

Hunting Season

1.

When World War II broke out, Ya'akov Cohen had fallen in love for the first time. He was a student at Balfour High School in Tel Aviv. Barbara (“Bebs”) Fuld had beautiful eyes. Ya'akov first met her at a Scout troop, where he was giving a talk on the situation in Palestine. She was in the audience. His eye caught hers, and he could not stop looking. After the lecture she pulled him into the dance circle and he joined her in the hora. He thought the attraction was mutual, but he was wrong. Bebs did not return his love.

Four weeks after the war began Sultana al-Sakakini passed away. Her husband was inconsolable. Each day he went up to the Greek Orthodox cemetery on Mount Zion to lay flowers on her grave and weep. Characteristically, he described his grief in language that could easily apply to his nationalist feelings. Pondering the notion of accepting God's will and praising him, Sakakini asked the stonemason to engrave the words “We will never accept the judgment” on his wife's tombstone. He considered adding the phrase “We shall be the first to declare a rebellion against earth and heaven.” His son Sari played the piano to comfort him, a selection from Beethoven that Sultana had loved, but Sakakini broke down crying.¹

Sari Sakakini had returned from America with a master's degree in political science from the University of Michigan. He found work at the American consulate in Jerusalem. His sister Hala, who had gone to study at the American University in Beirut, recalled that her brother also brought home a great

fondness for cornflakes and for *Life* magazine, whiskey, and iced tea. In many ways, he had realized his father's American dream.² He soon found a friend in Jerusalem—Omran, a taxi driver. Theirs was an impossible love.

Michael Bryant, the director of the British electric company in Jerusalem, loved Lotte Geiger, but their love was another short-lived illusion. She was Jewish; he was English and married. General Evelyn Barker, commander of the British forces in Palestine, also married, fell in love with Katy Antonius. This too was an all-consuming passion, doomed to fail.

2.

Ya'akov Cohen was a good boy, very attached to his parents; he sometimes went to the movies with his mother. His was a "bourgeois" house—his father worked in an office. The family had come from Lodz, in Poland, where Ya'akov's father had been in commerce. He had moved first to Germany and France, and when he lost his money, he settled with his family in Palestine. That was in 1934, when Ya'akov was ten. A year previously the boy had begun writing a diary, and he kept it for the rest of his life.

The diary is an important document. It tells the story of a generation in Palestine; the first pages are written in German, but then it switches to Hebrew to describe an adolescence in Tel Aviv. "I like school life," Ya'akov wrote. He worked hard at his studies; his goal was to graduate from high school. Being in the Scouts was also important to him. He read, swam, and kept a stamp collection, participated in an Arabic-language club, and visited relatives. When Aunt Yetta received an immigration permit there was great happiness. Uncle Eliezer built a house, and they made a small party when the roof was completed. Aunt Yetta arrived in Palestine, and now they all waited for the rest of the family, still in Lodz. Tel Aviv celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 1939; its population had reached 200,000. Ya'akov broke his hand leaping over a vaulting horse but his cast came off after only three weeks.³

Bebbs, who came from Berlin, was Ya'akov's ideal. He thought of her day and night. "It was a very childish love," he wrote later. "I was nothing to Bebs and

she meant nearly everything to me. But sometimes a person needs a one-sided love like that. Months passed before I could free myself of that feeling.” He believed he had only stayed in the Scouts because of her; he never forgot that he had once picked an anemone for her but she refused to accept it.⁴ In September 1939, Ya’akov Cohen started his second year of high school.

When the war broke out Palestine was in the grip of a recession that had begun with the Arab revolt and the subsequent decline in immigration. Then the war slowed citrus exports and halted construction work. In August 1940, unemployment reached a record high. However, the country was soon transformed into a huge supply depot for the British army; the economy took off and dozens of new factories were built. Palestine supplied the British with ammunition and mines, gasoline, tires, and spare parts. It dressed and shod the soldiers and fed, lodged, and entertained them when they passed through on leave. Palestine flourished in the war; tens of thousands of people owed their livelihoods to it. Only butter became too expensive, Arthur Ruppin wrote, and margarine was used instead.⁵

Cohen lived the war. He read the newspaper each day and copied headlines into his diary. He frequently listened to the news on the radio. Once or twice his school staged air-raid drills, and occasionally the air-raid sirens went off in Tel Aviv. A nightly blackout was instituted, and Ya’akov’s father enlisted in the civil guard. Others joined the army or special police units. “Everyone supports Britain,” Cohen wrote.⁶ In September 1940, the Italian air force bombed Tel Aviv and more than one hundred people were killed; many fled the city. Cohen was in Jerusalem that day; nothing happened to his family. He soon wrote that life had returned to normal. He thought that the bombing was an exceptional event and that people should get on with their lives.

3.

The White Paper was not meant to be long-lived, and Ben-Gurion knew it. “This is not the last word,” he wrote in his diary. His feeling was apparently based on more than just intuition. He later told the high commissioner that Prime Minister

Neville Chamberlain had told him explicitly that the new policy would last at most for the duration of the war; the government could hardly set itself a plan for ten years in advance. So he was not afraid of the White Paper, Ben-Gurion said, because it would not be implemented.⁷

The idea of binational independence was indeed filed away immediately, along with a thousand other ideas; like them, there was little chance of the proposal being realized. New regulations aimed at restricting the transfer of Arab land to the Jews also existed only on paper; both Jews and Arabs found a thousand ways of circumventing them, as they had done under the Turks. The White Paper could not be revoked for the time being; Ben-Gurion thought the Zionists should oppose it as if there were no war, but help the British army as if there were no White Paper, which is what they did.⁸ As in World War I, the Zionists saw opportunities to advance their cause. “They all seem to think that the defeat of Germany will necessarily entail the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine,” stated a Foreign Office memorandum.

This was indeed the fundamental assumption that guided David Ben-Gurion.⁹ He recorded in his diary what he had heard from Edwin Samuel, who would soon be chief censor in the Post Office: There were “army circles” friendly to the Zionist cause who believed the White Paper was an error. “We will not fight England,” Ben-Gurion determined, explaining that “the best in the English nation” opposed the new policy and considered it a breach of trust. The most prominent of these friends was Winston Churchill, soon to be prime minister.¹⁰

Still, British-Jewish relations were tense. The beginning of this new campaign was not good. A few weeks after the war began, forty-three members of the Haganah were arrested not far from the town of Beisan (Beit She’an); they were returning from maneuvers and carried illegal weapons. The group included Moshe Dayan. They were court-martialed; one was sentenced to life imprisonment and the rest to ten years. But the chief of the imperial general staff, Field Marshal Sir Edmund Ironside, thought the sentence was “savagely and stupid” and ordered that it be revoked. Other prison terms imposed on Haganah members were also reduced and revoked from time to time.¹¹ This flexibility was notable, given the court’s severe treatment of the Arabs, who were sometimes

sentenced to death. There was, of course, a difference: the Arabs were acting against the British, while the Haganah was preparing, for the time being, to strike only at the Arabs.

Within four months of the outbreak of war, the Jewish Agency gave the authorities a list of 134,000 Jews who wanted to serve in the British army—one out of every two men of military age and 20,000 women. By the end of the war some 30,000 soldiers had actually enlisted.¹²

The Zionist movement, however, tried to convince the British to establish specifically Jewish army units to defend Palestine. The initiative came from Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who had worked to set up the Jewish Legion in World War I. To this end, Chaim Weizmann also tried to exert pressure on the authorities, but with no success. There was no reason to treat Jews differently, any more than “special arrangements should be made for the recruitment of Scotchmen or bus conductors or people with red hair,” one official declared. By the time a Jewish brigade was established, the war had ended; the brigade's 5,000 men heard only the final shots.^{13*}

Ze'ev Jabotinsky announced from New York, where he was living, that the Revisionist movement would stand beside the British in its war against the Nazis. Etzel also ceased its terrorist activities. The organization's commander, David Raziell, was released from prison and was sent on a British commando operation in Iraq, where he was killed.¹⁵ However, some Etzel members, led by Avraham Stern, refused to halt their campaign of violence and set up a splinter organization in a dispute as much over power as principle.¹⁶ When Jabotinsky died, in 1940, the Revisionists were left without a leader.

4.

On Thursday, January 23, 1941, Ya'akov Cohen began a new notebook for his life history, as he called his diary. This was his custom at the start of each year. In the weeks that had passed since he had finished the previous notebook, a number of events had taken place, in particular the bar mitzvah of his younger brother Gabriel. On the night before the party, at one in the morning, the air-raid

sirens had suddenly gone off. Everyone was extremely alarmed; until then there had been no sirens at night. The family went down into the bomb shelter.

But the bar mitzvah was a success; Gabriel read the haftarah very well. About seventy guests came, and Gabriel's friends dropped by in the afternoon, bringing gifts of books and games. Ya'akov labored until midnight washing dishes in the kitchen, and when he finally went to sleep there was another siren. At school the teachers stopped using the top floor, and one day a week, in addition to Saturday, there were no classes at all. Ya'akov's latest pastime was rowing on the Yarkon River, sometimes long distances. He continued to go to the movies; he liked Leslie Howard and Ingrid Bergman. Once he went to the HaOhel Theater to see Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*. The play made *Ha'aretz* furious. God only knew how this foolish, primitive pacifist had become so popular with the public when everything depended on success in the war, it wrote. But Ya'akov Cohen thought the play was great.¹⁷

In June 1941 Tel Aviv was again bombed from the air. One shell hit an old-age home, and several residents were killed. Now a volunteer fireman, Ya'akov was called to help; the bombing severely interfered with his studies for his final exams in English grammar and mathematics. As the summer vacation approached, high school students were called on to "enlist" in the villages and kibbutzim to help with work. This campaign reflected the assumption that there was something "parasitic" about life in the city and that the kibbutzim were doing more to promote the Zionist cause. Ya'akov Cohen opted to go to the Galilee. He enjoyed his time at the kibbutz, getting up at four in the morning to drive the hay wagon; he was able to swim in the Sea of Galilee and to go on hikes. "We marveled at the beauty of our land the whole way," he wrote.¹⁸

The British used Jews for intelligence and sabotage missions in Lebanon and Syria, which were then under the control of the Vichy government, and in their war against the Germans in the western desert. Moshe Dayan, who lost an eye in a British army operation, proposed enlisting "Aryan types" to serve as spies in the German prison camps. He also suggested that Jews disguised as Arabs and trained in the Arabic language and Islamic ways of life carry out secret missions for the British. The German unit and the Arab unit, along with a few others,

served as the founding nucleus of the Palmach, the Haganah's crack military force. Thus the Zionists' principal combat units were established in full cooperation with the British authorities and functioned initially under their sponsorship.¹⁹

Until the fall of 1942 there was still the possibility that the Nazis might conquer Egypt and advance on Palestine. People were in a terrible panic; some tried to arrange refuge in monasteries, while others equipped themselves with cyanide. The British army offered its Jewish soldiers the option of leaving the country; Jewish Agency leaders considered going into exile and tried to organize the evacuation of Jewish community figures in Egypt. The agency feared that the Nazis, once in Palestine, would make common cause with the Arabs. One ultra-Orthodox spokesman even prepared an emotional plea to the Arabs to have mercy on those Jews who had not supported Zionism.

The specter of a Nazi invasion ignited a fierce debate about survival and patriotism. Should the Jews surrender to the Nazis and live in disgrace or should they fight and die with honor?²⁰ But the British halted the German army's advance at the battle of El Alamein; one of the casualties in North Africa was Frederick Kisch. Bernard Montgomery, who led the British to victory, won everlasting glory and the gratitude of the Jews in Palestine. Already indebted to Monty for suppressing the Arab revolt, the Jews were now doubly indebted to him for saving them from the Nazis. Against this background of mutual interests, military cooperation between the Yishuv and the British authorities grew even closer.

5.

When Ya'akov Cohen was in his senior year of high school, he copied into his diary slogans from posters calling on young people to enlist in the army; he also copied quotes from Churchill and put the "V" for victory symbol at the top of each page. He read the Hebrew edition of *Der Fuehrer*, a biography of Hitler by Konrad Heiden, and learned how to imitate the fuehrer's speeches, to the hilarity of his friends. His class was engaged in argument; the question was whether to

enlist in the British army or the Haganah. Twenty-two students, Ya'akov Cohen among them, vowed to "hand themselves over to the national institutions" when they finished their studies; only one decided to enlist in the army. In June 1942, after he graduated from high school, Ya'akov joined the Palmach. A year had gone by since the Palmach's beginnings, and it now comprised some one thousand people, about half of them from kibbutzim.²¹ Mostly, the conscripts worked in the agricultural settlements; part of the time they received military training.

Palmach commander Yitzhak Sadeh, formerly Landoberg, had emigrated from Russia. An adventurer, music lover, art trader, and artists' model, Sadeh was also a wrestler and a womanizer, a bohemian romantic who sought the friendship of literary and theater people. He had grown up during the Communist revolution and had served in and deserted from the Russian army. He had known and admired Yosef Trumpeldor. Upon arriving in Palestine he had joined the labor battalion, working as a stone breaker and writing articles. Sadeh radiated militancy and revolutionary ardor; a founder of the Haganah, he took his patrols beyond the borders of their settlements, considered a bold innovation at the time. When Chaim Weizmann visited Palestine during the Arab revolt, Sadeh served as his bodyguard. One of Sadeh's relatives, the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, recalled that Weizmann had been fond of Sadeh and had called him "Reb Yitzhak."²² In the Palmach he was known as "the old man"—in 1940 he turned fifty—and was a much-admired, charismatic figure.

The Palmach never numbered more than six thousand soldiers, including some one thousand women, but its troops were seen as the very incarnation of the "new man." Fiercely patriotic, the Palmachniks also identified with the Red Army and admired Joseph Stalin. They displayed youthful arrogance and were tough, headstrong, elitist, and seemingly free of all inhibition. But they imposed their style and way of life on one another with ideological fanaticism, as if participating in a secret cult. The men's hairstyle, with its tousled forelock, their *tembel*, or fools' hats, their sandals, shorts, and slang, their emotional rigidity and sexual asceticism, their nightly campfires and songs and particular sense of humor, their political and ideological idioms—every aspect of the Palmachniks

was prescribed by strict, precise rules. No exceptions were allowed; the group was everything.

Ya'akov Cohen's two years of service in the Palmach took him to various kibbutzim—Ein Ha-Horesh, Givat Brenner, Hulda, and Dafna. He cultivated bananas, fertilized fields, grazed cows, and worked as a plumber. He learned to shoot a Bren gun and engage in hand-to-hand combat. "A lesson on grenades and a lecture on Arabs," he wrote in his diary one day. He also heard talks on the Arab disturbances and took part in bayonet drill, reconnaissance training, infiltration, and "espionage exercises." He read the Bible with his comrades and joined in lots of folk dancing. His impressions of Hitler continued to amuse his friends. Once he participated in setting up a new settlement—during the war some sixty new settlements were established.²³ On Saturday nights the group listened to records.

From time to time, Cohen would go home on visits, where he would shower, sleep, and drink soda at Witman's. Tel Aviv was full of young men evading military service, he noted. Occasionally he saw Bebs; they went to a movie together. *Gone With the Wind* was playing in Tel Aviv. "I failed again with Bebs," he wrote in his diary, "perhaps it was my fault."²⁴ Quite a few nationalist clichés appear in his diary, echoes of what he had internalized at school. He visited Masada and left with a sense of respect and admiration for the Jewish heroes who had died rather than surrender to the Romans. He believed that the Negev could be settled. Hebrew labor and Hebrew energy would overcome all obstacles, he wrote.

The Palmachniks claimed to symbolize not only their generation but also an ideal that was cherished by the entire Yishuv.²⁵ In this sense, they were very conservative, very much part of the establishment. Etzel, on the other hand, declared a "revolt."

6.

"The revolt sprang from the land and from the blood," wrote Menachem Begin, Etzel leader.²⁶ Despite its name, though, Etzel's action was not a revolt, but

rather a decision to resume terrorist activities, largely against the British. Etzel made this decision at a point when the Left seemed to be gaining a monopoly on heroism. The Warsaw Ghetto rebellion of April 1943 was depicted in Palestine as the achievement of Zionist socialists; the role Revisionist youth had played was suppressed. A series of events in Palestine expressed solidarity with the ghetto fighters, all under the sponsorship of the labor movement.*

Then, in September 1943, after a sensational trial, two Haganah men were sentenced to ten and seven years in prison, convicted of having stolen hundreds of rifles and some 100,000 rounds of ammunition from the British army. The men denied the charges and the Jewish Agency sent Golda Meyerson to testify in their favor. Nevertheless, the Haganah did seem to have been behind the operation. Although the weapons accumulated were intended for a war against the Arabs, not the British, the Haganah was breaking away from the authorities' tutelage: a large portion of its training was now taking place without the authorities' permission.

A few weeks after the trial, when tensions were running high, a violent clash took place at Kibbutz Ramat HaKovesh. Close to eight hundred soldiers surrounded the kibbutz to conduct a weapons' search. The police arrived in some forty vehicles; airplanes supervised the operation from the air. The police were under the command of Raymond Cafferata. They rounded up all the men into the kind of cage used in the Arab villages and began searching the kibbutz houses, causing a large amount of damage to the buildings. The kibbutz members threw stones, and the policemen responded by beating people with rubber truncheons and rifle butts. Cafferata shot into the crowd but, according to an official statement, aimed at people's feet. One kibbutz member died from a skull fracture. In a report, the commander of the operation stated, "I have had considerable experience of internal security work in Ireland and India but I have never before witnessed a more violent or fanatical reaction to those engaged in the search."^{28*}

Menachem Begin had been a close associate of Ze'ev Jabotinsky in Poland. When he arrived in Palestine in 1942 he was twenty-nine. He brought with him the same brand of nationalism that had guided Jabotinsky, including a belief in

the Jewish people's right to the entire territory of the biblical land of Israel, "from the Nile to the Euphrates." Begin urged the "redemption of the land," convinced that it would be accomplished by force. Etzel publications also spoke of building the Third Temple.³⁰ He also adopted Jabotinsky's statesmanlike self-image and something of his distinguished style—he too harnessed the power of words and drama.

In February 1942, Avraham Stern, the leader of the Etzel breakaway group Lechi, had been shot and killed by a British police officer in controversial circumstances.³¹ Some of his followers had defected to set up yet another organization, which concocted an improbable plan to kidnap the high commissioner. Some of the leaders of Lechi managed in the meantime to escape from a detention camp where they were being held. Only Etzel appeared to be doing nothing. A bold gesture was needed. Thus, in February 1944, Begin issued a "declaration of war" against the British, "war to the end." At the top of the declaration appeared the organization's symbol: a rifle within a map of Palestine reaching to the Iraqi border, and the words ONLY THUS. Begin thought of opening his revolt by taking control of the Western Wall; the plan did not work out.³²

During the period of Etzel's revolt, the organization had about six hundred members, but only two hundred were capable of going out on operations. None of the members served in the organization full-time, and only very few received any kind of pay. Almost all continued with their regular civilian work, which provided ideal cover for their activities. Etzel's funds came from robbing banks or extorting money from local businessmen; the organization received contributions as well, mostly from America. Etzel's revolt began with attacks on government office buildings in several cities, and its success spurred Lechi to redouble its own operations.³³

In August 1944, Lechi operatives tried to assassinate High Commissioner Harold MacMichael. They threw a bomb at his car, near Givat Shaul in Jerusalem; the high commissioner was slightly wounded, his wife was not hurt. His driver was seriously injured. This was Lechi's second attempt to kill the high commissioner. A few months later, in November 1944, Lechi men murdered Lord Moyne, Britain's senior representative in Egypt, an act that lost the Zionists

the friendship of one of their most important supporters, Winston Churchill.³⁴

“This is a great blow to Zionism.... We cannot even conceive the extent of the damage this thing is going to cause us,” Ya’akov Cohen wrote in his diary. “If the gangs don’t stop their escapades once and for all, our chances of a pro-Zionist decision on the question of Palestine will disappear.” Moyne’s murder, Cohen wrote, had thrust the Yishuv into a decisive political struggle.³⁵ He was right.

Like the illegal immigration operations initiated by Ben-Gurion in response to the 1939 White Paper, anti-British terrorism was part of the struggle for control of the Jewish community, and almost brought the Jews to the point of civil war. Etzel’s underground radio broadcasts, its broadsides, and the Revisionist newspaper attacked Jewish leaders in general and figures in the labor movement in particular, vilifying them as false, cowardly, imbecilic, and traitorous. Etzel called on Jews to join its ranks, and this was the organization’s main message. Its operations were aimed not only at the British; they were designed to magnify Etzel’s standing in comparison with the labor movement. At the same time, Etzel and Lechi also competed with each other. Menachem Begin was not enthusiastic about Moyne’s assassination.³⁶ As for the Haganah, it intensified efforts to help the authorities capture members of the Revisionist organizations. In English this period was called “the season”—the hunt was on for Jewish terrorists. Moshe Shertok suggested that the high commissioner set up a special anti-Jewish terrorism unit,³⁷ a classic example of the mutual interests of the Zionist establishment and the authorities.*

Begin’s revolt placed Ben-Gurion in a difficult position. He tried to explain to High Commissioner MacMichael that political concessions to the Zionists, especially loosening the immigration restrictions, would strengthen the Jewish Agency and help it fight terrorism, but MacMichael was inclined to blame the Jewish Agency for Etzel’s campaign of terror. Ben-Gurion reported on one conversation in which MacMichael had been “furious”; at one point he had “boiled over” and gone red with rage, his whole body shaking with fury. The Jews are a strange nation, he said. They are bad psychologists as well, because they do not understand the British. Only one nation in the world was helping

them, only one country was doing anything to save them, and the Jews were incessantly sullyng and slandering and humiliating that very nation. Not a word of thanks.*

In October 1944 the Haganah's chief of staff, Moshe Sneh, met with Etzel commander Menachem Begin and warned him against trying to capture the community's "soul." The labor movement led the Yishuv and had no intention of abdicating its leadership. The labor movement, he claimed, represented the Jewish people; any attempt by Etzel to usurp power would "necessarily lead to confrontation." The two men were rivals, old acquaintances from their days as political activists in Poland. Begin responded that he had lived through Siberia and the NKVD's dungeons, and his comrades were battle hardened as well. Sneh could not frighten them. Begin denied, however, that he wanted to take over the leadership. Sneh did not believe him.⁴⁰

Baffy Dugdale recorded a conversation with some labor movement activists who were concerned that the Revisionists might step up their actions against the British. She suggested some sort of grand national counteraction—like bringing in a ship of illegal immigrants in broad daylight.⁴¹

7.

Most of the illegal immigrant ships operated by the labor movement sailed from the port of Constantza in Romania; some sixty journeys were made altogether. Each one was a great human and operational drama, a saga of bravery and passion for life. Ships and crews had to be found and readied for sailing, and equipped with food, water, and medical supplies; passenger documents and a national flag had to be obtained. The passengers had to be collected and transferred to the port of departure. They were frequently smuggled across borders in truck convoys or through mountain paths and thick forests, even as the war raged. The Nazis did their best to intercept them.

The immigrant operations demanded faith, courage, organizational talent, contacts, and money to bribe police and secret service chiefs, government ministers, and foreign consuls. The Mediterranean Sea was a battlefield and

dangerous for civilian ships, all the more so for the shoddy vessels the Zionists used. Conditions on board were abominable: the ships were overcrowded, and there were insufficient provisions, water, and sanitary facilities. Some of the boats were large, bearing hundreds of refugees; others were tiny, carrying but a few. Most reached Palestine's coast at night, where the Palmach helped the refugees cross the last stretch of sea to dry land.

By the end of the war, close to 20,000 people had entered the country this way. Another 40,000 immigrants had arrived with legal permits.⁴² However, the illegal operation did not in the end enable more Jews to flee the Holocaust, because the British deducted an estimated number of illegals from the 75,000 permits promised in the White Paper. And even this quota was not fully utilized.* The British had a difficult time fighting illegal immigration. Some of the boats were caught at sea, towed to the Palestinian shore, and their passengers arrested. The illegals were then often deported to detention camps in Mauritius.[†]

On more than one occasion the immigrants resisted arrest, either passively or violently. The colonial secretary wrote to the prime minister complaining that militants were deliberately provoking violent confrontations with the security forces and it could well be that the Nazis were infiltrating secret agents among the immigrants. British police and soldiers dealt with the detainees harshly, women and children included. The Haganah sent several agents to sabotage a ship called the *Patria*, which was about to deport several hundred illegal immigrants from the country. The operation was hasty and bungled and cost the lives of nearly three hundred immigrants.⁴⁵

Some of the boats sank at sea, and their passengers drowned. The *Struma* sank with nearly eight hundred illegals on board. That was in February 1942. The ship sailed from Constantza and anchored for several months at Istanbul. Historian Ronald Zweig has shown that the Turkish authorities compelled the ship to return to the high seas at the initiative of Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, who deliberately misled Prime Minister Churchill and the cabinet as to the ship's seaworthiness. After this catastrophe the British decided to divert as many ships as possible to Cyprus. The government was obliged to return to the problem over and over again; its decisions reflect increasing flexibility, including

the inclination to permit those people who succeeded in reaching Palestine to remain there. The refugees emerge from the saga looking like soldiers who succeeded in defeating an empire.⁴⁶

The British continued to agonize and vacillate over the future of Palestine. In November 1940 John Martin, Churchill's principal private secretary, wrote that instead of hunting down the refugees at sea it would be better to give the Jews an independent state. Martin called Palestine by its Hebrew name, Eretz Israel. He imagined a Jewish state joined in a federation with the Arab countries. Churchill himself supposed that after the war it would be necessary to establish a Jewish state for the absorption of millions of Jews.⁴⁷

The discussion of a state came up as part of a reassessment of the White Paper, which began almost immediately after the paper's publication, just as Ben-Gurion had predicted. "Palestine is a mill-stone around our necks," the colonial secretary wrote. In 1941 the British already had begun to think about the postwar Jewish refugee problem and wonder how this would affect the situation in Palestine. As always, one official wrote a position paper, and another put forward an opposing argument. Then, in the summer of 1943, the officials returned to the thought that it might be best to partition Palestine into two states. No less than ten position papers on the subject landed on the cabinet table.*

Essentially, the renewed debate over what to do with Palestine arose largely from the fact that Churchill opposed the White Paper. He saw it as a gross violation of an obligation Britain had taken upon itself. He did not rescind the White Paper, but he allowed it to sink into oblivion. From time to time he approved exceptions to policy.

The restriction on immigration levied a price in human life, but the White Paper's role in the Holocaust is, in the end, relatively small. In the summer of 1941, Chaim Weizmann estimated that when the war ended it would take twenty years to bring a million and a half Jews to Palestine; Ben-Gurion argued that three million could be brought in ten years.⁴⁸ Palestine, then, was not the solution for the Jewish people; the only way to save them and millions of non-Jews was war. Most of the Jews who survived in Europe were in fact saved thanks to the defeat of Nazi Germany. Britain lost more than a quarter of a million soldiers in

this struggle, as well as tens of thousands of civilians.⁴⁹ One of those soldiers was Chaim Weizmann's son Michael, a pilot.

Before and during the war, as well as toward the end, when the genocide of the Jews had become well known, opportunities apparently arose to buy Jewish lives from the Nazis. In a few of these cases British officials acted to frustrate the negotiations; some expressed antisemitic sentiments in the process.⁵⁰ Perhaps Jewish Agency leaders should have struck a deal behind the backs of the British. They were reluctant to do so, however, because, among other reasons, they continued to regard themselves as part of the British administration. Large question marks hang over several major rescue initiatives. In any case, while more Jews might have been rescued, neither the British nor the Zionist movement could have saved millions during the war.

Both parties were more interested in events in Palestine than in the fate of the Jews of Europe. "I was not well-versed on matters of saving the Jews of Nazi-occupied Europe, even though I was chairman of the Jewish Agency," Ben-Gurion wrote a few years later. "The heart of my activity was enlisting Jewry in the demand to establish a Jewish state."⁵¹ The British, for their part, were mostly concerned with the reaction of the Arabs.

8.

Khalil al-Sakakini could never forgive the British, even after they adopted the White Paper, nor did he forgive the Jews, even when he learned that the Nazis were killing them. He continued to feel that they could come to Palestine to die there, as they had done in Turkish times, but not to live there under British protection.⁵²

When he read of the sinking of the *Struma*, Sakakini wrote that the incident saddened him. Still, the eight hundred passengers who were lost were not refugees but invaders, Sakakini wrote. If the Arabs had self-government, they would have fought the ship even before it set out and might even have laid mines along its route to prevent it from reaching Palestinian shores. He described the passengers as adventurers, more fanatical than brave; he compared them to

people who threatened to throw themselves into the sea unless he gave up his house.

Sakakini ridiculed the public day of mourning the Jews in Palestine declared after the boat sank. Why not mourn every boat that sank? Why cry only when Jews drowned? No, he wrote, don't expect the world to love you. The world was one thing, and the Jews were another. As part of his campaign against Jewish immigration, Sakakini published an article in the newspaper *Falastin*; printed on the front page, it included a sarcastic attack on David Ben-Gurion. "Welcome, cousins," Sakakini sneered. "We are the guests and you are the masters of the house. We will do everything to please you. You are, after all, God's chosen people." When he went into town he received much praise. Wonderful! people said. An acquaintance in Jaffa sent him a telegram of congratulations: "May your teeth grow strong," he wished. Sakakini, sixty-six years old, felt he had grown old and that the praise was coming too late. He had not expected such an enthusiastic response to the article, he wrote. At one bookstore he was told that dozens of people had come to buy the newspaper.^{53*} Sakakini liked to sit at the Piccadilly Café on Mamilla Street, where he would meet Arabic-speaking Jewish intellectuals and discuss the events of the day with them.⁵⁵ His writings did not reflect personal animosity toward individual Jews; they reflected the widening gap between the Zionists and the Arab national movement.

The Arab position on the war was the subject of much speculation. The Jewish Agency's sources stressed the Arab inclination to support the Nazis for mostly obvious political reasons but also, at times, out of ideological identification. The Zionist intelligence services reported a few German secret agents working among Palestine's Arabs but assumed that no single organization could really be considered a fifth column. By one estimate, some 60 percent of the country's Arabs supported the Nazis.⁵⁶

Britain's evaluation of the Arab position was more complex. According to its sources, the Arab tendency was to support whoever was going to win. At the beginning of the war, the high commissioner reported to London that fortune-tellers in Jerusalem were predicting Hitler's death. As the German army advanced, Hitler's popularity increased, and at the height of his success he was

being described as an Arab hero.⁵⁷ The American consulate in Jerusalem also tracked Arab opinion, using in part reports written by Sari al-Sakakini. In one of his first memorandums, Sakakini tried to refute the general view that Nazi Germany had taken over the Arab national movement through secret agents and bribes. He compared the Arabs to the American revolutionaries: the Germans were helping the Arabs but were not taking over their cause, just as the French had helped the American revolt against the British but did not run affairs in the United States as a result.

The American independence fighters had not made common cause with the French because they liked them but because the French were the enemy of their enemy, Sakakini noted. So the Arabs had turned to Germany; they were prepared to receive support from any party. There was a simple way to keep the Arabs from the Nazis: Britain could end its support for the Zionist cause and transfer its patronage to the Arabs. Palestine's Arabs were willing to take Britain's side; so was the mufti, Sakakini wrote.⁵⁸ Haj Amin al-Husseini in the meantime had paid a visit to Adolf Hitler.

While living in Beirut, where he had gone after fleeing Jerusalem, the deposed mufti had disseminated Arab nationalist propaganda, organized political activities, raised money, and purchased arms. The French Mandate authorities stationed guards around his house; every day he went out for an afternoon walk. One day, in October 1939, he did not appear—the guards assumed he had remained at home because of the Ramadan fast. He was not seen the next day either, and then the guards recalled having noticed several women leaving the house in a car. At the time, they had simply thought that the women were the mufti's wives, but now they realized their error. The mufti himself had been in the car, wearing a dress, his face covered by a veil. The intelligence services of half a dozen countries began hunting for him; he was apparently hiding out in Baghdad or perhaps in Tehran.⁵⁹ In any case, on November 30, 1941, he was sitting in the fuhrer's office in Berlin.

Reaching Hitler had not been easy for the mufti, and he did not get what he wanted. The minutes of their conversation are reminiscent of the talks between the Zionist leadership and the British during World War I. Husseini asked for

two things: a declaration of support for the Arabs in Palestine and the establishment of an Arab legion under Wehrmacht sponsorship. The mufti had previously met with Mussolini; he hoped that Hitler would agree to issue a joint statement with Il Duce. The Arabs were “natural friends” of Germany, he argued; they were both facing the same enemies—the English, the Jews, and the Communists. He expressed his confidence that the Germans would win the war and offered the Arabs’ help in exchange for Germany’s promise to help them after the war.

Hitler agreed with Husseini’s fundamental assumptions. He was fighting two countries controlled by the Jews, Britain and the Soviet Union; he would of course not agree to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Nevertheless, he would not issue a declaration of support; at this point he did not want to anger the French government, which still controlled Lebanon and Syria.^{60*}

Berlin was the mufti’s base until after the war. He was invited to give lectures and from time to time sent the authorities various operative suggestions, including a plan for bombing Tel Aviv and dropping paratroopers in Palestine. None of his proposals were included in the Germans’ war plans, although the Nazis did show some interest in the idea of establishing an Arab legion. In the end they used the mufti in an initiative to set up a Muslim-Balkan unit in the framework of the Waffen-SS. As part of this project, Husseini entered into close contact with Heinrich Himmler.

Sari al-Sakakini believed that even after the White Paper was issued, the British failed to understand that the Arabs’ position in World War II was very similar to that of the Jews in the previous war: they could choose to side with the British or the Germans. Their decision was only a matter of which alliance would be more worthwhile.^{62†}

George Antonius’s papers preserve the draft of a letter an Arab doctor in Jerusalem apparently intended for the president of the United States. The letter contains the essence of the position Arab spokesmen would adopt after the Holocaust, that the Arabs should not have to pay the price for Europe’s persecution of the Jews. “We all sympathize with the Jews and are shocked at the way Christian nations are persecuting them. But do you expect Moslems of

Palestine ... to be more Christian or more humanitarian than the followers of Christ: Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, *etc.* *etc.*? Have we to suffer in order to make good what you Christians commit?”⁶⁴ Antonius wrote in a similar vein: “The treatment meted out to Jews in Germany and other European countries is a disgrace to its authors and to modern civilization but ... the cure for the eviction of Jews from Germany is not to be sought in the eviction of the Arabs from their homeland.”^{65*}

Toward the end of the war High Commissioner MacMichael was driven to the same frustration his predecessors had evinced. He was so despondent about his role in Palestine that he became careless, failing to watch his tongue even with David Ben-Gurion. He had no idea what the British wanted from him, he said. No one had told him what measures they expected him to carry out. The government’s policy was constantly changing, there were countless interpretations, countless commissions of inquiry, no end of white papers. For twenty-five years London had not known what it wanted. He himself had no clue what he was doing in Palestine. As far as he was concerned, everything was possible, if someone would only tell him what to do. If they wanted partition, there would be partition. If they wanted a state, there would be a state. It was all the same to him. MacMichael had no interest in politics; he did not understand it. That was not his business, and it was not his job. His job was to keep order.

At the end of this remarkable conversation, when Ben-Gurion was standing by the door ready to leave, the high commissioner said, “You have much more power than we do.” He did not understand what Ben-Gurion wanted from him, either, he added, but he supposed that Ben-Gurion had something in mind. After all, there was always some kind of intrigue in what the Jews said and did. The fact that the prime minister opposed his own government’s official policy made MacMichael’s life even more difficult. MacMichael himself proposed dismantling the Jewish Agency—after the war there would be bloodshed in Palestine, he warned. But his suggestion was filed away.⁶⁷

Ben-Gurion estimated that the high commissioner would be pleased to be released from his position and given some remote colony where he could rest. “A small man,” Ben-Gurion commented; talking to him, he told his colleagues,

was “torture.” Golda Meyerson also reported difficulties talking to leaders of the British establishment; their conversations all came down to the same thing: the chief secretary and the high commissioner demanded that the Jewish Agency take more determined action against Jewish terrorism, while the Jewish Agency wanted concessions on immigration that could be presented to the public as an achievement.^{68*}

9.

Sometime after meeting Omran in Jerusalem, Sari al-Sakakini wrote to his sisters, “He is my best friend. His manliness impresses me.” Omran was absolutely devoted to him, he said.⁶⁹ A few months later Sari published an article in a mimeographed bulletin put out by the YMCA in Jerusalem under the heading “My Best Friend,” whom he identified only by an initial. “We like to be together, to do things together,” he wrote. “Both of us think of the other. Both of us would do anything to please the other. We know each other’s virtues and shortcomings. We trust each other, we take refuge in each other. The moment we part we start longing for each other. Each considers all expressions of beauty and poetry as rising from his heart for the other... We understand each other to the point of reading one another’s thoughts. Neither dares speak out to the other the love that is in one’s heart.”⁷⁰

This last sentence was not quite true. Omran sent Sakakini a series of long, passionate, erotic love letters on the stationery of the cab company that employed him, Orient Taxi on Princess Mary Avenue. He often wrote in the morning, upon returning to work after a night spent with his friend. Sakakini composed a love poem for him.⁷¹ In addition to adopting his father’s nationalist worldview and cultural values, Sari al-Sakakini seems also to have absorbed his father’s concepts of masculinity. “I would like you to be so strong that if you fought a bull you would throw him over,” Khalil al-Sakakini had written to his son. “I would like you to have great stature, taut muscles, a vast chest, sinewy arms.” He wished to give his son an appreciation of strength. In one letter he wrote, “Strength, strength. If you must worship anything, then worship strength.

Make of your body a perfect statue for this god.” Once, when Sari al-Sakakini had to fill out a form, in the space for status he wrote, “single, thank you”; next to the question marked “dependents” he wrote, “in no way and never.”⁷²

In March 1944, Ya’akov Cohen turned twenty. “Now I am certain I have entered the age of maturity and know my duties to God, my people, and my parents,” he wrote in his diary. He had finished his term in the Palmach. “Two years of service for the homeland,” he noted, asking himself if the time spent had been worthwhile. “Yes, definitely yes!” he responded.⁷³

Toward the end of the war, Cohen moved to Jerusalem and enrolled at the Hebrew University. He also worked as a counselor in an institution for children. On May 8, 1945, the day of Germany’s surrender, he wrote, “The whole city got up and went out to the streets, to take part in our shared celebration.” David Ben-Gurion did not share the general happiness. The war had killed six million Jews. “It is a sad day,” he wrote in his diary, “very sad.” Khalil al-Sakakini was not pleased with Germany’s defeat: “If any one of the combatants has reason to be proud, it is Germany, because it fought the entire world for six years,” he wrote.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, the Jewish terrorist organizations escalated their activity against the British.