

The Sun (Baltimore)

April 26, 1998, Sunday, FINAL EDITION

**SECTION:** TABLOID, Pg. 12D

**LENGTH:** 2154 words

**HEADLINE:** Gunrunners and peacemakers; Baltimoreans: As early as 1847, Jews here emerged repeatedly as central figures in Zionism.

**BYLINE:** John Rivera, SUN STAFF

**BODY:**

One Baltimorean was at the first Zionist Congress. Another founded Hadassah. A third collected arms illegally for the fledgling Jewish state in a warehouse on Hanover street. And a group of Baltimoreans put together the deal for a boat that became the most famous immigrant vessel in Zionist history.

Practically any leaf one turns in the history of Zionism and the founding and building of the Jewish state has the name of a Baltimorean written on it.

At the First Zionist Congress, held in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, there was just one American delegate: Rabbi Shepsel Schaffer of the Shearith Israel Congregation, representing the Zion Association of Baltimore.

But Baltimore's Zionist roots go back even further. According to the Encyclopedia Judaica, funds were being collected in Baltimore for Jews in Palestine as early as 1847. One of the country's first Hovevei Zion (Lovers of Zion) groups, a precursor to modern Zionist organizations, was founded in Baltimore in 1884.

From these beginnings, Baltimore went on to become a center of Zionism in the United States:

\* In 1900, the Federation of American Zionists held its first convention in Baltimore. At its second convention, in 1904, Dr. Harry Friedenwald, a Baltimore ophthalmologist, was elected president and served in that post until 1918.

\* **Henrietta Szold**, the Baltimore-born daughter of a rabbi, started a night school in the late 1880s, principally for Russian Jewish immigrants. Moving to New York after her father's death in 1902, she joined a women's study circle that discussed Jewish history and Zionism. After a visit to Palestine, Szold organized the study circle into Hadassah Women, a group that promoted Jewish institutions in Palestine, focusing particularly on health promotion. Today, Hadassah is the largest Jewish organization in the United States.

\* About 80 Baltimoreans volunteered to fight in the Jewish Legion, the British army unit that drove the Ottoman Turks from Palestine during World War I.

\* Dr. Herman Seidel, who arrived in Baltimore in 1903 from Lithuania, helped to organize the first national convention in 1905 of Poalei Zion, the organization of Labor Zionists who were committed to a socialist vision of a Palestinian homeland for Jews. Seidel became one of the country's leading Zionists.

"Baltimore has been an important center of Zionism, a place from which many national leaders have emerged," said Barry Kessler, assistant director and curator of the Jewish Museum of Maryland. "Certainly for its size, it has generated a lot of intense activity, both for and against the Zionist movement."

Some of Baltimore's most important, and most colorful, contributions to Zionism came during the period immediately before the founding of the State of Israel. A central figure was a retired Baltimore liquor distributor, Mose I. Speert.

His involvement with clandestine activity on behalf of Jewish refugees from World War II who wanted to get to Palestine began in July 1945.

He was one of 18 Jewish leaders who went to listen to David Ben-Gurion, the future first prime minister of Israel. Ben-Gurion gave the men the first detailed account of the horrors of the Holocaust, which was just beginning to be recounted by the world's press.

"Even after all these years, it tears my heart out to remember the things Ben-Gurion told us that day," Speert told The Sun in 1984, five years before his death.

Speert decided he would collect guns for the self-defense of Jews in Palestine. He calculated that Baltimore's Jewish veterans would have brought home firearms after their service in World War II, and he was right.

Quietly putting the word out among a tight-knit group of friends, Speert was able to collect hundreds of pistols, rifles and other weapons.

Speert hid the arms behind a false wall in his former liquor warehouse at Lombard and Hanover streets. The weapons were transported by truck to New York, then shipped to Palestine.

Speert's gun-running went on until 1948, when a visit by Baltimore police carrying a search warrant convinced him it was time to unload the rest of the cache and truck it to New York.

His contacts in New York sent down a small moving van, and the drivers squeezed it into the alley behind the warehouse so it could be loaded without being seen. Speert and the drivers were nearly finished when a mounted policeman entered the alley, coming toward the truck.

But this wasn't just any cop: It was William McKeldin, brother of Baltimore's then-Mayor Theodore R. McKeldin.

As Speert told the story to authors Stanley A. Blumberg and Gwinn Owens in their book "The Survival Factor: Israeli Intelligence from World War II to the Present," he knew the officer and decided to try to distract him before he reached the truck.

"I was so scared I wasn't sure I could even talk," Speert said. Still, he approached McKeldin, trying to appear nonchalant.

"Good afternoon, Officer Mc-Keldin," Speert said.

"How are you, Mr. Speert?" McKeldin replied.

"Just fine. ... Say, I wonder if I can ask you a favor?"

"Why, sure."

"We're about to pull this truck out of here, and as you can see, there's just about room for it to clear the buildings. Could you move your horse out of the alley?"

"Of course," McKeldin said, promptly turning the animal around and riding out of the alley.

"Thanks very much, officer," said a relieved Speert.

"Don't mention it. Have a nice day," McKeldin said as he disappeared around the corner.

Speert and a Baltimore group of Jewish businessmen played a key role in buying and outfitting an old Chesapeake Bay steamer, the President Warfield, and converting it into a vessel to carry nearly 5,000 Jewish refugees from Europe to Palestine, running the British blockade against Jewish immigration.

The President Warfield, which made nightly crossings on the Chesapeake between Baltimore and Norfolk, Va., had been stripped of its finery and pressed into service during World War II as a troopship for the Allies.

After the war, it was sold for scrap for \$8,000 to a Washington wrecking company, which in turn sold it for \$40,000 to the Weston Trading Corp., a Zionist front.

It was brought to Baltimore for an extensive overhaul. "She virtually had to be rebuilt," Speert told The Sun in 1972. Speert was appointed ship's quartermaster and had to assemble supplies for 5,000 passengers. He stored the supplies in the same Hanover Street warehouse.

The Warfield left Pier 5 in Canton on Feb. 25, 1947, under Panamanian registry and with a reported destination of Canton, China, where it purportedly would be used for river transport. But it ran into a storm and had to be towed to

Hampton Roads, Va., for repairs.

Even before it left Baltimore, there were rumors that the President Warfield's destination was not Asia. The ship's captain "discounted reports around Baltimore's harbor that the ship was to be used for carrying refugees into Palestine," The Sun reported on Feb. 27, 1947. "The reports, however, persisted."

The ship set sail again April 1. The Sun reported: "Her captain said that the ship would touch at Marseille and then proceed to China. However, it was said that the vessel carried no Pacific charts which, according to the captain, 'were removed for some reason I don't know.' "

The President Warfield picked up 4,515 passengers in Sete, France, on July 10 and left the harbor, tailed by a British warship. By July 16, it had been surrounded by four British destroyers, two minesweepers, a frigate and a cruiser. The Warfield headed toward Tel Aviv, where the crew hoped to beach her.

"Then, as she neared Tel Aviv, British ships pulled up beside her and demanded that she go to Haifa," Speert said in the 1972 interview.

"As they turned a searchlight on her, the big board bearing the name President Warfield was flopped over, the new name, 'Haganah Ship-Exodus 1947' appeared and the Haganah flag was hoisted."

Two of the destroyers rammed the Exodus and heavily armed British marines boarded it. The crew and passengers fought with their fists, potatoes and cans of food. Three Jews were killed.

The passengers of the Exodus had expected to be diverted to a displaced persons camp in Cyprus, but the British instead took them to a camp in Germany, causing a worldwide outcry.

In Baltimore, 250 people signed a petition that Mayor Thomas D'Alesandro Jr. presented to the British consul in the city.

Although Baltimore was a center for Zionist activity, not every Baltimore Jew was a Zionist. It was also, in fact, a center of anti-Zionism.

Members of Baltimore's long-established German Jewish community, particularly members of Reform congregations, opposed the idea of a Jewish state. They held that Judaism was a religion, not a nationality, and felt that the attempt to create a Jewish state would call into question their loyalty as Americans.

The leading anti-Zionist organization was the American Council for Judaism, and one of its most important spokesmen was Rabbi Morris S. Lazaron of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation.

Lazaron raised hackles in the Jewish community in a sermon delivered on the eve of the Jewish New Year on Sept. 14, 1947. At a time when emotions over the Exodus deportations were running high, he called the voyage the latest chapter "in a long story of Zionist extremist hypocrisy, unscrupulous propaganda and exploitation of our brothers' misery."

Lazaron, quoted in a Sun article, said that compromise with Zionists who insisted on a Jewish state "has produced only greater tragedy among our brethren in Palestine and elsewhere, and division and strife in American Jewry."

"This compromise has strengthened anti-Semitism here and in England in quarters which hitherto have been friendly," he said. "It has given aid and comfort to terrorism. It has been a failure and a disaster."

Rabbi Israel Tabak countered a week later when he addressed his Shaarei Zion Synagogue congregation in a Yom Kippur sermon, calling on "our colleague Rabbi Lazaron to make amends for the great wrong he has done the Jewish people by his public statements on the Palestine question."

"His address on Rosh Hashana eve has deeply disturbed the Jewish people in the community and has greatly confused a good many right-thinking Christians," Tabak said.

"When he spoke against a Jewish state in Palestine and appealed to our government not to be pressured into taking the leadership and support of the Jewish state, he committed treason against his own people, the people of Israel in the hour of its greatest need."

At the other extreme were Baltimoreans who supported the radical Irgun Zvei Leumi, headed by Menachem Begin, which carried out violent attacks against the British occupation forces and Arabs.

The Sun (Baltimore) April 26, 1998, Sunday,

Although the majority of Baltimore Zionists supported the Haganah, the main body of the Jewish underground army that was preparing to fend off Arab attacks, a small group organized here in support of the Irgun.

They were the Maryland Chapter of Americans for a Free Palestine. In June 1948, weeks after the state was formed, three of its members organized a Rally for Israel attended by thousands of Baltimore Jews.

Two of the rally organizers were Jews: Jack L. Levin and Jimmy Swartz of Mano Swartz Furs. The third man, the chairman of the chapter, was a West Baltimore Irish-Catholic furniture store owner, Oliver B.J. Krastell, whose love of Zionism was matched by his hatred of the British.

Levin recalls that they received a hostile reaction from many in the Jewish community, particularly those who supported the Haganah, and were called "hotheads" and "terrorists."

"Those people were very resentful of us upstarts who were backing the American League for a Free Palestine, because they thought we should be keeping our powder dry and waiting for the inevitable day that five Arab armies would attack," Levin recalled.

After the establishment of Israel, there was ambivalence among American Jews about their relationship with the new Jewish state.

Ben-Gurion urged all Jews to "come home" to Israel. This had little appeal to many American Jews who considered the United States their home. By the late 1940s, the American Jewish Committee threatened to drop its support of Israel if it persisted in pressuring Jews to immigrate there.

In August 1950, Baltimore oilman Jacob Blaustein, then president of the American Jewish Committee and a self-proclaimed non-Zionist (he told Forbes magazine in a 1968 profile that "the Israelis consider me a friend but I can also sit down and talk with the Arabs because they know I'm not a Zionist"), traveled to Israel and met with Ben-Gurion.

The result was the Ben-Gurion-Blaustein Agreements, which stated that "Citizens of the United States are Americans and citizens of Israel are Israelis; This we affirm with all its implications."