities needed to be switched back for peacetime use. In addition, companies had huge inventories of war goods that they had no use for and began selling them at greatly reduced prices to anyone who could show the requisite paperwork and pay for them.
Realizing that, agents from Palestine (remember this is before the State of Israel came into being) came to the U.S. and recruited American Jews to assist them in this endeavor along with a number of other operations in preparation for what everyone knew would be a war, once the Jewish state was declared.

Charles (Charlie) Winters was born in Brookline, MA on February 10, 1923. He was the son of Scotch-Canadian and Irish parents, and at a young age contracted polio, which left him with a limp. This impediment prevented his performing military service and instead he worked for the government as a purchasing agent.

After the war, Winters went into the produce export business, buying two decommissioned B-17 bombers, which were converted to cargo planes and planned to use them in transporting fruits around the Caribbean. At that time he was living in Miami, FL. This plan was not working as he had hoped, so when his

friend of his, Al Schwimmer, who was a flight engineer for TWA and also assisting the Haganah in obtaining war planes, asked Winters if he would be willing to sell the planes and ‘consider guiding them to somewhere in Europe’, Winters told Schwimmer that he would think it over.

In the end not only did Winters sell the planes to Schwimmer, he also flew one of them, with another pilot in the second plane Taking off from Miami, with a third B-17 that had been purchased in Oklahoma, the aircraft refueled in Puerto Rico, as if completing a normal shipping route and headed for Palestine by way of the Azores and Czechoslovakia. The Czech government was perfectly willing to provide landing facilities along with armaments for a price. These three planes, which were retrofitted to warplanes, constituted the only heavy bombers that the Israeli Air Force had during the war, but were reportedly essential in turning the tide of the war in Israel’s favor. In his diary on July 16, 1948, David Ben-Gurion, the Israeli Prime Minister noted their arrival in Israel and that they had already been used on several bombing runs in Egypt. They became the 69th Squadron Bombing Group of the Israeli Air Force, known as ‘the hammers’.

For his part in this enterprise, Charlie Winters, along with Al Schwimmer and several others were arrested, tried and convicted in U.S. Federal Court in Miami in January, 1949. While his co-defendants were not given prison sentences, on February 4, 1949, Winters was sentenced to 36 months in a federal penitentiary along with having to pay a $2,500 fine. This was due to his being found in violation on two counts of Title 18, section 88 and Title 22, section 452 of the U.S. Code. These citations deal with ‘conspiracy to export implementations of war’. Winters ended up serving 18 months of his sentence before being released. As a result of his sentence, he became the only American to go to prison for helping Israel!

When I originally began the research for this presentation, I contacted the federal archives in Atlanta, GA to see if they had a transcript of Charlie Winters’ trial. Unfortunately, they did not. However, they were able to supply me with court documents related to the trial, which gave me a sense of what went on in the courtroom. For example, initially Winters pleaded ‘not guilty’ to the charges against him. Then for some reason he changed his plea to ‘guilty’. While I didn’t see anything to explain this change, maybe some kind of deal was in the works. If that was the case, apparently it didn’t work out as subsequently Winters’ tried to change his plea back to not ‘guilty’, but the judge would not allow it.

Another bit of information that I received from these same papers and other sources is that just prior to Winters’ and his co-defendants being put on trial,

there was a similar case in California, in which the defendants, although found guilty, did not do any jail time, having to pay a fine of $10,000 each. ‘unnamed friends of Israel’ provided the money for this. Perhaps these individuals also paid Winters’ fine as I was not able to find any information on this. After being released, Winters established a small export business in Miami.

At the time of his death on October 30, 1984,Winters had told his current wife, Joan about this incident. His two children from this marriage, Lisa and James along with Charles Todd and Charles Jr. from a prior one were totally unaware of their father’s activities in support of Israel. However, there were clues. According to his son, James, as a teenager his father refused to let him go hunting with his friends. This was because as a result of his criminal record, the senior Winters was not allowed to purchase weapons or keep them at home. The real tip off came at Winters’ funeral, when James found the setting decorated with blue and white flowers, Israel’s national colors along with Israeli officials in attendance. Afterwards, Israel flew Joan Winters to their country, where some of his ashes were interred at the Templars Cemetery in Jerusalem and the remainder spread over Har Tavor, located in Emek Yazreal, near Haifa.

Bibliography

Encyclopedia Judaica, vol. 11, pgs 722-3 and 945-6, Keter Publishing House, Jerusalem Ltd. 1972.

“Jailed for Aiding Israel in ’48, But Pardoned by Bush in ’08”, New York Times, December 24, 2008, pg. 1.

Medoff, Rafael. Militant Zionism in America: The Rise and Impact of the Jabotinsky Movement in the United States, 1926-1948. The University of Alabama Press, 2002.

Newspaper clippings, undated; MACHAL[Mitnadvei Hutz LaAretz] and Aliyah Bet Records; I-501; 16; 39; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.

Porath, Zipporah, Col. David (Mickey) Marcus, ‘A Soldier for All Humanity’. American Veterans of Israel Legacy Corp. 2010.

Slater, Leonard, The Pledge. Simon and Schuster: NY, 1970.

Weiss, Jeffrey and Weiss, Craig, I Am My Brother’s Keeper. Schiffer Military History, Atglen, PA, 1998.

Wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Winters