



Museum visitors follow in the footsteps of *Palmach* soldiers

In Tel Aviv's *Palmach* Museum, visitors follow the journey of recruits, including confinement to a British detention camp, and diners listening to a radio broadcast of the 1947 United Nations General Assembly vote approving a Jewish state.

By HILLEL KUTTLER

THE MUSEUM in northern Tel Aviv lacks display cases, artifacts, don't-even-think-about-getting-close-to-the-million-dollar-painting ropes, documents, and explanatory text.

In short, the *Palmach* Museum isn't really a museum. It's more like the "*Palmach* Experience," a visitor's 90-minute leap back in time, to the most pivotal decade in modern Israel, and modern Jewish, history—the 1940s.

The unconventional museum educates people by personalizing the journeys of several young men and women brought together, late in the British Mandate period, when they joined the *Palmach*—the special-operations force of the equally illegal *Haganah* military in pre-state Israel—from its formation in 1941 through the War of Independence in 1948.

Akin to the *Palmach* soldiers' progressing as one unit, so do visitors undergo the experience with each other. With exhibitions absent, there's no

lingering. We proceed together as this *Palmach* unit's development unfolds on film, projected onto such surfaces as walls, tents, and rocky trails at each of a dozen or so rooms, all in the museum's basement. Visitors spend much of the hour and a half in near-darkness, taking in the projections. The film seems to come alive at points, almost like a play being performed for us.

Descending a ramp winding down through a memorial to *Palmach* fighters killed in service—beginning with the names of the legendary immigrants Hannah Senesh and Enzo Sereni, who were parachuted into German-occupied Europe—we begin the experience by entering a room that's set, as if on a stage, depicting a 1940s-era Israeli street corner that's dominated by the sides of three stone buildings. A period bicycle is chained to a sidewalk's post. A poster on a building's wall exhorts, "Arise and join up! Your place is in the military!" Meanwhile, on the wall is projected archival footage of Holocaust prisoners walking in striped uniforms.

We move into the next room, stepping onto the rocks and around boulders and



earth of a faux forest, eavesdropping on an early gathering of these soldiers-in-the-making. They express a determination to oppose the Nazis. We learn that British authorities had formed the *Palmach* as a unit to fight the Germans, in the event the latter succeeded in crossing northern Africa and invading pre-state Israel. In other rooms, we almost feel that we're among the real fighters as they roast potatoes and play an accordion around a campfire; undergo a briefing before departing in mid-June 1946 on the Night of the Bridges mission, when the *Palmach* dynamited 11 strategic bridges throughout the country; sit in the hold of a ship filled with Holocaust survivors attempting to run

the British blockade of the Promised Land; standing in a cemetery to bury a fellow soldier as another recites the Natan Alterman poem "Silver Platter."

The characters, a museum official later told me, are composites. Throughout the experience, we glean some of their personal histories. We watch as two get engaged, and hear about those we've met later killed in battle.

In an interview later with *JUF News*, museum director Zeev Lachish called *Palmach*, essentially, a composite, too, with "the basis of all the elements" of what would become the Israel Defense Forces—including the artillery corps, the navy, the air force—"created in *Palmach*."

As to the museum's out-of-the-box approach, the point was "to be different," Lachish explained.

"It's much easier to get to young people through the heart," and the museum's 20-year existence "is proof" of its success, he said.

"After leaving the museum, you can't remain indifferent. You have to be moved. You become, in a way, involved in the history. History comes alive." ■

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When in Tel Aviv...here are other military museums to check out...

The following are museums taking more traditional approaches to telling about Israel's military forces in the immediate pre-state years. Like the *Palmach* Museum, all are run by the Ministry of Defense and are located in Tel Aviv.

Haganah Museum: The *Haganah* (Hebrew for "defense") was the first of the militaries established in pre-state Israel, representing the mainstream Jewish Agency for Israel. It was established in 1920 to defend against Arab residents' attacks, and evolved into a military force—and eventually, upon statehood, into the Israel Defense Forces.

Etzel Museum: The *Etzel* (acronym for National Military Organization, also called the *Irgun*, Hebrew for "organization") actually has two museums: one downtown in the Jabotinsky House, a museum dedicated to Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the founder of Revisionist Zionism; and a free-standing, black-glass, triangular structure along the Mediterranean Sea. The latter museum features photographs, historical documents, newspaper clippings, maps, models, and weapons. Films are screened, and computer terminals are available to research battles and soldiers.

Lehi Museum: It's housed in the building where the leader of the *Lehi* (acronym for Fighters for Israel's Freedom), Yair Stern, was killed in February 1942 by a British police officer after Stern was discovered to be hiding in an apartment's bedroom closet. That room and its furnishings are preserved as a memorial. A lower floor tells of the *Lehi*, also known as the Stern Gang, which attacked British soldiers and targets in an effort to end the Mandate and establish a Jewish state. ■