

Scent of Freedom

“Bevingrad” was the highest-security British prison in the Middle East, but that didn’t stop Jewish paramilitaries from lying through their teeth and crawling through its sewers in a daring escape // Tamar Hayardeni

Where to?

The Underground Prisoners’ Museum

Renovated prison commemorating Jewish fighters jailed by the British

1 Mish’ol Ha-gevura Street, Jerusalem

(02) 623-3166

www.hamachtarot.blogspot.co.il

Open Sunday–Thursday,
9 am–5 pm; entrance fee



The average tourist would definitely wrinkle his nose in disgust and pity at the row of old women beaming from the photo of the Russian Compound’s pilgrim hostel in

turn-of-the-century Jerusalem. The subjects are seated on iron bedsteads on a flagged floor in a muddle of nondescript bureaus and rags. What stranger can appreciate a pilgrim’s joy at journey’s end, the expense and uncertainty all behind him, and only the calm and quiet of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre ahead? Who cared about the standard of accommodation when it came gratis in the Russian Compound, with a premium breakfast and the dust of saints thrown in?

The free ride came to a tragic end as revolutionary skies darkened over Russia during World War I. Fate permanently disconnected the czar and his family from the hardships of this world, Russia became the Soviet Union, and state-sponsored pilgrimages to the Holy Land were discontinued. The sixty-acre Russian Compound – hostels, church, and all – stood empty, and the country’s new British rulers were delighted to repurpose it. The women’s hostel became a prison, where Jewish underground fighters soon rubbed shoulders with murderers, thieves, and sundry petty criminals. The men’s

hostel housed a police station and lock-up, and the rooms reserved for visiting clergy were turned into a courtroom. The aristocrats’ section became the Agriculture Ministry, the small infirmary remained a hospital, and the entire complex was pressed into service as the seat of the Mandate government.

After the Jewish resistance movement bombed the King David Hotel in the summer of 1946, barbed wire went up around the Russian Compound, and the British declared it a closed security zone. The Jews mockingly called it “Bevingrad,” after Ernest Bevin, the British colonial minister whose discriminatory policies were downright anti-Semitic.

The fact that the compound was the most heavily guarded place in the country didn’t stop the underground fighters of the Irgun and Stern Gang from plotting their escape. At the beginning of 1948, Israel’s War of Independence was already well under way, and these inmates couldn’t stand wasting all their time and energy in jail. Their breakout involved two stages: smuggling themselves out of

By the thirteenth fugitive, one guard realized something was wrong and sounded the alarm, but the twelve escaped Stern Gang and Irgun fighters had vanished

prison, then out of Bevingrad. Each mission was considered impossible – but so was the creation of a Jewish state amid a sea of hostile Arabs...

Pipe Dreams

Deep inside the prison, locked away in cell 23, the militia men formulated a plan. The cell was large, crowded with fifteen bunk beds. There was no point in examining the thick walls and heavy steel bars for possible weaknesses, so the convicts started work right away on the floor. It was Joseph Ehrlich's idea; aside from his involvement in the Stern Gang, he happened to be a public works inspector for the Mandate government. He



All-inclusive hotel package, 19th-century-style.
Female pilgrims in the Russian Compound hostel

found a city plan that showed a sewage line passing right outside cell 23; the prisoners could dig a tunnel to the manhole that accessed it. From there they'd be halfway to freedom, leaving only the problem of escaping tightly patrolled Bevingrad.

As the best minds in the resistance struggled to find a way out of the Alcatraz of the Middle East, the rest put their backs into taking up the flooring under the bed farthest from the cell door. This bed belonged to Moshe Svorai, one of the Stern Gang commanders who'd devised the plan. He also needed the least sleep of any of them, which was lucky, as the excavation obviously took place mostly at night.

The floor was very thick, and its flagstones enormous and extremely heavy. Ehrlich managed to smuggle in implements, cement, and flashlights, but how to dispose of the earth and stones being dug up right under the British guards' noses? In an urgent meeting with the prison director, the residents of cell 23 complained bitterly that the high stone threshold at its entrance precluded their sweeping out the water used to scrub the floor. They asked permission to dig a small drainage channel just by the door. Delighted by his prisoners' concern with hygiene, the director agreed, even supplying them with tools and a wheelbarrow. For every "legally excavated" barrow



By the By

- ▶ The British invested much effort in turning the quaint women's pilgrim hostel into a high-security detention facility. They replaced the dainty shutters with black, iron bars, junked the pink curtains and soft, silk carpets, converted one dormitory into solitary confinement cells, and used the roof for patrols instead of laundry lines. It's hard to imagine rubashka-clad Russian women walking these long, dark corridors, humming a tune plucked out on a concertina.
- ▶ One room of the museum is devoted to the Jewish prisoners executed by the British, but their photos are displayed with no indication of when and why they were hanged. So Na'aman Belkind, strung up by the Turks in Damascus for helping the British as a member of the Nili spy ring in World War I, appears alongside Meir Nakar, executed in 1947 for acts of sabotage against the British; Moshe Marzouk, hanged in Egypt in 1955 as an Israeli spy in the Lavon affair, is next to Eliyahu Hakim, convicted of assassinating Lord Moyne and put to death by the British administration in Cairo in 1945; and Irgun activist Dov Gruner's portrait looks straight at that of Eli Cohen, Israel's famous Syrian spy.

of dirt, the diggers dumped two more from the escape tunnel.

As they dug, Irgun members on the outside came up with a way out of Bevingrad. Instead of trying to scale the fence or crawl under the barbed wire, the escapees would walk, bold as brass, through the main gate. First they'd clog the prison sewer system, prompting the British to bring in a public works team to fix it. Ehrlich and his Jewish crew would crowd around the crucial manhole just outside the jail, climb in one by one, and emerge stinking with sewage. Who'd get close enough to realize that more workers were coming out than had gone in? Hopefully, the whole group would walk straight past

the guards, who'd prefer to get them out of smelling distance as fast as possible without checking too many identity papers.

This crazy plan would work only if two items were smuggled in: a camera – to take photos for fake certificates – and overalls for the “maintenance men.” Then they'd have to walk through the most heavily guarded gate in the country without batting an eyelash.

A Storm in a Coffee Cup

On February 20, 1948 (10 Adar 5708), the prisoners broke through from the escape tunnel into the sewage pipe just below the manhole. A particularly hard-fought game of volleyball in the

jail yard distracted the guards on the roof.

At zero hour, the first two fugitives disappeared into the black hole of the tunnel – just as a squealer from cell 23 suggested to the duty officer (a Jew named Shvili) that he look around for Mati Shmuelewitz, the first escapee. Shvili was about to investigate when Moshe Svorai, already head and shoulders into the tunnel, realized that this glitch could make or break them. Desperate, he extricated himself, pulled the officer into cell 23, showed him the tunnel opening, and told him to his astonished face:

“Look, Shvili, this is an escape tunnel. We've been working on it for almost two months. If they get away, no one will blame you. They're getting out because they're needed outside for the war. What do you want?”

[Shvili] started to shake and answered in a choked voice, “You're destroying me!”

“Shvili,” I answered, “you have a family and kids out there. These boys are going to defend your family as well as others. If you want things to turn out for the best, just do as I tell you. Go to room 31 and have a cup of coffee, and stay there until someone comes to call you.” (Moshe Svorai, *How We Escaped to the Front: Thirty-Six Anti-British Underground Fighters' Daring Escape Stories*, p. 236 [Hebrew])



A combination of good luck and good sense led Shvili to room 31, where he drank enough coffee to last a lifetime. Meanwhile, covered with sewage and wearing their best “when’s our lunch break?” expression, Svorai and co. poked their heads out of the tunnel’s other end. One by one, they approached the various gates of Bevingrad at respectable intervals. Holding their noses, the guards waved them on without inspection. One suspicious sentry did stop a pair of “workers” and send them to the prison head for a spot check. But their filthy faces, stinking overalls, and dramatic flourish convinced the director to throw them out – and call for air freshener.

By the thirteenth fugitive, one guard realized something was up. The alarm was sounded, the prisoner arrested, and Jerusalem was placed under curfew, but the British couldn’t find the eight Stern Gang and four Irgun fighters who’d vanished into safe houses around the city. Though the manhunt continued, the wanted

men were soon far away, joining the Jewish army fighting for independence.

Three months later, the British furlled up the Union Jack and went back to where they came from. The Russian Compound prison was shut down, and the neighborhood captured by Jewish forces. After the State of Israel’s establishment, the jail served first as a Jewish Agency warehouse but was later turned into “The Hall of Heroism,” commemorating Irgun and Stern Gang prisoners.

In the 1980s, plans for Jerusalem’s new city hall and Safra Square threatened the prison with demolition. In 1991, thanks to a public campaign, the building was transferred to the Defense Ministry, which oversaw its renovation. After preservation, the jail reopened as the Underground Prisoners’ Museum. ▣



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

► Kadosh Coffee Shop

6 Shlomzion Ha-malka Street
053-809-4518
Kosher, dairy

► La Bocca

8 Shlomzion Ha-malka Street
(02) 563-5577
Kosher, meat

► Black

18 Shlomzion Ha-malka Street,
(02) 624-6767
Kosher, meat

Other Local Attractions

► Friends of Zion Museum

20 Joseph Rivlin Street
(02) 532-9400, www.fozmuseum.com
Open Sunday–Thursday, 9:30 am–6 pm,
Friday 9:30 am–2 pm
Entrance fee

► Jerusalem City Model

City Hall, Safra Square
(02) 629-7315
Free entry, guided tours only

► Tower of David Museum

Jaffa Gate
(02) 626-5333, www.tod.org.il
Open Sunday–Thursday, 9 am–4 pm,
Friday 9 am–2 pm
Entrance fee