



Robin Hood of the Galilee

The protection provided by the young Jewish socialist founders of the Shomer militia was sometimes financed by expropriation operations that reduced their bourgeois Jewish victims to penury and shame, even driving them from the Holy Land // **Tamar Hayardeni**



Where To?

Kfar Giladi

The Shomer Museum and reconstructed weapons cache dating from 1922

Museum: open Sunday–Thursday, 8 am–4 pm; entry fee, (04) 694-1565
Weapons' Cache: entry fee, reservations required, 052-251-2915



inter 1999. Students from a tour guides' course visit the Shomer (Guardian) weapons

cache in Kibbutz Kfar Giladi. Tova, a kibbutz veteran, recaps this early Zionist militia's heroic exploits. The fighters kept the roads safe,

bought weapons, and deflected enemy attacks on the Galilee's first settlements, she explains, all while building up their own commune (the first of its kind), planting trees, and raising children. Crammed into the small, dimly lit room, her audience listens spellbound as Tova recalls the difficult beginnings of the British Mandate, with the population of the Holy Land reeling from famine and sickness following World War I. How lucky we are, she says, that the Shomer's blue-eyed idealists cast aside bourgeois dreams of university in Belarus and came here instead to sow the seeds of a state in the desolate Middle East.

Interrupting this Zionist reverie, a student named Itamar throws out a seemingly casual remark. "That's all very well, Tova, but I just wanted you to know that I'm a great-grandson of Moshe Zalman Levin of Levin Brothers Investment Bank. I'm here because my mother came back to Israel from Brazil."

Heavy silence. Tova lowers her gaze, finally whispering: "Manya Shohat owes you and your family an enormous apology."

Expropriation (Un)limited

In November 2009, author Meir Shalev wrote in his column in *Yediot Aharonot's* weekend supplement that though the Shomer had valiantly defended Jewish lives and property in the Holy Land, criticism was also in order. Truth will out, he said.

That truth, it turned out, was connected to expropriation, a word defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as "the action by the state or an authority of taking property from its owner for public use or benefit," or in short, "the action of dispossessing someone of property." That second definition – which incidentally could cover any act of robbery – could have been written for all the Jewish underground militias in British Mandate Palestine, including the Shomer, but their lack of a public mandate certainly disqualified them from the first, more accurate definition.

The Shomer's brave defenders used the word "expropriation" as a euphemism for the occasional robberies they carried out to finance their activities. The agents responsible for these "ex" operations,



By the By

- The cache in Kfar Giladi was built to store large amounts of ammunition bought with the funds stolen in the “Carriage Job.” Five meters deep, the hiding place took a year to dig – in total secrecy.

Isser Be’eri, a leader of the Labor Brigade, director of the Hagana home guard’s intelligence service, and later head of the Israeli Military Intelligence directorate, was famous for his cover-ups. He brought in Jewish workers from outside the area to plaster over the cache, blindfolding them en route so they’d have no idea where they were.

- For over half a century no one outside the Clandestine Commune’s inner circle knew anything about the stash, until Nahum Hurwitz, a senior member of the Shomer, stumbled across it in 1983. The weapons-store contained hundreds of hand grenades, rifle bullets, and mortars. Hurwitz dutifully kept his amazing discovery quiet for another ten years, until plans to build on site forced him to reveal the cache’s existence. After that, it was restored and opened to the public as a heritage site.

as they called them for short, claimed in their defense that they were stealing from the British, or from middle-class Jews who could and should have been supporting the Zionist battle against Arabs and imperialists, especially since said Jews were benefitting. It was Robin Hood all over again, the logic went, with the Shomer robbing the rich to “feed” the poor Zionists. All proceeds were earmarked for arms purchases, construction of fortifications and secret armories, military training, etc.

Kibbutz Kfar Giladi was no different from any other “ex” executor. The commune was established in 1916 in the northernmost Galilee Panhandle, where the kibbutzniks hoped to draw the northern border of the Promised Land. At first it was called Kfar Bar Giora (incorporating the Shomer’s original name), and its illustrious members included Alexander Zaid, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, Israel and Manya Shohat, and the famed Joseph Trumpeldor. All were highly skilled horsemen and courageous warriors but cared little for the property rights of bourgeois travelers.

In 1918, after kibbutznik Israel Giladi was killed, Kfar Bar Giora was renamed for him, and in 1921 its members officially joined the Labor Brigade (Gedud Ha-avoda, a forerunner of today’s United Kibbutz Movement). At the same time, Manya Shohat set up a small, radical “Clandestine Commune,”

also known as “Manya Shohat’s Gang.”

Galilean Sting

In December 1923, the gang planned its most ambitious heist: the “Carriage Job,” or the “Great Ex.” The target: a horse-drawn coach transporting the fabulous sum of fifteen thousand gold coins from Beirut to Jerusalem. The money represented almost the total combined wealth of ten Jewish investors from Jerusalem, who’d entrusted their life savings to the Levin Brothers Investment Bank, expecting to “make a killing.” The scheme was simple but lucrative: the consortium had bought up gold coins cheaply in Lebanon and Syria, intending to exchange them at a much higher rate in Jerusalem.

One participant was Isaac Avigdor Anda, a gentle yeshiva student from the Holy City who’d turned to money-changing so his seven children wouldn’t starve. Anda himself had nothing like the sum required for such an adventure, but he’d persuaded a good number of wealthy Jerusalemites that it couldn’t fail.

The coach had been reinforced against bullets and sabers. Inside sat Anda and Moshe Zalman Levin – one of the two brothers who ran the bank – accompanied by a pair of burly, well-armed guards, thanks to whom they’d made it safely from Beirut to the Upper Galilee.

After a turn in the road just below Rosh Pina, an ersatz British checkpoint suddenly blocked their



way. Levin dismounted, responding swiftly to seemingly routine inquiries about his destination and cargo. He produced an official Mandate permit, which affirmed that the gold in the carriage was his legal property and that he was allowed to bring it into British territory. The “checkpoint officer” asked to see the coins himself, handled a few, even bit them, and then declared them counterfeit and demanded their confiscation.

Anda and Levin almost fainted. The official promised that the requisite lab examination would take a day or two at most. If the coins turned out to be real, their rightful owners could collect them at the Rosh Pina police station. The fellow even issued them a receipt from His Majesty’s Mandate Government for fifteen thousand gold coins, after which he and his men made off with the entire cargo.

Needless to say, Anda and Levin

found no trace of their gold in Rosh Pina, and the “receipt” turned out to be a clever forgery. A British commission of inquiry subsequently came up empty-handed. Some claim that Jewish detectives working for the British Mandate covered the thieves’ tracks and tampered with evidence, since the loot was to be used for “the greater Zionist good.”

Licensed to Steal

The investors’ fortunes were lost, and their lives shattered. Anda returned to Jerusalem abject and ashamed. To repay his debts, he spent the rest of his days as a ritual slaughterer, which he hated. Levin and his brothers declared bankruptcy, and Moshe Zalman moved to Sao Paulo, Brazil, where he became a community rabbi.

Over the years, evidence mounted that the heist was carried out not by British soldiers, as everyone had



The enormous sum “acquired” in the Great Expropriation enabled its perpetrators to purchase vast stores of ammunition and conceal them in the most sophisticated weapons hideaway in the country

Photo: Dr. Avishai Teicher, Pikiwiki



When Manya and Israel Shohat founded the Bar Giora militia in 1907, it was the first of its kind. Later expanded and renamed Ha-shomer, it was replaced after World War I by the Hagana home guard. The Shomer was supposed to disband, but remained somewhat active within Shohat's Labor Brigade. Bar Giora guardsmen in Kfar Giladi, 1907

Photo: Israel Government Press Office

Facing page: in Russia, Manya Shohat was a firebrand revolutionary arrested for belonging to the Communist Bund. Shohat founded her own Russian Jewish labor union, with many thousands of members. Young Manya

thought, but by the Kfar Giladi gang. Prof. Ze'ev Tzahor examined a 1926 investigation of the Clandestine Commune. Concerning the "Carriage Job" he wrote:

Raised as they were in the tradition of Russian social revolutionaries, the members of the commune saw themselves as heralds of a new world order, entitled to fund their revolutionary activities by forced appropriation of bourgeois capital. [...]

The committee was asked to investigate an operation carried out toward the end of 1923, when commune members overpowered a vehicle belonging to Jewish Jerusalemite smugglers transferring fifteen thousand gold coins from Beirut to Jerusalem.

This "successful" operation was controversial not because of the

means by which the money was obtained, but due to rumors that the ill-gotten gains had been used for non-revolutionary purposes. (Ze'ev Tzahor, "The Committee to Investigate the 'Clandestine Commune' in the Gedud Ha-avoda," *Cathedra* 58 [December 1990], p. 142 [Hebrew])

The chairman of the investigative committee, none other than Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, deemed the expropriation operation ideologically and morally sound, comparing it to government taxation. His only quibble was whether, as rumored, members of the commune had used the money to cover everyday expenses rather than buy weapons or construct the most sophisticated arms cache in the country.

The story continued to make waves decades later, featuring in two Israeli works: Shlomo Shva's *The*



Daring Tribe (1969), a novel based on the lives of Israel and Manya Shohat, and Deborah Omer's children's book *Gallop* (1989). Meir Shalev's curiosity was also piqued, leading him to Nahum Horowitz, one of the Shomer's last surviving members:

Nahum Horowitz invited me into his house but refused to answer my questions. "I have no idea what robbery you're referring to," he said, "and I'm not prepared to say a single thing about the Clandestine Commune. It's classified."

"It's already not so classified," I told him. "The story's been publicized, including in Shlomo Shva's *The Daring Tribe*."

Horowitz, a particularly surly geriatric, tensed. His eyes pierced mine threateningly. "Who did you say wrote that book?" he asked.

"Shlomo Shva."

"We'll deal with Shlomo Shva later, and I'm not saying another word to you."

I backed out one small step at a time, daring to smile only once I was outside. (Meir Shalev, "Guards and Policemen," *Yediot Aharonot* weekend supplement, November 13, 2009, p. 27)

"You can't turn back the clock," Itamar told Tova at the end of his group's visit to the weapons cache in Kfar Giladi in 1999. "You can't compensate my great-grandfather, or give us back all the years we wasted in Brazil. But at the very least, you ought to put up a small plaque thanking Moshe Zalman Levin – and all those others who lost everything – for their contribution to the Shomer militia and the Jewish state in the making."

To the best of our knowledge, the Carriage Job's victims are still



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

Mama Halsä

4 Yuval Yaniv Street,
Kiryat Shemona
Kosher, meat, (04) 694-0020

Landver Café

Nehemia Mall,
4 Ha-nasi Street,
Kiryat Shemona
Kosher, dairy, (04) 638-0221

Don't Miss

Tel Hai Historic Courtyard

Entry fee, reservations required, (04) 695-1333

Iyon (Tanur) Stream and Waterfall

Open Sunday–Thursday 8 am–5 pm, Friday 8 am–4 pm
Entry fee, (04) 695-1519

Manara Cliff

Access south of Kiryat Shemona
Open 11 am–3 pm
Entry fee, (04) 690-5830