

The Story of the Jewish Legion
by Vladimir Jabotinsky





Vladimir Jabotinsky

The Story of
The Jewish Legion

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by Vladimir Jabotinsky

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Foreword

John Henry Patterson

I

Vladimir Jabotinsky's last walk on earth was between two lines of young Betarim, who awaited his arrival in Camp Betar in Hunter, New York. They stood in military formation for his inspection. Although suffering from acute pain, Jabotinsky carried out the inspection and went straight to his room and died – a martyr to duty even unto death.

I was not with him during the last hours of his life, but when I later heard of it I could not help saying to myself that if Jabotinsky were to choose the setting for his death, it would have been something after this manner. The inspection of a Betar parade as his last deed in this world was highly symbolical.

Not that Jabotinsky was a born soldier. He was not. Not only by my standards – the standards of a man who has spent many years of his life in army service – but by any standard, Jabotinsky was of course

a “civilian.” While in the Jewish Legion, he made an excellent soldier; as fine and brave, as disciplined and courageous as any. However, no one who knew the man at all could possibly have missed those exceptional gifts of statesmanship, intellect, leadership and oratory with which he was endowed in such unparalleled abundance. It was too wonderful a combination to be restricted by any army uniform. If there had existed a Republic of Israel, Jabotinsky would have made an ideal president. But there was neither a Jewish Republic nor a Jewish Army, except for the Legion in World War I, which came into being primarily through Jabotinsky’s vision and his stubborn determination not to rest until the Legion became a reality.

Yet, maybe for the very reason that the Jews had no army of their own and the Jewish Legion was a comparatively short-lived affair; maybe because the Legion remained Jabotinsky’s most outstanding success, the most brilliant page in the history of his crowded life, the “civilian” Jabotinsky never lost his military bearing.

He was thirty-six years old when he joined the Jewish Legion, having spent all his life prior to that either at the desk writing his books, articles and poems, or on the platforms all over Russia trying to imbue Jewry with the Zionist idea. After about two years of military schooling and service, he once again returned to the very active life of a political writer, lecturer, propagandist and leader of his people. Only two years in the army as against forty years of civilian endeavors, but no one who came in contact with the man could have been in any doubt as to his military past. It was not only Jabotinsky’s upright, soldier-like bearing, which he maintained with inborn ease all through the years to the last day of his life, but it seemed to me that Jabotinsky found in the army a response to his innermost longings, something he badly wanted, maybe not so much for himself as for his people.

Jabotinsky used to say of himself, as he mentions also in this book, that he had a “*Goyishe kop.*” By that he meant that his mentality was fundamentally the mentality of a Christian, void of the peculiar inhibitions of a Jewish mind influenced and twisted by the abnormalities

of centuries of life in dispersion. As a Christian I venture to say that by describing himself as a “*Goyishe kop*,” Jabotinsky badly belittled his mental capacities. His scholarly mind, his broad erudition, his exceptional linguistic abilities and the brilliance which loomed out of every word he spoke or wrote were not “*Goyish*” but Jewish. It took generations of Jewish scholars and rabbis, of Jewish suffering and Jewish idealism to produce a Vladimir Jabotinsky. Still, there *was* something in him of the “*Goyishe kop*.” Jabotinsky the Jewish statesman was predominantly a “*Goyishe kop*.” That was probably the main reason why his political philosophy was so healthy and simple, and why with all his tremendous popularity he never became the recognized leader of the Jewish people.

It took me many years of close friendship with Jabotinsky and of comradely collaboration in many ventures, before I began to understand where the Jew in him ended and the “*Goy*” began. But not until I read *Prelude to Delilah*, the biblical novel about Samson in which Jabotinsky puts on Samson’s lips a great deal of his political philosophy, could I draw myself a full picture of Jabotinsky’s make-up. I shall later return to *Prelude to Delilah*, but at this stage I would venture this rough definition: Jabotinsky’s spirit was Jewish; his way of thinking was “*Goyish*.”

According to the account of his conversation with Max Nordau, reproduced in this book, Nordau said to Jabotinsky: “That, my young friend, is logic. But logic is a Greek art which the Jews hate.” That is it! Jabotinsky’s logic was non-Jewish, and logic – logic alone – played the overwhelming part in his political thinking and actions.

There was a widespread conception of Jabotinsky as a man led by emotions, a man of uncontrollable enthusiasms. His great oratory, which often enthused beyond control great multitudes of people, contributed to the formation of this misconception of Jabotinsky. For a gross misconception it was. One could rarely meet a man with whom emotions would carry so little weight in his political thinking and actions. Indeed, in the numerous encounters with statesmen of many lands which I have had, I cannot recall one who was as much a

slave of his logic as Jabotinsky was. One of the most colorful, experienced and magnetic orators of his day, Jabotinsky would never mount a platform without first preparing carefully his lecture or speech up to the last of his studied gestures. He would leave nothing to chance, and he did not believe in miracles. In logic he believed, in the logic of mankind, in the logic of events and in the logic which must rule supremely in our lives. This was the most striking non-Jewish feature in his mentality. There was practically no bridge between Jabotinsky's logic and the Jewish submissiveness to chance, miracle and fate.

When on that rainy morning in 1914 he read the news of Turkey's entry into the war, he arrived by way of sound reasoning at the idea of a Jewish Legion. The way he tells it in this book, it was all very simple, an obvious logical conclusion to be arrived at by any Jewish intelligent observer of world affairs. That that implied no less than a revolution in the history of the Jewish dispersion and in the Jewish political philosophy of the last two thousand years was a minor consideration, as compared with the supreme demands of sound logic. Only later, when confronted with the bitter and determined opposition to the Legion idea not only of diehard assimilationists but of organized Zionism, did Jabotinsky probably recall the wise words of Max Nordau that "logic is a Greek art which the Jews hate." Did this discourage him or stop his efforts to form a Jewish Legion, boycotted by many Jews among them the leading Zionists, cold-shouldered by the Allied statesmen, actively opposed by so many and supported by so few? Well, logic might be a Greek art, and Jabotinsky was a Jew, but it certainly was his, Jabotinsky's, *alpha* and *omega* of political thinking.

In 1937, Jabotinsky was on a campaign tour in South Africa. In April, one of his colleagues at the New Zionist Headquarters in London went out to join him in Johannesburg. Of the news he brought from London, the most important item was a report of the forthcoming plan of the Royal Commission for the partition of Palestine. He told Jabotinsky the story with a very worried air. Jabotinsky asked for details, pondered over them for a little while, and then turned to his colleague smilingly: "Wipe the worry off your face. The whole plan

does not stand to reason and it will never become a reality.” It does not stand to reason, and that is all there is to it.

When, in 1933, the tragic news came from Palestine of the murder of Dr. Arlozoroff on the beach of Tel Aviv and the subsequent arrest of two Revisionists accused of the murder, Jabotinsky did not fly off on a tangent in some emotional outburst. He studied minutely all the reports, as he later followed from afar the court proceedings; he analyzed dispassionately all the facts of the situation, and only when he arrived at the conclusion that “it does not stand to reason,” he threw himself unreservedly into a campaign to save the two innocent young men and to smash the false accusation against them.

Logic, the Greek art, was Jabotinsky’s guide in political thinking. That is why he felt more deeply than anyone else the abnormalities of Jewish political society. That is why he longed so badly for a state organization for his people, for an army, discipline and the overall normalcy which every other nation possesses. In his novel, *Prelude to Delilah*, Jabotinsky gives expression to his political philosophy to a greater extent than in his many articles dealing with current problems. There, in the life of Samson, in the riddles which he used to pose to the Philistines and in his wise aphorisms, Jabotinsky states his innermost dreams and longings. When I read this book years ago, I finally understood what it was that Jabotinsky searched for in the Jewish Legion, and what it was that made of this short episode a lasting imprint on his life.

One could quote endlessly from *Prelude to Delilah* in elucidation of Jabotinsky’s way of thinking. Indeed, whoever wants to understand Jabotinsky must read that enlightening book. But I shall quote only one passage, which will suffice for what I wish to bring out. It is a passage from one of the last chapters. The heroic days of Samson were already ended. He had been seized by the Philistines, blinded by them, and was living in captivity in the humblest quarter of Gaza. From time to time people came from Judea, asking him to come back to his own people, but he constantly refused. One day, one of his close followers and admirers, Hermesh, came on the same mission and got

the same reply. Before leaving, Hermesh asked Samson whether he had a message for his people, and this was the message of Samson:

“Tell them two things in my name – two words. The first word is Iron. They must get iron. They must give everything they have for iron – their silver and wheat, oil and wine and flocks, even their wives and daughters. All for iron! There is nothing in the world more valuable than iron. Will you tell them that?”

“I will. They will understand that.”

“The second word they will not understand yet, but they must learn to understand it, and that soon. The second word is this: A King! Say to Dan, Benjamin, Judah, Ephraim: a king! A man will give them the signal and of a sudden thousands will lift up their hands. So it is with the Philistines, and therefore the Philistines are lords of Canaan. Say it from Zorah to Hebron and Shechem, and farther even to Endor and Laish: a king!”

Here is what Jabotinsky looked for in the Jewish Legion and what drove him to a Jewish state: “Iron and a King.” In these two short words you can find everything: Jabotinsky’s uncompromising revolt against the unorganized, formless Jewish dispersion with no state organization, no leadership, no discipline and no national policy. And you can find in it, too, the foundations of his simple yet sound and constructive political program for the Jewish people. He wanted for the Jews what they lacked most: a united nation with a central leadership; a state with an army; “iron” for their defense in a hostile world, and a man who gives the signal and thousands lift up their hands....

That is why it was he, Jabotinsky, who originated the idea of a Jewish Legion in World War I, and fought for a Jewish Army in World War II. This it was that prompted him to organize Jewish self-defense back in Russia and later in Palestine. This was behind his idea of the Brit Trumpeldor movement, which he loved and cherished more than any other of his creations. In these Betar youngsters he was hoping to arouse the great longing for “Iron and King,” for military preparedness, organization, self-respect and discipline – all those

elements of nationhood which he so badly missed in Jewish life, and which, he knew, were the indispensable foundations for the rebirth of Jewish statehood.

II

If one lacks historic perspective and the knowledge of the specific conditions of Jewish life, one can hardly appreciate the titanic role played by Jabotinsky in the creation of the Jewish Legion in World War I. Indeed now, in the days of World War II, the Jewish Legion may seem to some people as something insignificant and hardly worth talking about. Are not there “armies in exile” of the Poles, Czechs, French and others in this war? What is there so important about a Jewish Legion of a few thousand men fighting in the British Army in the last war? Only after consideration of all the circumstances of the case can one arrive at a realistic evaluation of the feat of Jabotinsky.

When Jabotinsky embarked on the Jewish Legion venture, everything was against him and there was nothing whatever to give support to his idea. First of all, it was a precedent-breaking idea. Since the fall of Judea and the Jewish dispersion all over the globe, there never was a Jewish military unit anywhere in the world. For two thousand years, the Jews had had neither a state organization of their own nor any military formation of their own. Furthermore, by the very fact of the Jewish dispersion, the Jewish people had a stake in every land, and this was later to be one of the chief arguments of the opponents of the Jewish Legion. “How can we dare,” they would say, “to join either of the warring alliances, thus endangering the Jewish populations of the other alliance?” In other words, they claimed that if a Jewish Legion was formed within the framework of the British Army, the Jews of Germany, Austria, Bulgaria and Turkey would pay the price, for surely vengeance would engulf them.

This in itself was no idle argument, for Jewish realities demanded consideration. Jewish minorities lived everywhere, practically at the mercy of the ruling majorities. But even more powerful was the

unspoken argument of a long-lasting tradition, of the very philosophy of the Jewish *Galut* (Dispersion).

In most countries of Europe, especially in Eastern, Central and Southern Europe, where the bulk of the Jewish people lived, the Jews were neither *de jure* nor *de facto* full-fledged citizens of their respective states. Also in spirit, moreover, they did not feel like full-fledged members of these European nations. This state of affairs, which developed during several centuries, had brought about a widespread indifference among the Jews regarding the fate of such states. They were not expected to be wholehearted patriots of the countries which treated them like stepchildren – and they were no such patriots, though to the extent they were allowed to serve such countries they always served them loyally. What they principally were concerned with – for very obvious reasons – was how this or that development in the nations among whom they lived as a hated or persecuted minority would affect their own lives and interests.

Step by step, this attitude, logical and justified as it was in light of the treatment accorded to the Jews in all those countries, developed into a kind of philosophy of the Jewish *Galut*. It was a philosophy of complete passivism. The Jewish mind has provided an ideological foundation for the sad realities of their life. The Jews have become an object in the play of forces in history, but for the present at least, not a subject taking an active part in the march of history. A pogrom in Russia or Rumania, an antisemitic outburst in Germany, a Dreyfus affair in France, or wars between the various nations of Europe were to be considered as major or minor holocausts, from which one had to escape but which one could not actively combat. Fate, which has taken care of Israel for so many centuries, would somehow save Israel again, but what could Israel himself do? ...

It is against this background of thorough passivism consecrated by hundreds of years of tradition that Jabotinsky's idea of a Jewish Legion has to be seen, in order to realize the depth of the abyss which divided Jabotinsky's way of thinking from that of Jewry as a whole. Indeed, if he were to have called the Jews to take up arms in order

to defend themselves from an attack by local hooligans or pogromists – as he did in his earlier days in Russia and later in Palestine – his appeal would have fallen on much more receptive ears. But what he wanted this time was an official emergence of the Jewish people from the traditional state of absolute neutrality in a war among the European nations. He wanted to transform the Jewish people from a conglomeration of minorities living in various lands and officially belonging to the various nations, into a nation of its own with a national policy of its own. Small as the Jewish Legion was in number, it was to be a symbol of a Jewish Army, and what is more: an official proclamation of belligerency on behalf of the Jewish people as such. No more neutrality, no more passivism, but a very active stand of a co-ally with the Allies. If there ever was a call for a national revolution, Jabotinsky's idea of a Jewish Legion was such a call. It was a revolution against tradition, against the fundamental way of thinking of his people, and a call to take a national stand in world events.

No wonder that Jabotinsky encountered such fierce opposition among Jewry to his idea of a Legion. The wonder was that he found in himself enough strength to go on with his campaign for a Jewish Legion despite that opposition, and to bring it to ultimate realization. For Jabotinsky had to overcome not only the internal Jewish antagonism to his proposal, but also innumerable obstacles on the external front. It would be difficult to assess now which of the oppositions, the Jewish one or that of the world at large, was more formidable, but it is safe to state that he had to swim against powerful currents.

The appreciation of the enormous difficulties which Jabotinsky had to overcome among Jewry did not come to me all at once. When I was appointed, first to the command of the Zion Mule Corps in Gallipoli, and then to that of the Jewish Legion, I knew as little of contemporary Jewry, its conditions of life and its peculiar problems, as any Englishman. Only after my close association with the Jewish Legion and Vladimir Jabotinsky, which resulted in my lively interest in Jewish affairs in the ensuing years, did this picture develop before my eyes in all its implications. That part of Jabotinsky's battle for

the Legion I realized in retrospect. But his fight in the international political sphere passed before my eyes. Furthermore, there I could judge as well as anyone what the reaction would be, and I knew that in diplomatic and military circles of England and of other European lands, Jabotinsky's idea of a Jewish Legion would be accorded anything but an enthusiastic reception.

Another thirty years had to pass before the world would get accustomed to kings and governments living and acting in exile while their countries were occupied by the enemy. Governments in exile and armies in exile were unknown in 1914. Even less chance of understanding and acceptance stood the idea of an army of a people which had no national territory of its own. For world political thought, Jabotinsky's idea of a Jewish Legion was not simply precedent-breaking, it was contrary to all precedents. It is true that he did not advocate at that time the formation of an independent Jewish army, but only of Jewish regiments in the British Army (later he tried to do the same in France and failed). Nevertheless, those were to be Jewish regiments. From a purely British point of view, it only added to difficulties. The French had a Foreign Legion, which was a kind of haven for desperados, adventurers or exiles from all over the world. The British had no such formations. And it was not this kind of a foreign legion that Jabotinsky suggested, but a formation with a very definite national and political objective.

The fact that this unprecedented foreign formation in the British Army was to be *Jewish* did not help in any way. Today, after the experiences of the first and second World Wars, very few military experts have any doubts as to the fighting abilities, endurance, courage and intelligence of the Jewish soldier. Only confirmed antisemites whose anti-Jewish feelings are stronger than their judgment of facts, would refuse to admit that the contemporary Jew has proved himself to be among the best fighters in the world. We must remember, however, that back in 1914, there was no proof as to the stouthearted qualities of the Jew as a soldier, and absolutely no precedent on which a judgment could be formed.

People in the British Foreign Office and in the War Office saw before them a Jewish-Russian journalist with an idea. Why he wanted a Jewish Legion they could well guess, for they were aware of the Jewish-Zionist aspirations regarding Palestine. What, however, would be the practical value of Jewish regiments? What kind of fighters were the contemporary Jews? Would it be an asset or a liability to have Jewish military formations within the British Army? There was no one at that time who could answer those questions with any degree of certainty. This Jewish journalist from Russia looked a very determined fellow who knew exactly what he wanted, but the British officials were well aware of the widespread opposition to the Legion idea in Jewry itself, all the way from the Zionist headquarters to the poor Jewish masses of Whitechapel and the rich Jewish notables in the city. This was the atmosphere in which Jabotinsky had to fight for the materialization of the Jewish Legion. Besides the revolution in Jewry, he had to perform a revolution in the whole conception of Jewry in British minds.

III

That Jabotinsky succeeded in performing the two revolutions is now a matter of record. In this book he tells the story of the Jewish Legion, to which I may be able to add some of my own recollections.

Jabotinsky “built better than he knew,” when at Alexandria, Egypt, in the early days of 1915, he sowed the seeds of a Jewish military unit which resulted, in its first stage, in the formation of the Zion Mule Corps. Although Jabotinsky himself did not join the Corps, it was his promotion of the idea of a Jewish Legion that was primarily responsible for the creation of the first organized Jewish unit in World War I.

On the twenty-third day of March in that year, Grand Rabbi Raphael della Pergola, with great solemnity, administered the “oath of obedience” to the massed ranks of the men of Zion. The five hundred recruits with uplifted hands repeated the oath after the Grand

Rabbi, and “swore obedience to the officer commanding the Corps and to such officers as should be placed over them.”

It was not until the second of April that we were able to secure a campsite at Wardian, a suburb of Alexandria, and there pitch our tents and begin “all out” training for the arduous duties ahead. I was fortunate in having the invaluable assistance of the gallant Captain Joseph Trumpeldor – of whom Jabotinsky writes so glowingly in this book – in preparing the men for immediate active service. None of us had any idea in those strenuous days that we should be in the firing line, several hundred miles away on the Gallipoli Peninsula, by the twenty-fifth of April, little over three weeks after we started training – surely a record in military history.

We were not only a transport corps but a fighting corps to boot, and every man was equipped and trained to take his place on the battlefield – where in the rough and tumble of trench warfare the men of Zion often came to grips with their old enemies, the Turks.

It is not my intention to go into details of the services rendered and the gallant deeds performed by the now famous Zion Corps during the entire period of the Gallipoli invasion. If the reader is interested in details, he can find them in *With the Zionists in Gallipoli* – a modest record written by me of events just as they happened.

I may, however, state that we won some of the highest military awards during the campaign and everybody from General Sir Ian Hamilton, the Commander-in-Chief, down to the private in the ranks of the British Army, gave us unstinted praise. In fact, “The Zion Mule Corps became indispensable in Gallipoli.” These are not my words but those of Sidney Moseley, a representative of the War Office who witnessed the outstanding gallantry and devotion to duty exhibited day after day by the Zion men on the shell-swept and bloody shores of the Dardanelles.

Eventually, when the High Command decreed the evacuation of the peninsula, the hardy Zionists were among the last to take to the boats for Egypt. Yes, Jabotinsky had indeed “builded better than he knew,” for when he later tackled the London War Office on the

creation of the Jewish Legion, he found that a legend of Jewish gallantry in Gallipoli had taken root there and this lightened his task immensely. In fact, had it not been for the incredible stupidity of the “Old Men of Zion” who strenuously opposed Jabotinsky’s endeavors, I am certain that a Jewish Army of at least one hundred thousand men would have been formed. This was what a high-ranking general at the War Office told me when I was sent for to take command of the “Jewish Regiment,” as the Legion was at first named.

What a difference a Jewish Army in World War I would have made! It is difficult to state now with absolute certainty what the subsequent march of events would have been; few people possess prophetic powers. It seems, however, safe to say that the whole course of history, especially with regard to Palestine and the Jewish people, would have been totally different. The Jewish people would have gained Palestine, whether the British bureaucrats liked it or not; and a Jewish Palestine would have provided England with another Gibraltar – faithful to her unto death – at the Eastern end of the Mediterranean. If one bears in mind that in such a case the Jews would have had a state of their own and *ipso facto* the British would have been much stronger in the Middle East, one may doubt whether Hitler would have found it so easy to bring about World War II. Few people now doubt the enormous part played by the Jewish problem in Europe by enabling Hitler to sow dissension all over the continent and so climb to power in Germany and in Europe. The extreme vulnerability of British positions in the Middle East, accompanied by military and strategic weaknesses, were also important factors in the war.

Yes, if only Jabotinsky’s urgent pleadings had been listened to and a Jewish Army had been created to fight alongside the Allies in the First World War, great evils would surely have been averted and the world would have been quite a different place today. But his opponents, who could not shed their ghetto fears, were too strong for him. Instead of a great Jewish Army, a mere Jewish Legion had to suffice, and even this the ghetto men sought to belittle. The truth of the old

Greek proverb was never better exemplified: “Those whom the Gods are about to destroy, they first smite with blindness.”

But to come back to the story of the Jewish Legion. I was still in the hospital, recovering from the hardships and ills of the Gallipoli campaign, when I first met Vladimir Jabotinsky. He had called to see me with the object of getting my consent to take command of the “Jewish Regiment,” the creation of which was announced in the *London Gazette* of August 23, 1917.

I was much impressed with Jabotinsky the man, and a friendship was begun that day which ended only with his lamented death nearly a quarter of a century later. We worked together, fought together, and stood foursquare together, facing all kinds of troubles during those long trying years. Never could one have a better comrade or a truer friend than Vladimir Jabotinsky.

It was a proud moment in the life of my friend when he was gazetted a lieutenant in the 38th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers on the selfsame day that he carried a Jewish banner at the head of the Battalion on a triumphal march through the city of London on February 4, 1918. The band of the Coldstream Guards played a stirring march as the men with fixed bayonets proudly strode past the Mansion House, where the Lord Mayor, attended by many generals from the War Office, took the salute.

On the following day we embarked at Southampton for Cherbourg, France, and thence overland via Marseilles and Genoa to Taranto, where we took ship for Alexandria, arriving in Egypt on February 28, 1918. From the moment of debarkation it was made plain by the Army staff that our arrival was deeply resented. The anti-Jewish chief of staff, General Louis Jean Bols, did his best to destroy us, but failed miserably.

For the remarkable achievements of the Legion in the Holy Land I must refer those interested to my book, *With the Judeans in the Palestine Campaign*. There it will be found that the Legion did all that was asked of it, and when Allenby gave the order for the final advance that drove the Turks out of Palestine, Jewish troops held the extreme

right flank of his army. The objective of the Jewish Legion was the capture of the Umm Esh Shert ford over the Jordan.

This vital crossing was strongly held by the Turks, but nothing could stop the Legionaries. Jabotinsky, manipulating a machine gun, led the way and soon I was able to flash a message to General Chaytor that the ford was ours. He immediately sent his cavalry dashing across and, after ten days of fierce fighting, the Fourth Turkish Army was destroyed and the battle for Palestine won. Everything we were set to do we did promptly and efficiently and gained the warmest praise from every general we served under, including such noted men as Field Marshal Lord Allenby and General Sir Edward Chaytor. Indeed, the latter, in a special parade of the Legion, told the men that by “their gallantry east of the Jordan they had materially helped toward the winning of the great victory gained at Damascus.”

These Legionaries were predominantly British Jews. There were some six thousand others who came from the United States and Canada, principally from the former. Most of the Americans who participated in battle filled the ranks of the 39th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, under Colonel Margolin. They showed what mettle they were made of when they took part in the final assault and helped drive the Turks headlong over Moab and out of Palestine.

In December, 1918, while stationed at Rafah on the Egyptian-Palestine border, we were joined by some two thousand Jews from the United States, a fine body of husky men. They arrived in the nick of time and became the mainstay of the British authorities in Palestine when mutiny broke out in Egypt and most of the regular troops had to be dispatched there to suppress the uprising.

The American soldiers proved themselves capable of coping with every difficulty and trial that presented itself, and carried out their arduous duties most admirably. The great majority of them returned to the United States on demobilization and, strange to state, I met quite a number of my old Legionaries at a luncheon given by them in my honor in New York in April, 1945.

The function took place at the Commodore Hotel, the leading

figure in the happy reunion being my old “comrade-in-arms,” Elias Ginsburg. We did not forget to toast “absent friends,” and stood reverently in silent memory of that greatest of all Legionaries, Vladimir Jabotinsky. We were privileged to have with us the devoted and charming wife of our departed leader, Mme. Jeanne Jabotinsky.

IV

On the morrow of that memorable day in September, 1939, when Neville Chamberlain declared that a state of war existed between Great Britain and Germany, I received a telephone call from Jabotinsky asking me whether I could come to London to discuss a matter of importance. I came to London the same afternoon.

Even before Jabotinsky had time to tell what the important matter was, I knew what he had in mind. Two people cannot be bound spiritually and politically, as Jabotinsky and I were, without acquiring the same way of thinking. It was obvious to me that Jabotinsky would suggest a plan for Jewish national participation in the war.

This time it was not a Jewish Legion that Jabotinsky had in mind, but a Jewish Army with all the paraphernalia of a full-fledged Allied nation. The position which we faced in 1939 was entirely different from that of 1914. In the First World War there was a theoretic possibility for the Jews to ally themselves with either of the warring alliances. It is true that Jewish sympathies traditionally favored Great Britain, but Czarist Russia was Britain’s ally at that time. Helping Britain meant also helping the land famous for its pogroms and anti-Jewish persecutions. Now, the Jewish people had no choice whatsoever. Whoever would fight the Nazi-Fascist axis could be assured of the wholehearted support of the Jewish people.

Nor was the object of organized Jewish participation in the war the same as in World War I. Then, the liberation of Palestine from Turkey’s rule was the only aim. When the Jewish Legion was formed, it had been stipulated that it could be used only on the Palestinian front and nowhere else. Now, it was not Palestine that had to be liberated,

but the world at large was to be cleansed of the Nazi plague. No one on this earth could feel more acutely the barbarity and absurdity of Nazism than the Jew did. Jabotinsky's plan of a Jewish Army had no strings attached to it. He offered to Britain an army 250,000 to 500,000 strong, which would fight under the Supreme Allied Command on *any* front. Nor did he ask for political compensations or guarantees. In his heart he knew, of course, that if a sizable Jewish Army took an active part in the war, the Jewish people would get its political compensation after the war. Palestine would be Jewish, whether an official pledge to this effect was given or not. But he demanded no promises or pledges whatsoever. He just offered an army.

Together we went knocking on the doors of the mighty, from the prime minister down. In one ministry after another we had speech with high officials. Jabotinsky was very eloquent in outlining the great asset which a Jewish Army would prove to the Allied cause. He also offered to organize a worldwide Jewish Intelligence Service, explaining that the Jews, by virtue of their dispersion and the important part they play in international trade, could render outstanding services, particularly in the economic warfare against the enemy and in preventing any leaks in the blockade of Germany.

Some of the British officials were greatly impressed by Jabotinsky's plan. Indeed, it was difficult for anyone not to discern the important potentialities of a Jewish Army and of a Jewish Intelligence Service, especially in a war against Nazism. No one could doubt the unanimity and wholeheartedness of the Jewish hatred for Germany and the determination with which the Jews would fight the Nazi beast. However, neither clear thinking nor justice prevailed in the councils of the British Government and the plan for organized Jewish participation in the war was cold-shouldered and blocked.

The pretexts given by British statesmen for their rejection of the Jewish Army plan changed from time to time. First – in the days of Neville Chamberlain – the official explanation was that Britain and France needed no manpower. They did not know what to do with their own “great armies.” This sounds quaint, but nevertheless such

was the official answer given to us by the British Government. It was the time of the “phony war” between the Maginot and the Siegfried Lines; and Chamberlain, famous for his lack of vision, might indeed have believed that the small British Army would, with the French, sit forever behind the Maginot fortifications.

Later, after Churchill took over, a new pretext was provided. Both Jabotinsky and myself were at that time already in America. The “phony” stage of the war was long gone. Indeed, the *Wehrmacht* was omnipotent in Europe and the main battlefield had shifted toward the Near East. To say that Britain had enough soldiers was impossible. In fact, Britain badly needed additional manpower. A Jewish Army, however, was still not wanted, so another dishonest rejection scheme was invented. We were told that because of a shortage in arms and ammunition Britain could not agree to the formation of a Jewish Army....

All through the years of the war, even after Jabotinsky passed away, public opinion both in the United States and in Britain clamored for a Jewish Army. The seed sown by Jabotinsky, who came to this country for this very purpose, had borne fruit. But the anti-Zionism of the British Colonial Office proved stronger than the vital interests of Britain and America. Having to make a choice between the acceptance of an army which would undoubtedly make a great contribution to the winning of the war (especially on the Middle Eastern front), or the granting of recognition to the Jewish people, Britain chose to disregard the best interests of the war effort and squashed the army. The strong public demands were of no avail. Whitehall anti-Jewish bureaucrats had decreed that there would be no Jewish Army, and there was no Jewish Army. The Jewish Brigade, formed late in the war, was a most reluctant concession to the widespread demands of public opinion. It was the only tangible achievement of the Jabotinsky idea of a Jewish Army.

Even this Vladimir Jabotinsky did not live to see. He died a heart-broken man at a time when the entire world situation was at its blackest, and when the Jewish-Zionist situation oozed desolation. Yet, in

summing up Jabotinsky's life, especially that phase which was devoted to the Jewish Legion in World War I, and his efforts on behalf of a Jewish Army in World War II, one must admit that he accomplished results of historic significance. The two revolutions which he set out to perform nigh thirty years ago were successfully concluded. It was Jabotinsky's Jewish Legion that gave all the actuality and plausibility to the Jewish Army idea in this war. To make the British Government accede to the formation of a Jewish Army was beyond Jabotinsky's power. It was he, however, his ideology, his life, his education, the example of his Legion, that made Jews and Zionists of all parties unite in the demand for Jewish national participation in this war. It was Jabotinsky's spirit that moved thousands of American and British leaders in politics, literature, religion, journalism and arts to raise their voices in favor of a Jewish Army.

I can think of no more fitting conclusion to this effort at evaluation of Vladimir Jabotinsky than a story told years ago by a friend of mine and a close collaborator of Jabotinsky's. Late in 1937, on a visit to Palestine, he met an Englishman who was the head of a great British enterprise in Palestine, who had lived there for many years and was well conversant with Jewish-Zionist politics. When in the course of the conversation the Englishman learned that my friend was an associate of Jabotinsky's, he said: "Oh, you are a follower of Jabotinsky. That's your Churchill."

I never forgot this story, for the parallel between Jabotinsky and Churchill was truly striking. At that time, in 1937, Churchill was still in opposition. He was the *enfant terrible* of British politics for many decades, exactly like Jabotinsky in Zionism. Both Vladimir Jabotinsky and Winston Churchill were great writers and famous orators; both were "civilians" whose lives were colored by military episodes and a deep interest in war problems; both spent the major part of their lives in opposition; both had the foresight and the prophetic power to foretell political events and they both repeatedly warned their peoples – in vain – against the fatal policies of their mediocre leaders.

This parallel is true even in details. When, at a Zionist Congress,

the word would spread that Jabotinsky was going to speak, there would be a stampede for seats. They would all listen, applaud and admire, and then they would vote for Weizmann and re-elect him to the leadership. The reaction to Churchill's speeches in the House of Commons was exactly the same. There, too, a half-empty room would fill to capacity to listen to Winnie; they would give him a great cheer, and they would walk into the division lobby to uphold Stanley Baldwin, Ramsay MacDonald, Neville Chamberlain, or some other nonentity.

Unfortunately, this parallel did not proceed to the very end. The British nation, when confronted with a great catastrophe, obeyed its inherent healthy instinct and called to power its Jabotinsky, who was destined to lead Britain out of its dire peril to glorious victory.

The Jewish people did not turn to its Churchill. Even facing the most tragic disaster in its long and eventful history, it still left the reins in the hands of its old leaders. The Jewish Churchill was left to die "in opposition."

But I am convinced that Vladimir Jabotinsky did not die a defeated man. On the contrary, before he passed away he had vitalized and given hope to the youth of Israel, and this seed, which he sowed in adversity, will, before a generation passes, assuredly flower into victory.

La Jolla, June 28, 1945.

The Story of the Jewish Legion

Chapter I

Birth of the Legion Idea

Early in December, 1914, I arrived in Alexandria from Civitavecchia on an Italian ship. The British customs official was fumbling with my Russian passport, trying to ferret out from the jumble of thirty odd visas my permit to land in Egypt; at the same time he was chatting with some officers among our fellow passengers, and suddenly I heard him say, “A few days ago a boatful of Zionists, almost a thousand of them, arrived from Jaffa – the Turks kicked them out of Palestine.”

The war was in its fifth month, and for more than three months I had been wandering over the cheerless world as a correspondent of *Russkiya Vvedomosti* (Russian Monitor). My mission was to report on the moods and sentiments produced by the war rather than on the war itself. In Sweden I had to establish whether the public shared Sven Hedin’s belief that Russia, barred as she was from Constantinople and the warm Bosphorus, intended to seize a Norwegian port – Narvik, or perhaps Bergen – and thus acquire an unfreezing harbor on the warm Gulf Stream; and if so, whether Sweden would join Germany and declare war on Russia. My task in England was to determine what

truth, if any, there was in the biting quip then popular in Russia that “the British Lion is prepared to fight to the last drop of Russian blood.” In France there was nothing to “investigate” – not even skeptics had any doubts about the feelings of the French. I was simply to report on the conditions at the front, if I could get there; go to Rheims to see whether the Germans had really shot to pieces its magnificent cathedral; find out whether Paris was “dispirited” or “optimistic.” But by the time I reached France, “Paris” had already been transferred to Bordeaux, as the government offices had been forced temporarily to move out of the threatened capital. I went to Bordeaux – and there, one wet morning, I read in a poster pasted on a wall that Turkey had joined the Central Powers and begun military operations.

I must confess: until that morning, in Bordeaux as everywhere else, I had been a mere observer, without any particular reasons for wishing full triumph to one side and crushing disaster to the other. My desire at that time was: stalemate, and peace as soon as possible. Turkey’s move transformed me in one short morning into a fanatical believer in war until victory; Turkey’s move made this war “my war.” In 1909 I had been chief editor in Constantinople of four Zionist newspapers at the same time (the sort of thing that occurs only in one’s youth); the Young Turks then ruled the Sublime Porte, and there and then I reached the steadfast conviction that where the Turk rules neither sun may shine nor grass may grow, and that the only hope for the restoration of Palestine lay in the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. That morning in Bordeaux, after reading the damp poster on the wall, I drew the only logical conclusion possible – and to this day I don’t understand why it took numbers of my friends so many years to reach such a simple conclusion. As I saw it, the matter was crystal clear: the fate of the Jews in Russia, Poland, Galicia – very important undoubtedly – was, if viewed in the historical perspective only, something temporary as compared to the revolution in Jewish national life which the dismemberment of Turkey would bring us.

I never doubted that once Turkey entered the war, she would be defeated and sliced to pieces: here again I am at a loss to understand

how anyone could ever have had any doubts on this subject. It was no guesswork but a matter of cold statistical calculation. I am glad of the opportunity to mention it here, as I have been accused of gambling on a problematic winner in those years. I had lived in Turkey for a long time as a newspaper correspondent. I have the highest regard for the profession of journalist: a conscientious correspondent knows much more about the country he writes from than any ambassador – in my experience, often more than most of the local professors. But in that particular instance not only professors but even ambassadors were aware of the pretty obvious truth about Turkey. That Germany would be beaten into unconditional surrender, of course, not even a journalist could have foreseen at that time. But that Turkey more than anyone else would have to pay for this war, I did not and could not doubt for one moment. Stone and iron can endure a fire; a wooden hut must burn, and no miracle will save it.

Exactly at what moment I conceived the idea of a Jewish fighting force – whether there in Bordeaux in front of that poster, or later – I don't remember now. I think, however, there never was any such moment. Where is the man, whatever his faith, who can honestly point his finger at a certain date and say, "This is where I saw the light"? Everyone is born with the germ of his belief somewhere inside his brain, though it may not manifest itself until old age, however. I believe that it was always clear to me – from birth so to speak – that if ever a war should occur between England and Turkey, the right thing for the Jews would be to form a regiment of their own and participate in the conquest of Palestine – although before that day in Bordeaux I had never thought about it distinctly. As a matter of fact, this idea is a very normal idea which would have occurred, under such circumstances, to any normal person; and I claim the title of a fully normal person. In Jewish colloquial parlance this title is sometimes expressed as a *Goyishe kop*; if it is true – so much the worse for us.

A few days later I cabled to my paper in Moscow: "Suggest tour Moslem countries of North Africa to study effect on local population of Holy War proclaimed by Sultan." My editor cabled back: "Go ahead."

I began with Morocco but purposely went there via Madrid, where Max Nordau lived at that time; at the very outset of the war somebody in Paris conceived the bright idea of banishing him from France, his true homeland, as a “Hungarian.” Terrible things were happening then in the world....

I asked Nordau, “If the English could be persuaded to form a Jewish unit to fight on the Eastern front – in Palestine – what would be your attitude?”

He was skeptical. A sound idea, but where could such a unit get soldiers? English, French, Russian Jews were serving in their respective armies; in the neutral countries in Europe there were few Jews; America was far away; and besides, Jews nourished some foolish sentimental predilection for the Turk, “our cousin Ishmael.” True, no scholar on earth could tell what relation the Turks, a Touranian tribe, could possibly be to Ishmael the Semite, but there it was, and Nordau himself had had to face that music after his famous rebuke to the Young Turks at the Hamburg Congress.

“I remember that speech of yours,” said I. “You declared: ‘Why go to Turkey, to get assimilated there? That we can have nearer and cheaper.’ I then came to Hamburg from Constantinople and cheered wildly.”

“And I,” he replied, “had no end of trouble with some of our sentimental idiots. How dared I speak so harshly about our ‘cousin?’”

“Doctor,” I said, “we cannot let idiots dictate our policy. Not only are the Turks no cousins of ours; even with the real Ishmael we have nothing in common. We belong to Europe, thank God: for two thousand years we helped to build European civilization. And here comes one more quotation from another of your speeches: ‘We are going to Palestine to extend the moral boundaries of Europe as far as the Euphrates.’ Our worst enemy in this undertaking is the Turk. Now that the hour of his downfall has struck, we cannot possibly stand by and do nothing, can we?”

The old sage replied to my question with a profound saying; it wasn’t until much later that I came to realize how profound it was.

He shook his wise head and said, “This, my young friend, is logic; but logic is a Greek art, and Jews can’t stand it. The Jew learns not by way of reason but from catastrophes. He won’t buy an umbrella merely because he sees clouds in the sky; he waits until he is drenched and catches pneumonia – then he makes up his mind.”

Much time elapsed before I appreciated the whole truth of this remark; by that time I had found out that there existed in the world yet another tribe with exactly the same attitude toward logic, clouds and umbrellas – the English. The difference is that their lungs are stronger, and they have more money to pay the doctor.

After that conversation I visited Morocco, Algiers and Tunis, trying to “investigate” whether there had been any response to the Turkish appeal and whether there was any real danger of a Moslem rising. To ask the Moslems themselves for information would have been utterly useless, of course. Those people are great diplomats (in that “classical” sense to which I shall have to revert when I come to my audience with Delcassé), especially when they are afraid. I chose a better way: I questioned the local Sephardic merchants. They are not less autochthonous, and they are more clever and more frank. Where his own Jewish interests are not concerned, the Jew’s vision is likely to be perfectly sharp and farsighted. He knows the true feelings of the Arabs: even when they tell him stories, he can interpret their deceptions and draw his conclusions from what they don’t tell him. Almost all those Sephardim – merchants, lawyers, journalists, from Tangiers to Tunis – gave me the same answer, and history proved they were right.

“The appeal to a Holy War? Nonsense. Ridiculous even to ask. Only you naive Europeans still believe that it is possible to raise masses in the Orient in the name of Islamic solidarity and make them accept any serious risks. The Turks themselves don’t believe it: for the last hundred years Europe has been inflicting on them defeat after defeat, stripping them of their best provinces one after another, yet not one single Moslem people has budged an inch during all this time to help the Sultan – even though they call him ‘Caliph of all the Moslems.’

The Germans, who are just as naive as all other Europeans, have persuaded the Turks to try once more. It is hopeless: not a soul here will lift a finger to help the Turks.”

From Tunis I went to Egypt, via Rome. In Alexandria I unexpectedly found a lively Zionist atmosphere. Over a thousand refugees were there from Jaffa. Suddenly, for no reason at all, the Turks had ordered the Arab police to catch Jews in the streets and to pack them into boats. The police – “Cousin Ishmael” – carried out these orders with great enthusiasm, not sparing blows and not stopping short of loot. And on the water, a hundred meters from the Italian steamer, the Arab owner would stop his boat and demand a pound from each “passenger,” threatening to throw them into the sea if they did not pay.

I tried very hard to understand why the Jews, and nobody else, were chosen for expulsion. Among the refugees there were merchants, workmen, students, doctors, women and children. To this day I do not know what the underlying idea was...

In Egypt the British Government provided barracks and money. A special department was created for the affairs of the refugees, with a fine, friendly Englishman, Mr. Hornblower, in charge. The name of the woman who took care of the largest of the barracks – Gabbari – was Broadbent. The children used to call her the “white lady.”

I worked in Gabbari for several weeks. It was a camp of twelve hundred souls, of whom three hundred were Sephardim. We had two kitchens, an Ashkenazic and a Sephardic (at first there had been only one, but the Sephardim rebelled because they could not tolerate Ashkenazic food, especially the soup). We also had a Hebrew school and a chemist, and were altogether a completely independent community, having even a regiment of watchmen. There were about twelve languages besides Hebrew spoken in the camp. It was fortunate that all the children, nearly all the men and some of the women knew Hebrew. Otherwise, I cannot imagine how such a community could have been organized – with Bukharans, Moroccans, Grusinians (Georgians), Spaniards, and Jaffa students who refused to take quinine unless the chemist spoke Hebrew. I remember that a few

weeks later these students organized a football club and won a match against the scouts of Alexandria.

Every morning a huge army wagon used to arrive, driven by an Australian soldier and led by two gigantic Australian horses, for the express purpose of giving the smaller children of the camp a “ride.” The Australians learned to call out in Hebrew, “Come on, children,” and in a moment the wagon would be filled with tiny mites.

Occasionally we received a visit from one of the Australian officers, Lieutenant Eliezer Margolin, who stood and watched, and babbled in broken Yiddish, never for a moment dreaming that in a few years he would be colonel of one of the Jewish Battalions and that these very watchmen would be among his men.

The Sephardic community of Alexandria magnanimously opened its heart and its purse. The Chief Rabbi, Raphael della Pergola (he has since died), his assistant, Haham Abraham Abichezer, Edgar Soares the banker, and the merchant Joseph de Picciotto, all worked in the office, collected money, clothes, bedclothes, and represented the refugees at the government offices. There was also no lack of workers from the Ashkenazic side. Old Z. D. Levontin, manager of our bank in Palestine, procured credit from the Egyptian Bank and distributed money among those refugees who had deposits in Jaffa. V. Z. Gluskin, president of the Rishon-le-Zion winegrowers, used to ride around on tours of inspection from one barracks to another. M. Margolis, a leading representative of Nobel’s Oil Company in the Orient, was the treasurer.

There were also non-Jewish voluntary helpers. Especially do I remember the beautiful Frenchwoman, the wife of the Jewish Baron Felix de Menasseh: whenever she brought a wagon-load of fresh bread to Gabbari I used to wonder at the clever manner in which she was dressed. Very simply, and yet with “chic.” It seemed as if the French modistes had a special model – styles for visiting the poor.

Here in Gabbari the Jewish Legion was born. Two people played an important part in its birth – the Russian consul, Petrov, and Joseph Trumpeldor.