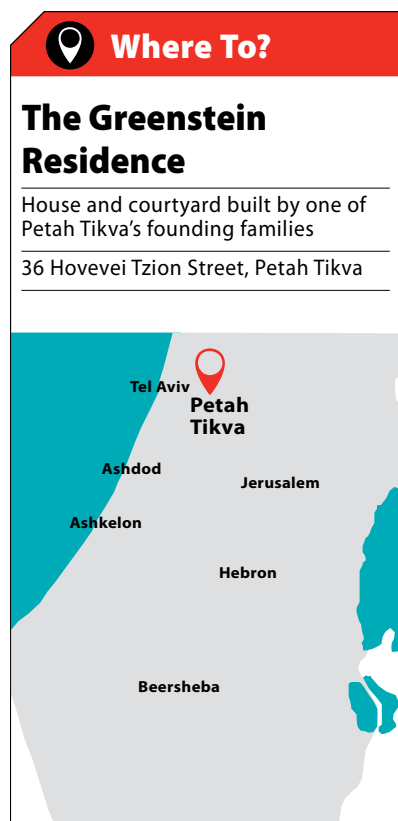


Queen Esther of Petah Tikva

Esther Greenstein never made it into the founding myth of Petah Tikva, but that doesn't make her contribution to its survival any less – as any bandit who crossed her could attest // **Tamar Hayardeni**



It's hard to find an Israeli who can't tell you what happened one damp morning in 1879 when five riders set out to found the town that became Petah Tikva. Yoram Taharlev's song has immortalized the myth of Yoel Moshe Salomon and three friends' surveying the marshy terrain by the village of Umlabes, while the Greek doctor Mazarake warned of the toxic air in which no birds sang. Salomon, so the legend goes, insisted on

staying the night, during which he sprouted wings and disappeared, leaving behind a valley full of birdsong.

Few are aware, however, that there's one rider missing from the ditty. Judah Raab's descendants still hold the omission against Taharlev. His version of the tale also ignores the town's womenfolk. The female population of Petah Tikva made such a fuss about it that one year the whole municipality was decorated with posters celebrating the riders' wives. All of which goes to show that you can't use pop songs to teach history.

Two Resounding Slaps

Much has been written about the history of Petah Tikva, which claimed to be the first modern Jewish settlement in the Holy Land (actually, Rishon Letzion was founded three years earlier). Yet the story of Esther Greenstein, Petah Tikva's unofficial queen, is relatively unknown. It goes like this.

Hidden behind a nondescript row of shops at 36 Hovevei Zion Street in Petah Tikva, there's a small courtyard, built in 1884 by Wolf Leib and Esther Greenstein. You might think that with such old-fashioned names they came straight from the ultra-Orthodox bastions of Jerusalem's Old City – as indeed they did. Wolf Leib

was a child prodigy who left Jerusalem's Torah academies to join the first class of the Mikve Israel agricultural school. In shock, his father married him off to Esther Rabinowitz, hoping this daughter of a distinguished family would turn his son around. But Esther thought a short beard and farmer's tan rather suited her husband and joined him in Mikve Israel. Wolf Leib soon began teaching at the school, and the couple was blessed with a son, Hayim Tzvi.

When the pioneers of Petah Tikva arrived, Wolf Leib (who'd meanwhile Hebraicized his name to Ze'ev Arye, "Wolf Lion") lent them his agricultural expertise. Lacking both funds and building permits, he and his fellow settlers were housed in clay hovels, where they suffered hunger and malaria.

Back in Jerusalem, the elder Greensteins pronounced their son and daughter-in-law insane, and Esther's parents begged her to leave her crazy husband and save her infant son from certain death. Yet Esther had already been hardened by multiple dangers, including illness, plague, and bandits' raids on the orchards.

On one such occasion, thieves broke into the farm, and the women and children quickly locked themselves inside a barn. The men struggled to defend their property but fell one after



Esther Greenstein's tombstone in Petah Tikva

Ze'ev Arye Greenstein in his old age

Courtesy of the Petah Tikva historical archive

another. The attackers headed for the barn, only to be surprised by Esther, pitchfork in hand and fire in her eyes. Leib Frumkin, one of those injured in the skirmish, later described the scene:

When they came to rob the building where the women and children were hiding, the rioters were met by an outstanding display of female courage armed with a pitchfork, upraised to stab the murderers. [Esther] was just a hairsbreadth from death. (Gershon Gera, *All Beginnings*, p. 46 [Hebrew])

Petah Tikva was saved, and

the Greensteins spent a few years shuttling between Rishon Letzion and Yehudiya, returning in 1884. They settled in the small, scenic courtyard mentioned earlier, in a house used today as a kindergarten. Originally, it was a four-room, one-story structure with a large veranda running the length of the façade. In typical Greenstein fashion, even the construction was tinged with melodrama. When the first walls were erected, a delegation from a nearby Arab village turned up with a Turkish police officer, demanding to see a building permit. Greenstein had none, but that didn't stop Esther from

Esther yanked the bride off the camel, stripped her of her gold trinkets, and announced that she'd get them back only when Petah Tikva had been compensated for the damage

yelling at the intruders in her most colorful Arabic to beat it. Tempers flared, a fight broke out, and in minutes Esther was at the center of the fracas, letting loose with her fists until her opponents ran screaming from the site.

Soon afterward, according to a similar anecdote, an Ottoman tax official popped up in Petah Tikva, mounted the threshing floor, and doubled everyone's taxes. The farmers knew he would pocket the extra but dared not defy him, lest he badmouth them to his boss, the *peha*, and put an end to their budding settlement. Once again, there was an argument,



The Greensteins' home



By the By

- ▶ Petah Tikva (Door of Hope) was actually supposed to have been built in the Valley of Achor (Troubled Valley), in the Jordan Valley near Jericho. There, settlers hoped to realize a biblical prophecy: "And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the Valley of Achor for a door of hope" (Hosea 2:17). Instead the town ended up just east of Tel Aviv, with dramatic ramifications for the traffic on Israel's main highway.
- ▶ Opposite the Greensteins' house is Petah Tikva's main synagogue. The three sundials on its western wall were built by Moshe Shapira, an ultra-Orthodox autodidact from Jerusalem's Mea She'arim neighborhood. Just imagine Greenstein and Shapira swapping ultra-Orthodox, anti-Zionist jokes in the middle of Hovevei Zion (Lovers of Zion) Street!
- ▶ Esther Greenstein was killed by a stray bullet in a standoff with Arab raiders. Pregnant at the time, she was buried in Petah Tikva's first graveyard. After that, bad luck continued to plague the Greensteins. During Arab rioting in 1921, their eldest son, Hayim Tzvi, was killed along with three other defenders of the settlement. He left behind a wife and five orphans. The town honors these men with a memorial and two thoroughfares – Hayim Tzvi Greenstein Street and nearby Absalom Gissen Boulevard.

faces reddened, and then along came Esther Greenstein. Jumping up onto the threshing floor, she gave the official two stinging slaps on the cheek, knocking him to the floor. Instantly, the elders of Petah Tikva insist, the man sprouted wings. Where did he fly off to? No one knows, but from that day on, taxes were collected without a penny's worth of overcharges.

The First *Sulha*

The most famous yarn about Esther's knuckles appears at length in the Greenstein family's memoir, written in 1933 and archived in the Petah Tikva Historical Museum. It all started when an Arab wedding procession passed through the city on its way to the Arab village next door. Riding a camel, the young bride wore a sparkling green satin dress and gold jewelry from head to toe. Dozens followed in her wake, singing, playing exotic

instruments, and attracting Petah Tikva's Jewish residents with cries of "*Ma brukh!*" ("Blessings!") and "Mazel tov!"

Just as east and west seemed to unite in a rare moment of cultural harmony, the wedding party rode straight into the settlement's ripening fields, disregarding their owners' angry protests. The local Jewish home guard was speedily called in, including Esther Greenstein, by then a proud mother of three. Predictably, a fight broke out, intensifying when the Arabs pulled out nail-studded cudgels. They attacked Alexander Hadad, head of the Jewish defense group, almost killing him.

Yet again, Esther let fly a stream of curses, this time in Yiddish. Grabbing a cudgel from one of the attackers, she struck out right and left. Astonished, never having heard tell of the Queen of Petah Tikva, her assailants soon found themselves on the ground and in agony.

Fuming, Esther yanked the bride off the camel, stripped her of her gold trinkets, and announced that she'd get them back only when Petah Tikva had been compensated for the damage.

Word of Esther's brave heart and doughty fists, whose blows had laid low the strongest of men, spread like wildfire, and by the next day, the bride's family requested a *sulha* – a traditional Arab conciliatory feast. Sheep were sent to Petah Tikva's shohet for slaughter, and a few days later both sides sat down to a historic meal of mutual recognition. At this first modern-

day Jewish-Arab ceremony in the land of Israel, a further precedent was set by honoring a woman. That made even Baron Rothschild sit up and take notice of Esther Greenstein.

All financial damage incurred by Petah Tikva in the incident was paid, and Esther duly returned the bridal jewelry. Shyly, the bride proffered one of her gold bangles back as a gift.

The Next Generation

Over the years, Ze'ev Arye and Esther Greenstein had three more children, and the modest house on Hovevei Tzion Street overflowed. In time, the veranda was enclosed and the house divided into two apartments, stunting its original beauty.

The Greensteins' younger son, Michael, followed in his father's footsteps, studying agriculture at Mikve Israel and tending his own orchards. His eldest daughter, Chana Sharon, was a judge at the Tel Aviv magistrates' court and lived next door to her grandparents' historic home in Petah Tikva.

Should you peep into the courtyard, notice the commemorative blue plaque on a shop wall, hung by the Petah Tikva municipality in honor of the Greenstein family. □



Tamar Hayardeni

A licensed tour guide and research fellow at the Ben-Zvi Institute, Hayardeni has also authored several children's books

Handy Info

Where to Eat

► La Carna

1 Hayim Ozer Street
Kosher, meat, (03) 549-9174

► Alfredo

94 Eim Ha-moshavot Street
Kosher mehadrin, dairy, (03) 923-0643

► Eliyahu Houmous

9 Bareket Street
Kosher mehadrin, dairy, (03) 540-8317

Don't Miss

► Museum Campus

Art Museum, Founders' Museum, Fallen Soldiers' Archive and Memorial
30 Arlozorov Street
Open Monday, Wednesday, and Friday,
10 am–2 pm; Tuesday and Thursday,
4 pm–8 pm
(03) 928-6300, entrance fee

► Avraham Shapira House

Home of the settlement's legendary watchman
20 Herzl Street, Petah Tikva
Free entry, reservations required
(03) 905-2350

► Yarkon Springs Visitors' Center

By Kibbutz Gan Ha-shelosh
Free entry, reservations required
(03) 938-8961