



Switching Sides

When Irgun agents broke into Acre Prison in stolen army jeeps and fake British uniforms, their leader's dog tags were genuine. Though decorated for bravery in World War II, he had turned against his former comrades in a daring jailbreak // [Tamar Hayardeni](#)



Among the British rank and file during World War II, murmurs of excitement tinged with jealousy accompanied any mention of the army's most elite units. A corporal might boast that his brother had served in the Royal East Kent Regiment, better known as the Buffs. Or that his father had been in the Royal Pioneer Corps, the legendary engineering unit that could penetrate the strongest defenses. A particularly lucky soldier whose service had a Middle Eastern flavor might claim he'd caught a glimpse of the unparalleled No. 51 Commandos, Jewish and Arab recruits who engaged in fierce guerrilla warfare in East Africa and Ethiopia. And only a few could say they knew a member of the SIG, a special intelligence unit made up of German-speaking Jews who masqueraded as German soldiers behind enemy lines and wreaked havoc during Rommel's North African offensive. Had anyone professed to have met a fellow who'd served in all of the above – as well as in the SAS, the Special Air Service, which downed more Nazi planes than any other division of the

Royal Air Force – nobody would have believed it.

Yet there was indeed one such soldier, a brave chap named Dov Cohen, who later joined the Jewish Brigade as well as the "TTG" unit it spawned to expedite escaped Nazis' descent into hell after the war. Cohen somehow found time to write books and poetry too, and he even fit in a few outrageously daring operations for the Irgun underground militia. Don't ask when he slept.

History of a Hero

Cohen was born into a well-educated family in Horodenka, Poland (now in Ukraine). While his classmates struggled with math and physics, Dov learned Hebrew and German and preached Zionism to fellow members of Jabotinsky's Betar youth movement. In 1938, after his discharge from the Polish army, he moved to Mandate Palestine, enrolled in the Hebrew University, and upgraded his Betar activities.

A year after his arrival, however, Cohen joined the British army's Royal Pioneer Corps and was sent to Europe to lay railway lines. A year later, he was promoted to the No. 51 Commandos and decorated



Served in the most elite British units, then fought to expel that same army from the land of Israel. Dov Cohen in British army uniform during World War II

Courtesy of the Jabotinsky Archive

for bravery in battle in Eritrea. His next stop, practically R & R, was in the Palestine Buffs, which incorporated Jews and Arabs from Mandate Palestine. From the Buffs' largely maintenance operations, Dov graduated to the SIG, making excellent use of his German. Following a stint in the SAS, he volunteered in the Jewish Brigade and was decorated once again, this time for fighting Nazis on the Italian front. And toward the end of the war, he joined the TTG, taking revenge on those who'd murdered his family along with all the other Jews of Horodenka.

In 1945, after almost seven years in the British Armed Forces, Cohen returned to Mandate Palestine. Senior members of the Hagana urged him to join their ranks, but instead he commanded the rival Irgun militia's Petah Tikva force. Under his *nomme de guerre*, Gondar Shimshon, he planned and executed many

clandestine missions, including the attack on the Lydda airport in the joint Hagana-Irgun "Night of the Airfields" operation in February 1946, from which all his men returned safely. Having knocked out fifteen aircraft and damaged eight, Cohen was promoted to Irgun commander Eitan Livni's right-hand man. (Livni later became a Likud member of Knesset and Tzipi Livni's father.)

That spring, Cohen led a botched attack on the Ashdod train station. Thirty-one out of thirty-three operatives were captured by the British and imprisoned in Acre with sentences ranging from fifteen years to life. Dov was one of the pair who escaped arrest, but he regarded the affair as a personal failure, especially as his boss, Livni, was among those incarcerated. He resolved to break into the jail and free all his colleagues, and to whoever doubted his ability to pull off such a stunt, Cohen

After Cohen's sabotage operation landed most of his operatives in Acre Prison, he resolved to spring them all



The guard at the entrance waved the convoy through, but Cohen fixed him with a stern glance and scolded him for barely checking his papers

An elegantly planned assault on a maximum-security jail. Acre Prison two years after its walls were breached by the Irgun

Photo: William Van der Poll

Camp of the Jewish Brigade's 2nd Regiment in Italy
Courtesy of Bitmuna

recited his record in the Pioneers, the Commandos, the Buffs, the Brigade, etc.

Off to Acre

Acre Prison was originally an Ottoman fortress built over a Crusader castle. Impressed with its long-standing lineage, the British adapted it to their own penal purposes, including the installation of an ultra-modern gallows. Hundreds of inmates enjoyed the dubious hospitality of the jail's thick, stone walls during the Mandate period. Most of these prisoners were Arab criminals, but there were also a few dozen Zionist militia men and even, briefly, Jabotinsky himself.

Shortly after the would-be saboteurs of Ashdod Station joined their ranks, there was an unusual uptick in the number of "tourists" fascinated by the ancient site, busily photographing its every scenic angle. At the same time,

Jewish prisoners' families began visiting more than ever. Thanks to this intensive surveillance, all security measures and guard duty schedules were duly noted, including the most promising times for a breakout and secure escape routes.

A Jewish engineer who worked for the Mandate obtained plans of the entire prison complex, and Cohen chose to breach the southern wall, where the large municipal Turkish bath leans up against the fortress to this day. Explosives were smuggled into the waiting hands of the Irgun prisoners and a few Lehi fighters in whom they'd confided. All awaited the appointed day.

On May 4, 1947, around 3:30 in the afternoon, a convoy of jeeps from the British Engineering Corps rumbled through sleepy Acre en route to the prison. The vehicles were stolen, the soldiers' uniforms were a sham, and only



the officer in the front car – none other than Dov Cohen – was dressed in authentic army gear decorated with genuine medals.

The guard at the entrance checked the sergeant's fake pass and waved the convoy through, but Cohen fixed him with a stern glance and – in a polished British accent – criticized his sloppy security in such dangerous times, what with Jewish terrorists attacking British targets all over the country. The others in the jeep held their breath and wondered if Shimshon had lost his senses! After a minute that felt like an eternity, the embarrassed sentry reexamined the papers, then handed them back to Cohen with a muttered apology.

Cohen's comrades were ready to give him a piece of their minds, but there was no time. One jeep turned south, unloading its occupants at the Turkish bath, where they posed as British telephone technicians.

By the By

- Hagana leaders denounced the “superfluous” jailbreak in Acre, claiming it had inflicted tremendous damage on the prestate Jewish community in Mandate Palestine and cost too many casualties. Others, melting with admiration for the operation's heroes, countered that its opponents just resented not having been asked to take part.

Irgun leader, Menachem Begin responded to the events in a May 7 radio broadcast:

Defeatists and deserters are exploiting the blood we've lost to rub salt into our bleeding wounds. Sadistically they ask: “Was it worth it? Look at the price you've paid!”

Woe, brother-hating deserters [...]. When four were killed in a terrorist operation by the Sarona fence, we honored them as fighters; we weren't jealous, nor did we say, “Look at the price you've paid for the failure” [...]. And even then, when you killed and drowned 220 Jewish souls in the depths of the sea by blowing up the *SS Patria*, we didn't fault you [...]. Only a traitorous defeatist who abandons his brethren to the slaughter will ask, is it worth it? And only a coward waiting for the slaughterer to slay him will ask, why? And for what? And only a blind man will say, “These are vain sacrifices.” (Menachem Begin, *Correspondence: In the Underground* [Hadar Publishing, 5719–22], vol. 3, p. 67 [Hebrew])

Ironically, in the film *Exodus* (1960), a Hagana unit executes the breakout from Acre Prison. Irgun veterans were justifiably outraged at this distortion of history.

- Most Jewish settlements near Acre were affiliated with Labor Zionism and therefore refused the British request to bury the seven Revisionists among the raid's nine casualties. In the end, the seven – including Dov Cohen – were laid to rest in Moshav Shavei Zion, between Acre and Nahariya. Cohen is also commemorated among the slain members of the Irgun's two settlement groups – named for pro-Zionist British MP Josiah Wedgewood and WWI Jewish Legion commander Eliezer Margolin – on a monument in Moshav Nordia, near Netanya.
- Acre Prison was conquered by Israeli forces on May 16, 1948, two days after the establishment of the State of Israel. At first the structure served as a military prison, then as a psychiatric facility, and in 1981 the building was converted into a museum commemorating the underground fighters imprisoned and executed there. The exhibition reconstructs prisoners' daily lives – and the story of the historic jailbreak.



As the old men drowsing inside watched indifferently, ladders, hooks, ropes, and electrical equipment – as well as dynamite and crowbars – were hauled up to the roof. Meanwhile, Irgun fighters spread out around the prison's perimeter with baggy civilian clothes for the escaping prisoners, so they could melt into the crowd.

Breakout!

At precisely 4:22 pm, an almighty explosion shook the castle, blasting an enormous hole in the southern wall, much to the elderly bathers' astonishment. The militia members imprisoned within immediately breached the iron-barred inner gate, while other inmates kept the shocked British jailers at bay with tear gas and explosives. In seconds, the rejoicing prisoners climbed through the opening torn in the wall, scampered over the rooftops, and disappeared into alleyways. Using roundabout routes, Livni and co. managed to drive by truck almost to Kibbutz Dalia. From there, they walked to the Irgun base in Shuni, near Zikhron Yaakov (and today the site of an Irgun museum and memorial).

Forty-one Irgun and Lehi members escaped that day, though not all reached freedom. Six were killed during exchanges of fire, and eight were caught and returned to jail.

Two hundred Arab inmates also took the opportunity to flee, but with no help on the outside and not a little bad luck, almost all were captured and put back behind bars.



Labor Zionists living near Acre refused him burial on their kibbutzim. Dov Cohen
Courtesy of the Jabotinsky Archive

Five of the thirty-four fighters attacking the prison were caught. Two received life sentences, and three – Meir Nakar, Avshalom Haviv, and Yaakov Weiss – were hanged in Acre. Three more were killed during the operation – including Dov Cohen himself. The legendary veteran of numerous British commando units was gunned down while providing cover for his men. He was only thirty-two. □



Tamar Hayardeni

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Handy Info

Where to Eat

Roots

1 Weizmann Street
Old Acre
Kosher, meat
(04) 884-8040

Mazalika

28 Jehoshaphat Street
Acre
Kosher, meat
(04) 991-1913

Hamasbia

1 Weizmann Street
Old Acre
Kosher, dairy
(04) 902-1515

Don't Miss

Knights' Halls

1 Weizmann Street
Old Acre
(04) 995-6707
Entry fee

Hamam al Basha (Turkish Bath) Museum

1 Weizmann Street
Old Acre
(04) 995-6744
Entry fee

Bahai Gardens

Route 8501, northern Acre
(04) 831-3131
Entry free