

THE ARMY-ZAHAL.

Perhaps the worst period of my life were those 24 months spent in the Israeli army. After I had been in Israel about a year and a half, we were conscripted as all young Israeli citizens were and inducted into NAHAL, an acronym for noar halutzei lochem, “fighting pioneer youth”. These units were set up in 1948 in response to a request to Ben Gurion, the then prime minister not to break up garinim, or groups of “volunteer” youth. We were inducted as a group into one unit, men and unmarried girls. Our average age was about 24. Men were in one part of the camp and women in another. We were all given our uniforms, and berets with the Nahal insignia (the sword and ploughshare). For the first six weeks we were “tironim”, that is we were uninitiated soldiers subject to basic training. Our camp, (Machaneh David) Camp David, was at Tira in the Carmel mountain range. We slept 10 to a large tent, close to each other. A major part of the day was spent preparing the tent for inspection, beds had to be made and look neat, our guns cleaned, our gear and kit bags set out, and we had to appear neat and tidy. The officer (hamifaked) was God. We were constantly packing and unpacking our gear. I suppose to some extent this is similar to “square bashing” without all the saluting of officers.

We had short haircuts, however one could sport a beard unlike in other armies and after our period of basic training, no one really cared how we dressed.

Food was served either outside or in a mess hall. I should not say served but rather that food was slopped into metal canteens. This was a period of little to eat in Israel, and we seemed to live on eggplants, tomatoes, olives (5 equal one egg) and bread. Occasionally there was a better meal with an egg instead of the olives. What struck me most was the senselessness of a large part of the training. There was an obvious purpose, in some of it, which was to get us into physical shape (after all we were for the most part a bunch of intellectuals), and to get us to respond to any command without question. The slogan was ‘only asses think “(rak hamorim chosveem) or something to that effect. We were constantly running up and down the Carmel ridges with our beds, first thing in the morning as well as in the middle of the night. This did not make much sense other than making us exhausted all the time. Our gear was heavy, and we were often wakened up in the middle of the night for long hikes. Here we stumbled over rocks and

stones. I do not think there are anywhere else in the world as many stones and rocks as in Israel. Thus the effective use of these by the Palestinians during the Intifada. Rocks are everywhere. The night training was in response to the idea that the Arabs do not fight at night. This may have been true of the 1950's not today.

It was drummed into us, never to leave our rifle anywhere. We had to sleep with our rifle. This was our girlfriend. We were constantly cleaning and oiling it. These were old Czech single barrel rifles, which is initially all the Israeli army had. Later on we graduated to Sten guns (an automatic machine gun prone to accidentally going off), and then to the Israeli made Uzi, much later.

I recently watched a movie about Wingate, the British officer who helped train the Hagana against the wishes of the British. He introduced the code of behavior in the Israeli army, no saluting officers, informality of calling officers by first name and eating together in the mess hall. This indeed compared to most armies was a “ democratic” army although I think the officers had better food and more money than we had. We got paid very little, and what we did have we spent on chocolate wafers in the shekem (a sort of army canteen, it actually is an abbreviation of sherut Kanteenot umisadot, which for the those interested in language translates to canteen and restaurant service). Most of us could afford very little. Every time I see chocolate wafers in the supermarket I think of these days, and how luxurious they seemed. I still have a taste for them; somehow they are not as good as I remember them.

It was in the Nahal that I learned my Hebrew. Part of the training and idea was to use the army as means of integration into society. This was after all an immigrant country with immigrants from many different cultures. Thus a part of the day was spent learning Hebrew conversation and reading from an easy immigrant newspaper, called Omer. Other lessons were based on the tanach (bible). We also learned to curse in Arabic and Russian. We were cursed at by our sergeant Aaron Ashkenazi, (originally from Turkey), and we learned to curse other soldiers in the unit, who were mostly from Morocco or Kurdistan. We really were a motley crew. The Kurdim (as they were called) were considered the most stupid and backwards of the immigrant population. For some reason only known to the army, we, “ Anglo Saxim” were put together with a group of 18-20 year olds from Kurdistan and Morocco. We were the “ worst” if that is the right word unit in the camp, known as “Machlaka 4”. The rest of the battalion looked

down on us, and I think they thought of us as crazies. The army might have been a better experience if we had been with an “ Israeli “ group, even though we were older and from a different culture, it would have been closer than that of Kurdistan.

Of those who shared a tent with me some have remained friends others unfortunately have died. We all hated the sergeants and officers. They seemed exceptionally cruel. Two of our group could not take it, and found means of escape, by prematurely burying their parents, getting leave, returning to the U.K. and only much later (many years later) returning to Israel. Others deserted and spent time in jail. The army almost destroyed the cohesiveness of the group. Stealing from each other became common, during muster, metal hats, camouflage covers often went missing and had to appear at parade. We soon recognized who could be trusted and who could not. At one point either my metal hat or camouflage net had been stolen, I think by someone in our own group, but my experienced friend Phil stole one from someone else and thus I avoided problems. This was the way the army worked, and I assume still works to this day. The story from Tommy Berman is that his bed went missing. How that happened I do not know. Phil got up, sauntered around and returned with a bed. I don't know if the army is still like this, but I saw a recent Israeli movie called Yossi and Jaeger about two friends stationed in Lebanon, and by the goings on, not much has changed. It was what was called in Hebrew a balagan, which I believe is Polish/Yiddish word for chaos. (There is a whole site in part devoted to a discussion of this word see [http:// balagan.org.uk/balagan.htm](http://balagan.org.uk/balagan.htm))

In my tent were Gerry Pitch, who later became a lorry driver and is one of the few who has remained on a kibbutz (not Amiad), Dr. Harold Flowers, a biochemist later in life at the Weizmann Institute, Tommy Berman, who later became a limnologist, and was partly responsible for my decision to study in the States, Les Collins who moved to Haifa around the same time that we left Amiad and found a job in Shemen as a metal worker, Piers Coleman, who now owns an antique store outside of Netanya, and Bernard Clements who later became an artist . He was one of those who could not take it, and went back to England for a time. Finally there was Phil Shearskey, who kept our moral up. He had gone through the British Army and knew how to manage.

We waited for leave so that we could get out, buy some decent food (if we had the money) and relax a little away from the constant harassment and shouting. I had an aunt living

in Ramat Gan, not far from Tel Aviv. She was my father's sister, Kitty, she and her husband Louis and three children lived in a tiny apartment in one of the newer shikunim (apartment complexes, bare minimum, that were put up in a rush to house the immigrant population) in Ramat Gan. I would turn up unannounced with one of my "mates" usually Gerry for the weekend. I did not realize how financially hard up the family was, and how difficult it was for them to adjust to Israel. Louis was a cabinetmaker and was involved in construction. I think he made window frames and doors for the new apartments that were going up at a fantastic rate. I think he wanted to branch out on his own, but was tied down by the Israeli trade union, the Histradut. At one point Kitty asked me to come by myself. Only recently (2008) in conversation with her did I learn what a burden my visits caused. They basically had neither room nor money, and my visits were an extra expense. She had three children (my cousins) and Louis was often without a job. Because of the harsh conditions of Israel at that time they eventually immigrated to Canada.

We spent three months in Machaneh David. I supposed towards the end we got used to it. Our sergeant, from Turkey ended up joining our group, and some of our group was sent to specialized courses. I did learn to shoot a rifle and Sten gun, throw a hand grenade (not that well, I have never been a great pitcher), and got to know the Carmel range, and every nook and cranny of Israel very well. To this day I can find my way around even without a map, as long as I know on what side of me is the Mediterranean.

We were supposed to spend two years in the Nachal, the first part as described above in basic training, the second part as agricultural workers on a kibbutz, and after about a year or so, to advanced training. This idea of advanced training was a novel one, and we were the first group of Nachal to do this. Later groups had to go through parachute training, something I am glad I did not have to do. I had enough trouble jumping off a 6 foot wall Thus after three months of basic training, some time in 1955 we returned to Kibbutz Amiad, not as members of the kibbutz, but as a Nachal Garin. We were quartered in wooden "shacks" arranged around a central flagpole where parades and orders were given. Our sergeant was much more humane, Zvi Fingerman (later Goffer) himself an immigrant from Argentina, who later became a good friend. Our commander, Yossi ? was an ass-hole. I cannot remember his last name but he was a young punk

who thought highly of himself and could not adapt to the fact that the soldiers under him were much older and much more intelligent. In fact a few years ago I met one of our group who had been with me in the army, and was now a bank manager in Ramot Hasharon and this Yossi came in for loan. Goff recognized him, and thought now was his opportunity to get his own back, and I believe he refused him the loan or at least gave him a hard time.

The Nachal camp, for such it really was, was on a bleak hillside behind the kibbutz, and quite a walk from the dining room and other buildings of the kibbutz. Behind this was a large hill (or mountain) with a peak that looked like an extinct volcano. We slept four to a hut. I shared a hut with Les Collins, Piers Coleman and I think Bernard Clemens, or was it Gerry Pitch? All of us were ravakim that is single guys. Those who were married I think slept in the kibbutz proper or had a hut to themselves. Single girls, and there were a few, slept up the hill, also in the huts.

Before going into the army I was a shepherd at Gal Ed and I continued this job as part of Nachal. We continued our Hebrew lessons, folk dancing etc. all material to integrate us into Israeli society. In fact I was sent to a folk-dancing course organized by nachal. My folk dancing was very good, I held myself erect, and I had a great sense of rhythm. I also was sent on a course for shepherds at the Wingate Institute outside Netanya. I think it was a week- long course on sheep rearing, breeding and how it was done in other countries. Apart from the fact that we continued to speak English among ourselves we acculturated quite well. We often went out of the kibbutz on army exercises. One of these I remember distinctly was at Tabha on Lake Kinneret. I do not remember the purpose, but our officer, decided to occupy an area frequented by picnickers. Our 2nd lieutenant, Yossi, ordered us to clear the area of civilians. One of our group Les Katz, refused to do so. He was in fact correct, we did not have the authority to chase off civilians. This was not a military zone. Les refused, and as a result was arrested for subordination. He spent a few weeks in military jail for not obeying an order, even though all of us thought that the order itself was illegal. He and his wife eventually left Israel. A few years ago I met Jackie his wife in Covent Garden manning an “ antique “ stall. Les died rather young. He was a fellow Glaswegian.

Meanwhile I worked as a shepherd, with Yossilke, who ran the sheep branch of the kibbutz and occasionally in the banana plantations with Avidov. The kibbutz owned extensive areas of bananas on Lake Kinnereth, near Tabha. This was hard work, either harvesting bunches

(which weighed 100's pounds) or wrapping the bananas with plastic material to protect them. Another job, which was more enjoyable was driving the tractor, and having others load on the fruit.

Apart from army discipline, and occasionally having to dress for misdar (parade), this was a satisfying time in that I enjoyed my work and my working companions. Conditions were primitive, the showers were make shift huts over run by rats, they would run along the edge and appear to stare down at one having a shower, the toilets were primitive, however time passed pleasantly enough. I really did not have any regrets, nor did I think much of why was I doing what I was doing. Social life was reasonable. We bachelors, often felt out of things, we talked about sex, ran after the young women who came to visit, but nothing serious happened.

We lived like members of the kibbutz. Food was bad and rather boring, but then there still was a general shortage of food in these early years. We subsisted on egg plants cooked in a dozen different ways, and lot of tomatoes and cucumbers. It is amazing what can be done with eggplants. They can be made to taste like "schmaltz" herring or stewed apples. However being a shepherd meant getting up at ungodly hours like 4-5 a.m. to milk the sheep before taking them out in the morning. This had to be done before it became too hot. Thus we had breakfast ourselves in the kitchen and for getting up so early we got extra rations, a real omelet or halva, considered a delicacy. If one were sick, these extras were provided, as was chicken soup a cure all.

After a hiatus of about a year we were sent on imun mitkadem (advanced training) to the Negev, to Camp Nathan, just outside Beersheba. It is hard to believe that this is the same Beersheba that is a thriving metropolis today. Beersheba was a sleepy little town, part in ruin, since it had been predominantly an Arab town, an oasis in the middle of the desert before the War of Independence. There were a few Arab style buildings and a Jewish entrepreneur had open an ice cream parlor, Moshe's "glidah", to which we went at every opportunity. The ice cream was good, and we could sit around and enjoy a beer. I can still picture the small building which became the shop, the few palm trees, and the surrounding desert.

In Machaneh Nathan we ate sand, slept in sand, and had sand all around us. This was the heart of the Negev desert. Advanced training did not seem all that different from basic training, the same discipline, and the same exercises. There was talk of making us "jump" and train us as

parachutists, but luckily this did not happen. I had great difficulty jumping off the roof of a low level building, never mind from an airplane.

One of the “adventures” of this period was to test our ability to do without water. I don’t know whose great idea it was. I think it may have been that of Aryeh (Arik) Sharon our mad general. (If I am correct this is the same Sharon who later became prime minister, and is still lying in a comma in Hospital after a stroke). The great idea was to march from Beersheba to Masada under strict water rationing or no water at all. This was a march through the desert of about 50 miles. I think Tommy and I acted as scouts going ahead to map the way, and I suppose to ascertain there was no “ enemy” in the region. We did meet the occasional Bedouin. The route was tough, the sun strong and it was very hot. We were strictly rationed as to the amount of water we could drink, very little. The long line of soldiers was followed by ambulances and tankers containing water just in case anyone fainted. When we got to Masada all we wanted to do was lie down and rest. Instead the army decided that we should have a series of lectures on the history of the place. Instead of giving us water, they gave us either soft drinks or chocolate milk. We began to puke; exhausted soldiers fainted from either dehydration or the excess of sweet liquid. No one gave a damn about the lectures. Every time I think of Masada I think of this grueling hike. I assume we had “ misdar” (a parade) on the top of Masada, but no one felt very patriotic at that moment. I have avoided going to Masada as a result of this experience. I don’t mind other parts of the Negev. I enjoy the Dead Sea and Ein Gedi, but Masada always reminds me of the stupidity of the army. I think the army has given up on the theory that one can be trained to survive on little water. Sounds a lot like Lysenko’s genetics.

We did see some action while in the Negev. We were sent out to ambush Fedayeen who were routinely crossing from Gaza strip and launching terrorist attacks. In one case we were sent to the Kurdish village of Patish to raise the moral of the immigrants sent to this god –forsaken place, after someone had thrown hand grenades into a wedding party. One person was killed and 23 injured. This was in March 1955. The village itself was founded in 1950. Attempts were made to settle Jews from Egypt but they refused to stay, so the Jewish Agency sent Kurdim!

It is in the middle of nowhere and reminds me of the location for the Israeli movie, “the band”, about an Egyptian band lost in the Negev. This was followed by routine night ambushes near Nachal Oz and Zeikim, just north of the Gaza strip. We would lie just off the beach behind

some scrub bushes and wait for hours for someone to pass. Once we shot up a poor donkey, which wandered off his regular track, and once a lone individual was shot. He had crossed the border in the water. He had no identification on him, and was unarmed. We had quite some discussion as to whether we had caught a terrorist or some poor soul who wanted to join his family or visit a relative. Who knows? After a few months of this we were released from the army and made our way back to Amiad.

When we discuss our time in the army none of us feel any nostalgia. Perhaps we were too old, or just not ready for this experience. Obviously it was necessary if we were going to continue to live in Israel, and we continued to do “milluim” (reserve duty) once or twice a year. Since I left Israel a few years later, I cannot judge how others felt about this disruption in their lives.