

THE MYSTERIOUS CASE OF THE HAGANAH POSTERS

THE JEWISH NANCY DREW SEARCHES FOR INFORMATION ABOUT 60-YEAR-OLD ISRAELI POSTERS THAT COME INTO HER POSSESSION.

by MOLLY ABRAMOWITZ

Being a Jewish history detective is a job description that has been given to me in recent years; my Israeli daughter Esther calls me the Jewish Nancy Drew. This all started when I was working on the St. Louis Project for the United States Holocaust Museum, tracking down passengers from that ship's sad 1939 journey [see winter 2003-2004 issue of this magazine]. But truth be told, I have always been involved with projects that require ferreting out information, whether it be finding documents and people or critically reading a book for review.

The project at hand started innocently enough several years ago when my aerobics classmate, Mary Popkin, invited our exercise group to her house for punch and cookies. Wandering around her lovely home and admiring the paintings and furnishings, I entered a hallway connecting the front room to the dining room. On the walls were five framed posters: Three were from the Haganah and two were from the Yishuv (the Jewish community in pre-state Israel). I was wowed.

It turned out that Mary's husband, Roy Popkin, who is Jewish, is the son



Photos by Stanley Abramowitz

of Zelda Popkin, an early Jewish American writer of note. Zelda's sister, Helen Rossi, lived in Palestine and was a reporter for *The Palestine Post*, which later became *The Jerusalem Post*. Rossi was the editor of the women's section for

many years. Her life at the time became a thinly veiled plot for Zelda Popkin's novel *Quiet Street* published in 1951. The heroic sacrifices, the well-meaning mistakes, and the suspicions of a people living through the grueling 1948 siege of Jerusalem are seen in a dramatic portrayal of ordinary people in times of deep unrest. *Quiet Street* was the first American novel about the Israeli War of Independence that featured women. Told from a mother's perspective, it shows the devotion and wrenching cost required to make an ancient dream of a new state into a modern reality. I spoke with Helen Rossi's son, Dan Kousevitzky, who is the model for the young boy in the story. He still lives in Jerusalem and was eight years old at the time. He remembers his Aunt Zelda living for a time period in his family home in Rehavia.

In 1947, Helen asked Zelda, to bring ink and paper to Palestine for posters that were to be made and printed prior to the battle of the Haganah against the Arabs. The entire operation was an underground activity; the Haganah was an illegal fighting force during the time of the British rule. Zelda surreptitiously brought the mate-

rials to Palestine by ship, and the posters were made. When she returned, she brought several posters, which her son Roy inherited. I was fascinated when Roy told me this story during the punch and cookies party.

Fast forward to last spring when I saw a for-sale sign on the Popkin house. I had long since lost contact with them, but decided to call. The Popkins told me they were moving to a retirement community, and I offered to purchase the posters and bring them to Jerusalem where they had been made. The Popkins

were very taken with this idea. Since we last saw them, my husband and I had purchased an apartment in Jerusalem where we live a third of the year. The deal was finalized, and we became the proud owners of a distinct piece of Zionist history. I questioned Roy further about his mother's involvement in the whole poster operation, but he said she didn't talk about it; it always remained a project under wraps.



Lithographer A. L. Monsohn, left, whose grandson printed the posters, and workers in the print shop he founded in Jerusalem, below.



The Posters

These posters and others made at the time played a pivotal role in the Jewish struggle for independence. The population of the country was quite diverse. The Jews in Jerusalem were sabras (native Israelis), immigrants from Arab countries and recent arrivals from war-torn Europe, among others. How was the provisional government to get them galvanized and focused on a cause? After all, life was hard and poverty was rampant, which made earning a living and concern for family matters of paramount importance.

Idealism for the creation of a state was a difficult concept for most people to comprehend. The Haganah posters were propaganda posters, closely resembling those of other nationalistic causes that sent out rallying cries, such as Spanish Civil War, Nazi and World War II posters.

When the posters appeared all over the city on billboards, sides of buildings, in office buildings and government institutions, they were a wakeup call to action and appropriate behavior. The images are all rather descriptive; they tell a visual story that was necessary for the

many people who couldn't read the Hebrew message. Many of the German Jews living in Palestine since the 1930s had not learned Hebrew — they spoke German; those from Eastern Europe spoke Yiddish; Eastern Jews and local Arabs spoke Arabic.

The three Haganah posters all have the *semel*, or seal, of the Haganah, which was created by Itamar David.



The Haganah poster, “It All Depends on You,” was used as a recruitment poster to raise Jewish morale. It bears a striking resemblance to the American World War II poster “Uncle Sam Wants You.” The Haganah was conducting recruitment and fund-raising drives at this time, and they needed motivational tools to spur on their cause to strengthen the Jewish community.

The poster with the telephone, “Pay attention; the enemy is listening,” is a message about security and defense. It was used for field security purposes as were the two charming caricature posters. One shows two women whispering. They are dressed in the kind of clothing that would be familiar to women even if they

couldn’t read the message that says, “Don’t engage in spreading rumors.” The other caricature, that of a man running, indicates a need to stay levelheaded or to keep your cool.

“Save Water” was a desperate reminder that water was very scarce, and in the upcoming battles, it would become a strategic resource. When this poster was removed from its frame, writing was discovered on the back. The Palmach symbol was displayed with the beautifully calligraphed verse in Hebrew from Jeremiah 49:28: “Damascus has grown weak, / She has turned around to flee; / Trembling has seized her, / Pain and anguish have taken hold of her, / Like a woman in childbirth.”

Those I queried about this said that because paper was scarce at this time, Itamar David possibly made a quick *semel* and verse design, for use by the Palmach, on the back of his Haganah poster.

Many old-timers in Jerusalem whom I spoke with especially remember the save water poster from their childhood. Its relevance to current water shortages in Jerusalem makes the poster more meaningful. The slogans of other posters are surely not outmoded. Israelis living in an explosive environment need to be vigilant, to heed warnings not to tell rumors, to be circumspect in their dealings, and to keep their composure.

— Molly Abramowitz



Along with the posters owned by the writer and explained in the text is one from the same era (exhibited at the Old Yishuv Court Museum in Jerusalem), depicting people on a balcony watching a missile fall. It reads, “Curiosity — Danger to Life.”

Once we got the posters home, we realized that they were in need of restoration and that we didn't know their provenance — and we were unsure of the best way to get them to Israel. After much research, we stripped the posters from their frames. Noting how fragile they were, we placed them between foam sheets for transport. Once in Jerusalem, we contacted the art dealer Jacques Soussana from whom we had purchased much of the art in our apartment. He directed us to Leah Ofer, a retired paper restorer from the Israel Museum. She worked her magic on the posters — repairing some tears, cleaning and smoothing out the paper — and then they were reframed at the Soussana gallery. Needless to say, we were thrilled with the transformation of tired looking posters into fine examples of early Israeli graphic art.

I then began my detective work. I naïvely thought that because there are many archives, libraries and historic institutions in Israel, it wouldn't be too difficult to find the artists and the printer. How wrong I was! The Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, the National Library of the Hebrew University and the Haganah Museum, among other institutions, have archives with much graphic art that has attribution: posters about the land from the Jewish National Fund (the Keren Hayesod); industrial and agricultural posters such as the Jaffa oranges posters, cigarette ad posters and laundry detergent posters commissioned by commercial sponsors. Where were the propaganda posters and political broadsides I was looking for? There were Jewish Brigade, British Army, Palmach and IDF posters, all with attribution. The Haganah posters I found (they did appear in various catalogued archives) all said artist unknown, printer unknown.

As is the case with negative information, you learn a lot. The underground nature of the Haganah activities must have precluded identifying the artist and printer. When I spoke to Israelis who know the time period well, they said the fervor of the Haganah was so great that no one involved needed recognition; they were contributing to the cause. Nevertheless, someone *did* create these posters. I

was determined to find out who.

My next activity was to show photos of the posters wherever I went, asking for help. A friend said his *mach-ateniste's* (son-in-law's mother's) father was a printer and worked at that time, and there were other small signs of recognition. Finally, I was directed to two collectors of vintage posters. One was David Tartakover, a well-known Israeli graphic artist himself, with an uncanny knowledge of vintage posters. He told me they were made in Jerusalem in the early part of 1948, before the state was established. The artwork, he said, was done by Itamar David who created the David font, which is used in Israel today. He also created the *semel*, or symbol, of the Haganah that appears on the three Haganah posters. The two posters of the Yishuv were probably done by the artist Yossi Stern. The caricature figures were typical of the art coming out of the Bezalel art school at the time Stern was a graduate. I was excited about the information — but not for long.

I queried the other poster expert and was given an entirely different story. He said the posters were made in Tel Aviv by other artists. I was in a quandary now: Was I in possession of TMI (too much information)? Was one expert right and the other unequivocally wrong? Could they both be mistaken? What to do?

A short while later, my daughter brought over a booklet promoting events in Jerusalem. While flipping through it, I spotted an ad for an exhibition of lithography by A. L. Monsohn from 1892 to 1992 at the Old Yishuv Court Museum in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City at 6 Ohr Chaim Street. My husband and I scooted over there and found a wonderful exhibit with examples of printing from such items as candy wrappers, official documents and posters.

I spoke with Galia Gavish, the director and curator of the museum, which is a gem of architectural design, history and artifacts about the Yishuv in Jerusalem. When I showed her the photographs of my posters, she exclaimed, "They were printed by Monsohn and made by Itamar David, and the two Yishuv posters were made by Yossi Stern." I was as delighted to get this confirma-

tion about the artists and the printer as she was to have come upon the posters themselves. Gavish did not have them in the exhibit because the grandson of Monsohn, Shimon Baramatz, who continued on in the third generation of the business, never had copies of them. (The exhibit on display at the museum is on loan from Baramatz's personal collection.) Gavish wanted to display the posters in the exhibit, which was opening in two days. I was unwilling to part with them, so she accepted digital photos of the posters, which she enlarged and framed — and they became part of the exhibit.

Shimon Baramatz, 87, was following the preparations keenly, though he was very ill in a hospice. When Gavish brought the pictures to him, he was ecstatic. He told her that he had been serving in the Haganah in 1948, when he was called back to his shop to print these posters. They were done on the company's newly purchased offset machine, rather than by lithograph, which only he knew how to operate. He hadn't seen the posters since. Returning to the museum a few days later to get a copy of the catalog, I saw that all the copies of the posters were hung on the wall that leads to the room where artifacts of the War of Independence in Jerusalem are exhibited.

Gavish greeted us with "You did a mitzvah, you did a mitzvah!" I registered much surprise. She went on to say that after she had the conversation with Baramatz, he did not speak again and then died. I had given him back a part of his life that had been missing, she stated.

I never dreamed when I first saw the posters in Roy and Mary Popkin's house that such an exciting journey of discovery would be ahead of me. As Gavish and I sat in her office drinking tea, we mused on how life is truly stranger than fiction — and how lucky I am to have five vintage posters and a compelling story to go with them.

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