

# A South African Comes To Dwell In Charlotte

By Kenny Gross

I was born into a household that was steeped in Zion. The first language that I learned to read and write was Hebrew. My name was officially registered as Elchanan, my brother's as Theodore, after Herzl.

In 1916 Johannesburg was a burgeoning city rising out of the veld from a mining town. My parents had arrived in 1902 from Riga and freely lived a full traditional Jewish life. The secular school I attended was the Jewish Government Primary. The afternoons I spent at "cheder" till I was eleven. Each time a new boy came into my cheder class, we started from the beginning again. This was upsetting to my dad who had me entered into the Beth Hamedrosh Hagavoha — a part-time yeshiva, where I learned Gemara and Hebrew studies until I commenced to the University at the age of sixteen.

In 1925 my grandfather went to Jerusalem to live and die. He was buried on Har Hazeitim, the Mount of Olives. It took us eleven years after the 1967 War to find his desecrated grave. This was hardly the peace he sought in our ancient homeland.

By 1935 some of my friends and cousins from Riga were settling in Palestine, including my closest Hebrew Class colleague, Shmuel Katz, who after years of service became a member of the High Command of the Irgun Zvai Leumi and a Herut member of the first Knesset.

The thirties was the decade of Socialism — the panacea of all the world's problems, until I had the undeserved blessing of

meeting Zeev Jabotinsky and listening to him. I was struck at the clarity and logic of his oratory, the like of which I have never heard again. We were all converted.

In the late thirties, inspired by Germany, "shirt" movements arose in South Africa. Their members were disgruntled Afrikaners (descendants of the Boers) who hated the British with a fervor that could only be inherited. Young Jewish lads formed defense leagues and protected with the police, synagogues and schools. We were soon pretty adept at street fighting.

World War II broke in September 1939. The South African army was a volunteer one. The country was at the outset split, many siding for neutrality. But General Smuts carried the day. Jews joined in droves and their participation far exceeded their proportion of the population.

I signed up in 1940 and was on active service as an accounting officer soon thereafter in the South African Air Force. Our army pushed through Abyssinia (Ethiopia), freed it from the Italians, and on to the western desert — all weekend leaves to Jaffa-Tel Aviv by overnight train with the eighth army to Italy.

I returned to Johannesburg in 1945 to learn with terrible shock of the nightmare of the Holocaust. We became extremely hostile to the British administration in Palestine for their "certificate" system of "survivor" admission — for the

sinking of the Struma and other vessels, for the Cyprus imprisonment of refugees from the flaming hell of Europe. **The Irgun For Us.**

I was appointed as the controller of the Keren Habazel (The Iron Fund) collecting funds first as a beginner and later as a specialist schnorrer — town to town, village to village, thousands of miles — and dispatching these "golden" pounds wherever arms could be bought in Europe. Our best sources were France and Italy. This was a hazardous occupation.

We trained youth for the war to come in Palestine, so that in May 1948, with the half closed eye of the South African authorities, we sent over a thousand volunteers to Mahal to fight and most important to fly in the new Israeli air force. We were blessed. We had a large number of trained air crews from World War II. In fact, Ezer Weitzman was trained in Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia, as a member of the RAF.

At the end of the war of Independence, Menachem Begin was elected leader of the new Herut Party. I met this slim, quiet, modest harmless looking young man with the sallow complexion. I was astonished by his unassuming attitude and his hunger to learn about our South African organization. From that day so many years ago we have maintained a close friendship. South Africa served him well in times of trouble — whether party, financial or under stress of political life in the wilderness. He spent the best holidays of his life with his South African friends.

In 1951 I went into book publishing in Jerusalem under the management of my old friend Shmuel Katz who had retired from politics. I

spent considerable time in Israel with him and Herut Party affairs.

I became very active in South African Zionist affairs. We ran our national executive on a party key for which we held elections. I was elected on the Revisionist List and served on a number of very active committees — IUA, Aliyah, etc. Our contributions per capita to the IUA despite the fact that they were not tax deductible, were the highest in the world. We did not have many extraordinarily large contributions. Our strength lay in involving every Jewish family in the country by volunteer effort — not by telephone but by canvas. Our expense ratio in collection, administration and remittance was in the vicinity of 7 to 8%. The rest went to Israel. There were no local deductions unless specially sanctioned by Jerusalem. For our local needs we ran a separate united campaign.

My revisionist party activities were numerous: *The Jewish Herald*, an English party weekly, started by Jabotinsky in 1932 and still going strong, party institutions in Israel, Herut financial needs. I chaired the Jabotinsky museum, a superb collection of freedom fighters memorabilia going back to the Turkish occupation period of World War I, and the Aryeh Ben Eliezer Hebrew University chair fund for the study of Freedom Fighters in history.

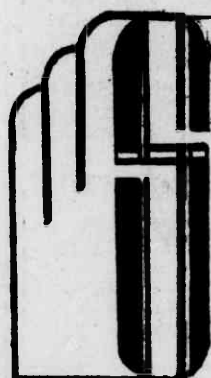
Aliyah was the spearhead committee. Our youth movements were on Israeli lines: Habonim, Bnei Akiva, Bnei Zion (Maccabi) and Betar. These produced numerous olim with a very small yordim (return) factor. In 1967 we sent thousands of volunteers and celebrated the victory: in 1973 we mourned their casualties at

the Suez Canal on that fateful Yom Kippur Day.

Our national federation executive, as mentioned previously, was constituted on party lines — according to the most recent election key. This is criticized by many but it does engender enthusiasm on ideological lines as opposed to pure philanthropic Zionism as practiced elsewhere in the Diaspora.

Israel means so much to us. I remember the arrival in 1951 of the first El Al plane. Jews flocked in the thousands to the airport and cried unabashedly when the blue and white drew alongside. It was a dream! We sang "Shehechiyanu Vekiemenu Vehigianu" with tears of joy — and sorrow for those who gave their lives so that this day would come.

This is part of my Zionist background. I hope I can make a contribution in Charlotte for a better and deeper understanding of and with Israel.



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