

# REPRESSIVE MEASURES

Jonathan Fishburn reads the newspapers produced by Irgun fighters held in British detention camps in Africa

Soon after Menachem Begin assumed leadership of the Irgun Tz'vai L'Umi – also known by its Hebrew acronym, Etzel – in December 1943, its relationship with the British Mandate authorities took a turn for the worse. Roused by the horrifying news of the mass extermination of European Jews, the Irgun attacked and blew up offices, military installations and police stations. The British intensified repressive measures to maintain control in Palestine and, in October 1944, deported 251 members of the Irgun to three detention camps in Asmara (Eritrea), Kenya and Sudan. During the next four years, they continued to deport people suspected of terrorist affiliations, a total of 439 by the end of the Mandate. This was not an episode to make the front pages; much of what we know about it can only be found in what the prisoners themselves wrote.

Although they were interned with few resources, each camp managed to produce an almost-daily newspaper, written in Hebrew, filled with international news and current events in Palestine. The papers also acted as a sort of journal of daily life in each camp, chronicling the deaths of family members, announcing sports activities for the week and conveying Rabbi Kahane's holiday blessings on Passover and Rosh Hashanah. This article offers a brief introduction to the nature and contents of these papers. Very few of each issue were printed, and extant copies are rare. Many of those in my possession are extremely fragile, with original handwritten emendations.

## *BeGalut Sudan*

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The internment camp at Carthage was located in the heart of the Sudan desert – drinking water was transported in scant quantities by car from dozens of kilometers away. A controversy erupted in November 1944 when the authorities cancelled the supply of kosher meat, which they had been purchasing from the indigenous Jewish community in Asmara, and instead offered canned non-kosher meat from British army rations. The internees launched a protest against this change, which offended the religious and secular alike.

Echoes of the protest reached Palestine, and the chief rabbinate, with the aid of the Jewish Agency, appealed to the High Commissioner to send a rabbi and a ritual slaughterer to the camp.

The title of the *BeGalut Sudan* (In the Exile of Sudan) is coloured in ink, and a sun and mountains are sketched in pencil in the background. On the upper left-hand side, the number of days that they have been in exile is recorded in Hebrew letters with the quotation 'If I forget Jerusalem, let my right hand lose its cunning.' On 9 March 1945, the paper reported that Radio Germany had announced that the Russians were 50 kilometers from Berlin and that the Red Army was getting closer to Danzig. On 24 May 1945, a 15-page supplement on the life and work of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who died in 1940, was included. Another issue includes a poignant 'Mazal Tov' advertisement announcing the birth of a baby to one of the internees – presumably his wife was pregnant when he was deported from Palestine and he didn't see his child until 1948, when internees were brought back to the newly established State of Israel.

## *BeGalut Asmara*

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Unlike the others, this was handwritten, so one can see that different people produced it at different times. Due to the scarcity of paper, it was written on the back of Italian share certificates (left over from when Eritrea was under Italian colonial rule). On the upper left-hand corner, it counts the year of exile and provides the Hebrew and English date. In February 1946, a special one-page supplement announced that Rabbi Herzog, Chief Rabbi of Palestine, had arrived in Cairo and was on his way to Eritrea to visit the camp. Two of the most interesting issues were written in May 1946: one features a review of how British newspapers reported on the violence in Palestine, citing the *Daily Telegraph*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Daily Mail* and *Yorkshire Post*; the other reports on the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry that unanimously declared its opposition to the White Paper of 1939 and proposed, among other things, the immigration to Palestine of 100,000 European Jews.



Example of an Italian share certificate used as paper for the handwritten issues of *BeGalut Asmara*

Despite these intense political upheavals, the editors did not forget the importance of the sports pages. On 21 May 1946 there is extensive coverage of a three-day festival that included soccer, football and tennis.

#### *BeGalut Kenya*

Gilgil camp had been used in the past as a jail for soldiers serving sentences for criminal offences, and the living conditions and sanitation were very poor. It's incredible to think that the inmates managed to organize themselves. However, according to the Etzel website,

A library was set up, which in Gilgil contained some three thousand volumes. A daily newspaper and a philosophical and literary journal were produced. Various courses were held, and lectures given on literature, the natural sciences and contemporary affairs. Many of the internees took correspondence courses at secondary and university levels, most of them at British institutions, and studied economics, law, accountancy and even architecture and engineering. In addition to their academic pursuits, the detainees played sport and exercised.

Certainly, the newspapers produced here are the most sophisticated, drawing on a wide range of sources including Reuters, the *New York Herald Tribune* and radio reports from London, Paris, Brazil and Moscow. The Irgun logo, a hand holding a rifle over the map of Palestine, including Transjordan, with the motto '*Rak Kach*' – Only Thus – sits at the head of each paper. Often they produced a day and an evening edition.

One of the starkest issues (opposite) features the hanging of Avshalom Haviv, Yaakov Weiss and Meir Nakar. Caught outside the Acre prison walls carrying weapons, they were tried and sentenced to death by hanging, which was carried out on 29 July 1947 and reported in the newspaper on the same day.

On 14 September 1947, in issue no. 154, there are greetings for the Jewish New Year. Issue no. 155, printed on 17 September, indicates clearly that they did not work on the two days of Rosh Hashanah.

On 25 September 1947, there is a grave announcement in a black border:

Gershon Akadchi: the nation has received news of the destruction of your family at the hands of the Nazis. We join in the pain and sorrow. From the officials of the camp, BeGalut Kenya.

These announcements became more common.

On the eve of Passover in April 1948, there is a moving message from the rabbi of the camp, Rabbi David Kahane:

Wishing from the depths of my heart, to all the people in the camp and their families, happy and kosher Pesach, a festival of real freedom, a festival in which we will see our redemption and our true freedom, and redemption of all of the people of Israel in every place where they are.

One can almost feel the urgency of the words as they were typed out and the sentiments that the message must have stirred.

After the State of Israel was declared in May 1948, the internees were able to return to their families. In what must have been an incredibly emotional reunion, in July 1948, the British ship *Ocean Vigour* reached Israeli territorial waters. An Israeli navy vessel came from Tel Aviv to greet them, and it is reported that the captain, Mila Brenner, proudly said: 'This is the captain speaking. Welcome home! We have been sent to greet the exiles who are returning home. From now on, you are free citizens of the State of Israel.'

After the State was declared, the Irgun disbanded and its members became part of the newly established Israel Defence Forces. As for Menachem Begin, he was elected Prime Minister in 1977. Perhaps we can see echoes of the episode I have described in what was probably his greatest humanitarian act: his decision to encourage Ethiopian Jews to immigrate to Israel, which led to Operation Moses and brought thousands of Jews from Africa to Israel in the 1980s. ●

A more detailed overview of life in the camps, the attempts to escape and the hanging of Irgun members referred to above can be found on the official Etzel website [www.etzel.org.il](http://www.etzel.org.il)

Jonathan Fishburn is an antiquarian bookseller specializing in Judaica ([www.fishburnbooks.com](http://www.fishburnbooks.com)). His latest catalogue has 1,000 items relating to Zionism.

אם אנשכחך ירושלים חשכה ימינו!

# תגלית


ערוך ישי-י"ל במונה הגותי-עבריים-הק"ל-י"ל

יום ג' י"ב אב תש"ז - 28.7.47 שנה שלישית לגלותנו 114

יעקב ז"ל, אבשלום חביב וסא"ר נקר

הועלו לגרום בכלא עכו, הי"ר.

רדיו לונדון: הבקר עם שחר נחלו בטהר עכו-סלחם המירווייסים היחודיים, שנידונו לסוף בעד השתתפותם בהתקפת על שתי עכו במרדט פאי האחרון.





סא"ר בן בדורי נקר

יעקב בן-יוסף ז"ל עם אמו

אבשלום אליעזר חביב

על ידי התוצאה לתורג לא התחשבה הממשלה באיום של האצ"ל, שהוא יחלה את 2 המרג'נים אשר נחטפו כבני-ערוכה ויטעו עמה לא נודעו עקבותיהם. האצ"ל הודיע, שאם מסק-הדין יוצא לסועל הוא יתחיל מיד להתקפת נגד הבריטים שתביא לסוף-כזה שארץ-ישראל עוד לא ראתה דוגמתו. בן א"י בחליה 2 המרג'נים הממשלה נקמה במסע-המחנות המודיעים והמסמרות הוגברו. בלילה האחרון נטרפו באיזור תל-אביב חמושים מדוקדקים אחרי החמושים, רדיו לונדון: מסקר האצ"ל הודיע, שאם יחלו את השלטה, יתחלו בדיוק בנחת חוסן גם שני המרג'נים הבריטיים משוה-המבטון, שנחטפו לפני לטעלה מאבועים, הודיעה על החליה נהפרכטה בירושלים אמש.

רדיו לונדון (בערבית): הרב הראשי פנה אמש לנציב העליון בבקשה הניגה, בבקשה דומה פנה גם ועד הקהילה ואמר, שאם יתחלו השלטה יוחדר הסגב במר"י. האצ"ל הודיע, כי במקרה שהשלטה יתחלו הוא ינקם בסועלה ישרה נגד הממשלה.

המושיג והתקפות בתורג.

רדיו לונדון: אהמול נעיצו המושיג בשני מקומות באיזור החוף, כחלק מהחמושים אחרי שני המרג'נים החטופים, המקום הראשון הוא כפר-סבא והשני הוא הישוב הסעורית היהודי-ערבי נס ציונה. שני מושיגים של ירושלים הוקפו ונערך בהם חשוד אחרי נשק, הודיעה אנכרת, שהחמוש בא אחרי שבפבריתם אלה התמוצצו בימים האחרונים סוקשים חתח סכונות ונרטו לאבדות בושט, 7 אנשים נעצרו להקירת. על י"ד תל-אביב פרעה התמוצצנה מתוך לביה קולנוע וכחוצאח מסנה מצעו שני היילים, אחד מר.א.ף, ומתורגסן הודיע, בשידור הערבי הודיעו, שהדבר קרה על י"ד סל-לי-פוזינסקי ובי נפעלו גם 2 ערבים.

Issue of *BeGalut Kenya* (29 July 1947) announcing the deaths by hanging of Avshalom Haviv, Yaakov Weiss and Meir Nakar