

My Story

By: Joseph Shlain

T.

Mahal.

With you since 1948. when
I arrived in Israel. You were
Active then and to this Day.
more active than ever.
Wonderful - continue to enjoy
Happily. you also enjoy my story

Joseph.

7.7.2022

My Story

It is for one and all, that I have written My Story.

With it goes the wish that my direct family see it personally.

My children, great children, great grandchildren and future generations.

Several of my decisions were made in a matter of seconds, and determine my life. In all respect as positive my heart felt.

Best wishes to all.

It is often said that
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our lives can take

You could probably
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Chapter 1

Planting Roots

It is often said that life can take some unexpected twists and turns and take you to places that you never thought possible. In a glorious tango with destiny, our lives can take us to destinations beyond our greatest dreams.

You could probably say that my life has been exactly that - a wonderful journey to unexpected places, driven by a deep seated desire help to those who have needed or asked for it along the way.

It has always been my intention to be helpful. I have always sought to help in some way - build a community, give a friend a hand and be part of the fabric that has built this great country, Israel. The desire to help has been not just my moral compass; but the guide that has taken me down these roads of infinite possibilities.

I was born to Mordechai and Dvora Shlain on the 25th of February 1926 in Hadassah Hospital, Jerusalem. It was quite auspicious to be born in Hadassah because at the time, there was quite a lot of unrest. This was during the days of British Mandate Palestine and not Israel as we know it today and there were "interruptions" from time to time from some of the Arabs.

My father's story is quite extraordinary and one that is entwined with Israel's. He was born Mordechai ben Israel Shlain in 1901 and was



Parents: Father Mordechai,
Mother Devora

only 22 when armed with a Zionist certificate, a document that the authorities issued at the time to those who were either very wealthy or very Zionist made the trip to Israel in what is called "the third Aliyah". This was the term given to the waves of immigrants who would come from Russia or other parts of the world in large groups to build a new life in the ancient, biblical homeland of the Jewish people.

The prospect of being part of the fabric and building a community in the ancient Jewish homeland was something that he wanted and you could say it was ordained in his name. "Ben Israel" means son of Israel and while at the time it didn't refer to a country, it was certainly emblematic of its people. He came from the Ukraine and after landing in Jaffa Port in a small boat, he went on to the town of Petach Tikvah where he found employment working in the fields.

This wasn't the most lucrative job and one of the challenges facing Jewish workers at the time was the landowners at the time sometimes favoured hiring Arab workers instead.



Me Josie - The beginning of my life, 1926



Josie with Parents Mordechi & Dvora and recently born first sister Sheila

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It was in Petach Tikvah where my father met my mother. He had found out that one of his colleagues had a very beautiful sister called Dvorah. Dvorah Yudelowitz. Struck by her beauty and wonderful nature, he did not hesitate to marry her which he did on the 10th of February 1925. They moved to Jerusalem where I was born a little over a year later.

Times were tough during this time and my father wanted to better provide for his family. When I was about six months old, my father went to South Africa. My mom's brother lived there and my father's intention was to join him and earn a better living to provide for his family. It was difficult but my mother accepted this and I can quite easily describe her as someone so special, she was out of this world.

My uncle, Georgie, had changed his name from Gershon Yudelowitz to Georgie Miller. It is not clearly known why he decided to change his name but to me, he and his wife, a dear woman called Malka and his children were all the Miller family.

My mom and I moved back to Petach Tikvah and stayed with my grandmother, Hadassah, who I adored. She truly was a remarkable lady.

Petach Tikvah has a very special connection to my family. My grandmother came from the Levinrad family. One of our cousins from the Levinrad side was one of the early residents of the city. What is also quite incredible is that my grandmother had given birth to a son a short time before I was born so I had an uncle who was just a little above my age! His name was Yifrach Yudelowitz and he would go on to become quite a major part of my life.

Petach Tikvah means the "Opening of Hope" in English. This small city, close to the metropolis of Tel Aviv, was founded in 1878 and today is a bustling and brimming with different ethnicities and cultures.



Mordechai in the Fields of Petach Tikva

While my mother went out to work to support us, my grandmother raised six children –and in addition included me! We all lived in different houses but that was my grandmother – totally dedicated to her family. My mom helped my grandmother financially as much as she could and she had a wonderful support system in her brothers and sisters. I grew up in an environment rich with language, mainly hearing Hebrew. My mother kept in touch with my father as much as possible. I like to believe that they wrote beautiful letters to each other, sharing their daily stories. As the first grandchild, you imagine how I was doted on!

I don't remember very much about my childhood, how we observed the Jewish festivals or what games I played but I do remember being spoilt rotten!

One memory I do recall was when I was about 3½, my mom and I got on a bus from Petach Tikvah and got off in the seaside city of Haifa. There we would board a ship, bound for Cape Town, South Africa.

I don't remember much about the actual trip, whether we changed ships or any exciting anecdotes but I do clearly recall landing in Cape Town and being met by my father. I was very young at the time and although the memory is not distinct I know it most certainly would have been filled with joy. Our family was reunited again. We then journeyed to Johannesburg and a town called Brakpan just outside the city that was very well known and my father worked in Brakpan with my uncle who had a business.

I may have spent a part of my childhood in South Africa but throughout this time, I always had a strong sense of my identity as a Jew – and a Zionist. You could say that Zionism is part of my DNA! It is an inbuilt part of my life.

Our family also started to grow once we started to find our feet in South Africa. My sister, Sheila, was born on the 20th of November 1930 and then Judy, who was 8 years younger than me, born on the 6th of September 1934 and my brother Avroy, born on the 5th of March 1938 who is 12 years younger.

It was soon time for my schooling to start and my father made the decision to move our family from Brakpan to a Johannesburg district called Booysens. This would turn out to be a terrible mistake because the town had a terrible affliction – antisemitism, which was rife.

These were the 1930's – years that would be difficult for the Jews. South Africa's Jewish community was largely made up of immigrants who had come from Germany or Lithuania, not only to seek their fortune in Johannesburg, the city of gold but to also escape deadly pogroms. They were not always warmly received.

At kindergarten I was called "bloody Jew" every day and sometimes the children would be physically violent and hit me. Where would children learn this kind of behaviour from? It could only come from their parents! Perhaps it was also the treatment that I endured at the hands of these antisemitic bullies that made

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me more sensitive to the situation for the African members of society who started to be treated like second class citizens. The racist Apartheid regime had yet to come into power (more about that later) but already black people were not allowed to use the same bathrooms or eat in the same restaurants as whites.

My father made the decision to move.

We moved to a new place called Hospital Hill. I was a rambunctious, curious blonde (good looking if I may say so myself!) six year old and I was looking forward to making new friends. And make new friends which I did! One of my first friends, who would last a lifetime, was Dennis Glauber, the youngest of three children whose mother was a widow.

My school career started and from an early age I seemed to show an aptitude for numbers. I could easily do sums and this love of numbers is still a part of my life today - I still do my weekly accounts. Perhaps it was a portent of things to come and my future career? My father was away a lot, his work involved a lot of travel so my mom practically brought us up on her own. She was an exceptional woman! My father then made the decision to move again and we would move to a place called Doornfontein which had a very vibrant Jewish community.

Packed up and ready to go, my father then found a place to stay very close to Doornfontein in a neighbouring area called Bertrams. It was here I would meet another lifelong friend - Freddy Salant. We have had a truly close association for 80 years!

It was also around this time when I developed rheumatic fever, a condition that my mother would help treat by taking me to Warmbaths, that had healing hot waters. I still sometimes can feel remnants of the rheumatism in my shoulders.

Moving to an area where there was a Jewish area also made a difference. While we were not particularly religious, my mother kept a Kosher home, lit candles on a Friday night and made sure we observed all of the Jewish festivals. My father came from a religious home, my grandfather was extremely religious.

My family life was a happy one. My parents adored us and it was very mutual. I absolutely idolized my amazing mother and of course, I was her first born. My father adored my sister, Sheila, who was an absolute born entertainer and would eventually become a stage performer. My sister Judy found her active life. My brother, Avroy, would go on to start an iconic South African cosmetics business called Avroy Shlain.

With my school life settling and my social life taking off, I took another step that would have a great impact on my life. I joined the Habonim Youth Movement. It is important to remember that there was still no modern State of Israel as we know it but here we were, young proud Jewish kids, full of proud Zionist fervour!



Active Member in the Habonim Movement

I loved my time with Habonim and I would not only make friends and be a part of something great but I would also discover my natural leadership skills which would hold me in good stead throughout my life. It was here where I would achieve and eventually become a "star". When you are young, the support and admiration of your peers is extremely important and I received this at Habonim. I loved going to "machanot" (Camps) in Cape Town during the holidays and being involved in planning and participating in all of the activities. Eventually I would become "Rosh Kvutza" (head of a group). These were great days, everything centred around the idea of a Jewish state – little did we know what was to come.

This was still the 1930's and in Germany, Hitler's power was on the rise. Although as a young child I wasn't as aware as I am now, I can remember being very anti-German, a feeling that would follow me for years, even into business. At one stage during my active business years, I was informed by the head company that the office for handling connections in my Business was in Germany. What choice did I have but to go? I made my way to Germany and to my pleasant surprise; the Managing Director was at the airport to greet me. We found a connection right from the beginning. He even invited me to dinner with his parents! We formed a close connection for many years. This was something that exceeded expectations and is proof that sometimes even negative events have a positive twist.

My father, thank goodness, had managed to bring his parents and siblings from the Ukraine and to Israel but to our heartbreak one brother and one sister were to perish in the Holocaust.



Grandparents - Israel & Heniya Haya

Habonim became more and more important to me. We had a very healthy competitive spirit! I had the honour of leading one of the Johannesburg based group and in our national competition we came second! We were beaten by a group in Cape Town but it was all in the spirit of good fun and camaraderie.

We would now enter a decade which would see great tragedy – but also a miracle for the Jewish people – the 1940's.

My involvement in the Zionist movement would grow from there. When I was a little older, I joined the Zionist Socialists party in South Africa. The Zionist Socialists were a lot more politically orientated than Habonim and would actively encourage its members to aspire to go to live on a Kibbutz one day. The spirit of Zionism was very strong not only in our movement but in the wider Jewish community as well and remains so to this day. In those days people got married very young, in their early 20's and we already had some couples who had families. I am proud to say that I helped create many groups within the Zionist Socialist Movement and from as far afield as South Africa, a deep love and connection was born in the hearts of many and the evidence can still be felt today as many would eventually make the newly born State of Israel their home when it would be established in the years to come and become some of the early pioneers of this new country and create generations to come.

I would also start to notice girls and many of them were friends.

When we moved to Bertrams, we rented four rooms in a house owned by the Samuels family. They had a daughter called Sonia, who although was the same age as me, was a year below me at school. We soon became fast friends. Sonia was popular and had a fantastic circle of friends as well.

This also increased my popularity amongst the guys! They started to express an interest in meeting her and her friends.

Crucial Decisions

Israel has always been in my blood. Perhaps it is because I was born in Jerusalem or the influence of Habonim or maybe that ancient connection that weaves through the chains of generations and manifests in our DNA. One thing is for sure, even before there was a modern state, there was a dream and I was part of helping to fulfill it.

I also had a wonderful, supportive family. My father worked very, very hard and while I don't know what he did, I do remember that he travelled a lot. We always had food and clothing. Love we had in abundance. My uncle (my mother's brother) had opened a restaurant for black patrons. At the time, there was division between the races and my father when he arrived in South Africa, had initially gone directly to him.

My mother also worked very, very hard. She made sure that our house was clean; the meals were cooked, the children taken care of and worried about the wellbeing of her husband and children. Our family was her universe. My mom was a wonderful mother. There is not enough praise to do her justice.

South Africa at this time was a Republic and had a majority Afrikaner government who had started to implement legislation based on racial segregation. For many black women, domestic work was the only jobs that they were allowed to have as a way to earn income. My uncle, Georgie (Gershon) had opened a restaurant for the black community and while there were some who would refer to it in a derogatory way, my uncle carried on.

I was the only one in my family who went to Habonim and while I don't remember how my parents felt about this, I am sure that they were supportive

of my choice. In 1939, War broke out in Europe – and it was also the year that I would become Barmitzvah. My parents did not send me for Hebrew lessons, they told me "you already know Ivrit" (Hebrew).

We rented a home on Terrace Road, in the suburb of Bertrams. The house even had garden and a big yard. It was in a quiet street, close to where the Tabatznik family had a beautiful house, a street away. My uncle (my mother's brother) Menachem, came to live with the family. He was a great guy and became my older brother to me. In time, my father earned enough money to buy our own home in the suburb of Bez Valley. My mother's family lived in Petach Tikvah, except for two brothers in South Africa and my father's family in Jerusalem.

I cannot remember my parsha (Torah portion) but I remember the family gathering before the party to celebrate my coming of age. I wasn't given the opportunity to study and when I asked if I would be able to, my father responded by saying "you don't need to go to Ivrit (Hebrew), you know Ivrit!"

I remember quite clearly having a family meeting in the house before the party to celebrate my Barmitzvah. I even remember that I had to make a speech. I remember my father encouraging me to read my speech before I would say it to all the guests. I have to confess, I don't remember what my parsha was; but I clearly remember going through my speech with my family.

It was extremely well received and I realized at that stage that writing and speaking were perhaps budding talents of mine and it is something I greatly enjoy. I used to enjoy writing stories and although I sometimes had problems remembering things, I enjoyed the process.

By the time I got to high school, I had developed my writing skills. I went to Athlone High School, where I matriculated and by then I had honed my writing craft enough to even be published in the school magazine.

Instead of renting rooms in a house with others, we eventually bought a house Terrace Road in Bertrams. By the time I got to high school, we had moved out of our home in Bertrams and into a house in Bez valley which my father had bought. In one of the streets behind our house on Terrace Road, were mansions or more fancy houses. One of the families, the Tabatzniks, had a beautiful home. They had a son called Bernard who everybody called "Bunny". We would become great friends, he used to come to me and then we would be off, walking together to catch the bus to school. We were very close. I would say we more than friends, we were like brothers. We could discuss anything and there were no secrets between us. My friend Dennis joined us and another friend by the name of Sam Axelrod and the four of us became a close group. Now Sam was very good looking – some even said he looked like a movie star! A lot of the girls became friends – hoping for an introduction to Sam.

Even though we were all a close, wonderful group of friends, I was the only one who was actively involved in Habonim. The Jewish community was quite close and cohesive and there was a South African Zionist Federation at the time that was very strong – and still continues today. The role of the Zionist Federation was to build and maintain the close ties between Jews living in South Africa with Israel. When the modern state was eventually born in 1948, Zionist Federations would play an important role in helping to raise money for the new Jewish state and building support. This role would be particularly important during times of strife and even to today, Zionist Federations all over the world work hard to educate and maintain those vital ties between Jews in the Diaspora and the State of Israel.

When I grew older, I joined the Zionist Socialist Movement. In 1945 we decided to create a youth movement and so the ZCM were created. We started to create further branches across Johannesburg and more of my peers would find their place playing sports and rugby and soccer were popular choices. I had a problem. I developed rheumatic fever at quite a young age and this

impacted my ability physically. I could walk but not run and eventually I managed to play a little bit of tennis. I was often in quite a bit of pain and my mother would take me to Warmbaths as mentioned in the previous chapter. But I had found my purpose in the Zionist Socialist Youth Movement.

In 2008, one of my nephews wrote a lovely article about his uncle Joseph Shlain. The article was all about my work with Zionist Socialist movement and my contribution to the founding and growth of Habonim Dror in South Africa.

The community was not necessarily socialist and the neighbourhood was largely mixed between people who were very wealthy and others who had to be conscious of each purchase but both movements that I was involved in followed this particular ideology. In fact, Israel was famously socialist when it was founded. Our family was always a happy one and although we were not wealthy, we certainly were never without food – or love.

I was soon getting to the age where I was starting to think about my future career. The other three in our group all decided that they wanted to become doctors and chose to start studying Latin. I was different. I knew that I did not want to study Latin and I wasn't very good at it but what I was very good at was writing stories. I also made the decision to go with the group that was studying mathematics and arithmetic and found that it came very naturally to me. I didn't have to study much and today, I still take pleasure in doing my weekly accounts. I don't even need the help of a computer! You could say that I am much more partial to people than I am to machines.

I would eventually finish school and matriculate at the young age of 17. I knew what I wanted to do, what career I would eventually pursue. As I enjoyed arithmetic, something that I still do to this day, I knew that this was a field I would go into. I then entered a 5 year accountancy apprenticeship, finishing before my 22nd birthday.

My father had organized life insurance policy and after our meeting, the agent took me aside and gave me advice which would change my life.

Choosing the right person to do my apprenticeship with was extremely important and like with many instances in my life, I would make the right choice. I would be the first "apprentice" in this particular company - the only other employee was a secretary. She was rather bolshy and quite bossy! I will never forget the wisdom that the insurance agent imparted when he called me aside and said to me, "Don't let anyone boss you around in your life. Be your own boss!" After a while she was replaced with someone much more pleasant. I worked hard to eventually qualify as both an accountant and auditor. I found it to be very interesting work because there were all kinds of different business to take care of and learn about. He was a wonderful man. The boss of the company would often be out of the office. After about five years, I became the boss!

All the while I was working on my career; I was still very actively involved with the Zionist Socialist. I was still staying at home and while I was working in the day, I would still dedicate time in the evenings or on weekends to my work with the Zionist Socialists. At the time we were aware of the World War raging in parts of the world and the situation that the Jews endured but maybe not to the extent and knowledge that would later become apparent. I was also still living at home with my parents. We all were and by now they had a lovely young black lady who helped out. I did have my privacy though and my father also gave me his car. It was a Chevrolet and as an apprentice I earned a couple of Rand, not enough to live on, but I still felt good, like I was making my way in the world.

These were the years between 1942 -1947 and so much would happen that would change not only history but my life and the path that I would take. These were very difficult years for what was then still called Palestine. The area was still under British mandate control and the modern State of Israel had not been declared yet. Most of my mother's family was still there, except

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for two brothers, and we kept in touch and updated about the situation by corresponding with letters. They lived in Jerusalem and kept us updated as much as possible about the challenges and difficult situation at the time.

In 1948, in what can only be described as the great miracle of our time, the State of Israel was declared. The response from five neighbouring Arab countries would be to declare war on the newly founded country.

At this stage, I had no plans to go to Israel. I had set up a business with my partner whose name was Percy Taylor. The name of our new company was Taylor and Shlain. I was only 22 at the time, on the hanhala (executive) of the South African Zionist Socialists and had a girlfriend and by now war had broken out in Israel. This would be the 1948 War of Independence.

My partner, Percy had every intention of going with a party of six that would include him and his wife. But then fate intervened. He came to me the next day and told me that he could not go because Daphne, his wife, was pregnant.

My immediate response was "if you are not going, I am going". I didn't think about it too much but it was one of the most crucial decisions of my life and one that would change its course forever.

I was off to Israel to help with the defense and building of the Jewish state. There was no greater decision than this!

Chapter 3

War Breaks Out!

By the time I was ready to make Aliyah (immigration to Israel); we had created a thriving youth movement with branches across Johannesburg and young people filled with joy and pride in their Jewish and Zionist identities. My connection with the party was not just with Habonim Dror but also grew during the years to include the Zionist Socialist Party as well.

In May 1948, in what could only be described as a modern day miracle for the Jewish people and three years after the devastation of the news of the Holocaust and the death of over 6 million Jews, David Ben Gurion, who would become Israel's first Prime Minister, declared the State of Israel. It was official. The Jewish people now had a country to call their own, in their ancestral and biblical homeland and as stated in the Declaration of Independence; the new country was open for the "ingathering of the exiles". This meant that according to the new country's Law of Return, Jews from around the world could return home and help build the State of Israel. The dream of 2000 years had been fulfilled.

At the time of the UN partition plan vote in November 1947, I was still working as an apprentice as discussed in the previous chapter. The wise advice that I had received of never allowing someone to control me really struck a chord (and still continues to this day!) and soon I had completed my five years of apprenticeship by January 1948. By then I had the pleasure of having worked with several different companies and clients. Many of them were Jewish. The community at the time was very large.

I will never forget where I was on the 29th of November 1947. We were all glued to the radio as we heard the words that would forever transform the Jewish people. The historical vote at the United Nations that would lead to the

establishment of the State of Israel! It was as much a momentous occasion in South Africa as it was anywhere else. I followed the events that would follow very, very closely. I was so connected to what was happening through my involvement with the Zionist Socialists but also because I had family in what was to become the new state of Israel at the time. My mother's family, save for her brothers Menachem and Gershon who were in South Africa. My father's family were in Israel situated mainly in Jerusalem.

Communication was difficult at the time, and we didn't have the sophisticated technology that there is today, we managed to keep up to date through family connections and through the Zionist movement.

In May, Ben Gurion would announce the State of Israel. No sooner than the Prime Minister declared the Jewish State, five Arab armies attacked. Israel was in a state of war. I would arrive in Israel in June.

I had no plans to go to Israel. The South African Zionist Federation had said that each movement could only send six people and there were already three couples going to Ma'ayan Baruch. I had just finished my apprenticeship and set up a business with Percy Taylor and while I was still very active in the movement, I had no intention of going to Israel. My career in South Africa was on the up and up! Percy, my partner, was planning on going with his wife. But fate had other plans.

The day after Percy announced that he and his wife were going to Israel, he came into the office and announced, "We cannot go, Daphne is pregnant". The minute he said I am not going, I replied with "I am going!" It was totally spontaneous and unplanned. I cannot forget that moment in my life. I did not consult with anyone. I did not speak to my parents. I did not sit by myself and contemplate. It was totally spontaneous. I already had a business and we had decided not to do accountancy but rather to move into investments and business. I had a private room. I had a car - a lovely Chevrolet that my father

had given me for my 18th birthday. I had a lovely girlfriend who I got on with very well. In one fell swoop I left everything and made a life altering decision.

With the outbreak of the War of Independence, thousands of South Africans rushed to volunteer to go to Israel. Anyone who had prior experience or was a seasoned pilot or soldier had priority. A decision was taken to allow each movement to send representatives, so six of us packed our bags, ready to head off.

What I do find quite amusing is today there are many who complain that it takes up to 9 hours to fly from South Africa to Israel. In those days, it took two days, including an overnight stay in a North African country! There were no direct flights at the time. Our flight would go via Italy. Prior to our departure, we were told to sit separately and not let anyone know that we were travelling together. The six of us, made up of two couples and two young guys were very careful to follow orders. I sat next to Georgie, one of the young guys and we were told not to talk to the two couples.

The reason for this was quite simple. They did not want anyone know that we were travelling to Israel. In those days, we stopped in Rhodesia (now known as Zimbabwe) and there was time to get off the plane and take a little walk. As we were getting back on the plane, one of the flight attendants asked "are all six of you going to Israel?" Unbelievable! We had taken great pains not to draw attention to ourselves and here we were, found out. So much for secrecy!

We stopped over in Rome. We had arranged accommodation and Georgie and I shared a hotel room. We knew we had bed and breakfast but didn't know that it also included lunch and dinner. Seeing we had no money, Georgie and I ate ice cream and chocolate for several days. I had just established a business so all I had was "grushim" - no substantial money yet.

Nobody gave me any money but in time I would become someone who people really trusted with their finances. I was also someone who people liked to trust

with their problems and would often sit with me for hours telling me about the trials and tribulations in their lives. Nobody knew what they were telling me but they also issued a warning, "When you go there and you go to the Israel office, (yet to be an Embassy) be careful how they charge you because there is a chance that they will charge you for anything. This will be especially relevant when young ladies start chasing you!" We learnt the meaning of the Italian words "quanto costa" and took no notice of the girls that openly chased us.

At the meeting at the Israel office, we were once again given very strict instructions and confidential which we were ordered not to write down. If we wrote anything down on paper, people would find out where we were going.

When Georgie and I arrived in Rome, I went on the bus and asked the driver to tell me which stop I needed to get off closest to the address I gave him. He replied, "Oh you are going to the Israel office." So much for secrecy, yet again!

We were not experienced officers and had to figure out how to make our way. We had to fight. There were a lot of people headed to Israel.

We eventually managed to get on a flight. The plane was packed but the 6 of us were now en route to Israel. I had to fight for my place on that flight. The only way I was able to go was by sitting on a Tnuva (dairy food company) box next to the pilot. I literally forced my way on to the plane!

When we eventually landed in Israel, the two couples headed up north to Ma'ayan Baruch but Georgie and I went to register for the army. We had come to fight in the war! They then took us to a place near Haifa, another major city in the north. The journey from the airport in Tel Aviv was interesting. While today Israel enjoys sophisticated highways, sometimes with major traffic jams, in 1948, the road was so narrow that two cars were barely able to pass each other!

I remember travelling by bus and one American guy sat with his arm dangling out of the window. The road was so narrow that when another vehicle passed us, it bashed his arm. He never made it to the army. We carried on our journey to Tel Levinsky.

We were also very lucky to be travelling at this time because there was a four day truce. My mother had given me gifts to give to the family in Petach Tikvah. They had no idea that I was arriving and had last seen me when I was 3 years old.

The family all had premises in the centre of Petach Tikvah, which is quite a big town. Over the years, members of the family had married and each had their own little house. I walked into the yard and saw two young women, my mother's sisters. They were doing the washing in a tub because in those days there was no such thing as a washing machine. My wonderful, affectionate savta (grandmother) was sitting near where they were. The younger of the two sisters lifted her head and when she saw me, said in Yiddish, "maman due weister dos ist? Dos ist Jossele! (Mama, do you know who that is, that is Yossele - the Yiddishism for Joseph). My reaction was profoundly emotional. I had tears in my eyes and my legs shook. We became very close.

They were so happy to receive the presents as well. I didn't stay over because I was in the army and had to return. My father had also sent presents for his family and I set off the next day to take theirs to Jerusalem. We were told that Jerusalem was short of food. During the course of the War of Independence, Jerusalem would come under a difficult siege that would make the transport of food and much needed medicine difficult. But off I went, to see my father's family. They also did not know that I was coming.

I rang the doorbell. My aunt opened the door and when she saw me screamed, "Mordechai!!"

Mordechai was my father's name and nobody had ever told me that I looked like my father. I stayed in Jerusalem overnight and took the opportunity to get to know my family. My aunt wasted no time in trying to set up a shidduch for me with her husband's niece. The family did everything they could to make me feel welcome and at home – even offering me the opportunity to have a shower, which I did. I felt terrible after I found out much later that having a shower used up a week's supply of water. Water was a rare commodity at the time.

It wasn't so easy to get back to the army as there were no buses at the time. I had to look for an army convoy and this was quite difficult. We had to travel at night as there was a lot of danger on the Burma Road, which was the access in and out of Jerusalem.

I also wasn't so fluent with Hebrew. While the language was part of my life and I had heard my parents speaking it, I did not know how to spell in Hebrew and I wasn't given the chance to go to an Ulpan. Getting around with limited Hebrew sometimes proved a challenge at the time. When I asked how to get back to Tel Litwinsky, they reached another place. We looked around and asked where we were. The answer came as a bit of a surprise – we were in the Yemini Quarter in the town of Rehovot!

Soon I was back in Tel Litwinsky, the truce was soon over and my career in the army began. We were known as Machal (Mitnadvei Chutz La'aretz – volunteers from outside the country) who came in our numbers to fight for the fledgling Jewish State. I am proud to still call myself a Machalnik! We were proud to be an important part of history. One of the things I really enjoy to this day is the opportunity to speak at schools and engage with the students. They really enjoy hearing my life story and while the teachers ask the probing questions, they are enthralled with what they hear about my personal history and that of the country they live in. They don't often realise the challenges and battles we encountered at the time. They ask a lot of questions like where were you, what did you do?

The atmosphere in Israel at the time was electric. While we knew what we were there to do, we were still proud to be there, fighting for our country. Even in a hundred years' time, memory and history will recall what a special time this was. There were some who had served in World War 2 and were professional soldiers. I couldn't help but wonder what kind of training I would receive and how long it would last. Training wasn't forthcoming because there was no time for that so from the frying pan and into the fire we went! We were each given a gun and taught how to fire it. We were told that if we were attacked, to fire our weapons. As we made our way up north, there were other convoys heading there as well. Huge guns making their way to the border and women and children came out to see. They had never seen such big guns. Some of the women even kissed the barrels. But on we went, our unit transported by a lorry, just like the others.

We were very near to Mayan Baruch. I would go when I was able to leave my unit. On one occasion, I was hospitalized with rheumatic fever and when I was finally able to go to Mayan Baruch, it was wonderful to see and reconnect with old friends from school and from the Zionist Socialists. The members of this kibbutz on the border with Syria were wonderful people. After about two weeks, the army realized that the guns being used by us were anti-aircraft weapons so we were effectively disbanded and sent back to Haifa where we would await orders where we would be sent to next.

At the time I used to keep somewhat of a diary. I tried as much as I could to keep an account of what was happening at the time. I wrote this en route to the town of Afula:

"People came running out to see us, so many women and children. All the men were in the army. They touched the guns and kissed them. We were stationed up North, close to the Syrian border. We dug trenches as quickly as we could. The Syrians wasted no time in shelling us. We couldn't understand how they knew our exact location. We found out that there was a (Syrian) village behind us and our closest water supply was Rosh Pina. Our bedding

was on the floor of the tent. There was not a bit of shade in the glaring, hot sun but there also was not one single complaint. I have so many memories of that time. I remember that I was once rushed to hospital with an acute case of diarrhea. I found out I was not alone. One day while stationed up north I received a telegram. I had passed my final exam as a chartered accountant. At the time it didn't mean much to me but in time I would come to appreciate how significant it was. On the Syrian border we were very close to the kibbutz of Maayan Baruch. We would find ways to see our school friends and comrades from the Zionist Socialists and founders of the kibbutz who were living in the trenches, protecting us. The army had figured out that we were not using proper guns and disbanded us. I found myself at a camp near Haifa waiting for my next posting. During guard duty at night it wasn't the enemy that I feared but wolves. Angry, howling wolves would come up to the fence at night. They wanted our food.

There wasn't enough time to send us to Ulpanim to learn or improve Hebrew, so to deal with this challenge, the army simply created English speaking units. We had Americans, South Africans, Canadians, Australians and even New Zealanders. The commanding officer was American and we were the first anti-tank unit in the army. Our second in command was an Englishman and or Sergeant-Major, a South African. His name was Hone Rosenberg and he became a dear friend of mine. These were men who had previously served and were experts. To serve in the army would become one of the most decisive moments of my life. I was greeted by my close friend, Fred Salant who was a year older than me. During this time, friendships and bonds were formed that last until this day. Sadly, many of them are no longer with us; but the bonds formed then lasted a lifetime."

Every year just before Rosh Hashanah, we used to meet with our various children and grandchildren.

Our unit was involved in a lot of activity. We saw a lot of action in the North and while many books have been written about the fourth anti-tank unit and its participation in the War of Independence, mine are personal anecdotes.



In the Army. With a tank. But our unit was Anti-Tank

While we didn't suffer any losses in our unit, my medical history was traced back to my enrollment and the two doctors in charge who happened to be ex-South Africans told me that according to this, I had no business being in the army because of my health challenges.

They told me that I could take the night to think things over. I went to Tel Aviv and spent the night talking to an old friend of mine who was a psychologist to get some perspective. I returned to the army the next day and told them that I hoped to remain in the army. "Fine", they said, "but these pages will be destroyed and you will never refer to them again." This was one of the finest and most positive decisions of my life and I enrolled as a welfare officer. I was still serving proudly!

Almost all the men in my unit were seasoned warriors and knew how to fire weapons. They were also taller and tougher than I was, like my friend Fred Salant, and could carry heavy things like the armament supplies. I was very happy with this new arrangement. It meant that once a month I could ensure

that we were well taken care of by going to Tel Aviv, collecting the letters, pocket money and parcels that were sent to them all.

For a while, I couldn't understand why the driver used to make a stop at a specific unit until one day I found out that it was a training centre for training army nurses. As a welfare officer of our unit, it was a pleasure to be with all the various Federations – South Africa, Australia, Canada, New Zealand the United States and England.

When I became a welfare officer in the army; and especially during a time of national crisis, this kind of declared or mapped out my life for me. I didn't plan it and like many things in life, you are set upon a road that you didn't previously consider and I certainly didn't plan to meet the people that I did, but they encouraged me the whole way.

On one occasion I found myself stationed at Ramle. While we were there, we organized that each person should have a day off. On the day that our driver had his day off, I drove our half-track the whole kilometer and a half to our canteen and when I returned I found out that our team had been changed by a group of Polish speaking soldiers.

When they changed teams, they said that if they didn't have the driver anymore. There would be serious consequences. I told them that I could do it – and effectively became the driver! I drove this vehicle which had a big gun and the Polish team through the hills of Jerusalem. The stories of engagement with the enemy I will leave to others but the situation was still extremely dangerous. As the only team with a heavy gun, we were called whenever heavy fighting broke out – that is until the motor broke down. As the half-track was towed into the garage, our driver returned. He enjoyed two weeks of leave until the motor was fixed. I then returned to my basic unit. Even though I was not in a specific unit, whenever there was action, I was involved.

Israel held out, we were winning the war and our unit would be scheduled to make its way down to the southern city of Eilat. During this one month of action and conflict, many of us had made the decision that Israel would become our home. The how's, what's, which and why we did not know - but we knew that Israel was home. We had fought hard for her and appreciated the modern miracle that this newly born state in our ancient homeland was. When we reached Beer Sheva, they said to me, "You are not coming with us. You will go back and find a place where we can live".

And I did.