

Advance Praise for *Palestine Posts*

Mordecai Chertoff's extraordinary letters are history at its most compelling – vivid, detailed, immediate. His account of the reaction of Jerusalem's Jews to the UN partition vote is the best I've read anywhere. The narrative moves effortlessly between the historical and the personal, revealing a young man full of contradictions, self-absorbed and sometimes childish yet keenly observing the momentous events happening around him. At the same time, this book tells the touching story of a son's search for his elusive father, reminding us that, in the end, history is always personal. Together, father and son have written a unique narrative that gives us the vicarious experience of participating in Israel's founding. This book is a gift to the Jewish people.

– Yossi Klein Halevi
Senior Fellow, Shalom Hartman Institute
Jerusalem

Not that long ago, there was an era of dreams and hopes, bravery and idealism, recovery and rebirth. That was the era of Israel's birth, a world too often forgotten but to which Mordecai and Daniel Chertoff return us. Much more than a collection of letters or the story of a man, this is the story of a country and a nation. To read *Palestine Posts* is to learn Israel all over again, and to walk away enchanted and inspired.

– Dr. Daniel Gordis
Senior Vice President
Koret Distinguished Fellow and Chair of the Core Curriculum
Shalem College



Palestine Posts
An Eyewitness Account of the Birth of Israel





PALESTINE POSTS

AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT
OF THE BIRTH OF ISRAEL

Based on the Letters of Mordecai S. Chertoff

By Daniel S. Chertoff

The Toby Press

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To my children, Rachel, Ari and David, who followed in their grandfather's footsteps as Israeli soldiers and lovers of Zion; my wonderful children-in-law, Lior, Talya and Sara; my delicious grandchildren, Yehonatan Yaakov, Ofri Bareket, Eitan Moshe, Lia Ariel, Noam Zion, Eliana Miriam, Ilan Shmuel and most recently, Harel.

But most of all, to my wife, Arlene, who makes everything in my life possible.



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Preface

The instability of human knowledge is one of our few certainties. Almost everything we know we know incompletely at best. And almost nothing we are told remains the same when retold.

Janet Malcom, "Strangers in Paradise,"
The New Yorker, Nov. 13, 2006

I discovered the letters only after he died. Three weeks before the end, he was still taking buses downtown by himself to Café Hillel to flirt with the waitresses and watch the girls go by. But suddenly his blood sugar spiked and within a few days we learned he had advanced metastatic pancreatic cancer. Although I could not quite believe that he would soon die, I nevertheless rushed to simplify estate issues, learn where all his documents were, and have him identify people in the old photographs he had stored in wooden boxes. During his last three weeks, time seemed to slow down and nothing existed outside of his room. Jerusalem had just had one of the heaviest snowfalls in its history; travel was challenging, electricity was spotty, and worst of all, we had no telephone or internet. It was difficult to deal with all the medical and administrative issues. My father, Mordecai Samuel Chertoff, slipped away just two days before the end of 2013 in a gentle and, according to him, painless and peaceful process. He complained of being tired, increasingly slept and, finally, did not wake up. He was ninety-one.

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Six years earlier, my father had left a large, spacious apartment in Greenwich Village, Manhattan and moved into two rooms in an assisted living facility in the Arnona neighborhood of southern Jerusalem near where my wife and I lived. We had moved to Jerusalem a few years earlier after living for more than twenty years in Efrat, a town in the Judean hills just south of Bethlehem.

When he left America he had consolidated his most precious belongings to bring with him to Israel. Now I stood alone in his apartment, surrounded by the distilled essence of what was important to him, of who he was. I wondered where to begin.

Slowly, I started going through everything. He was incredibly orderly and neat. Some of his drawers had dividers to enforce separation between pens, paperclips, penknives, and coins. Others held clothing, neatly folded and piled. I found some shirts, folded around cardboard and secured with paper tape, not worn since they were last laundered in New York, years earlier. Bills and papers were in neat, labeled folders. And in the bottom of a file drawer I had never opened before were folders filled with letters.

Leafing through them, I discovered the correspondence between my grandparents during the academic year of 1935–1936, when my grandmother took her three children to spend the year in Palestine, leaving my grandfather in New York; and the more extensive correspondence between my father and his parents and siblings when he lived in Palestine from 1947 to 1950, working as a journalist for the *Palestine Post* and serving in the Haganah.

I was stunned by the find.

Several years earlier, when my father was in his early eighties, he had started writing a memoir of his experiences living in Palestine/Israel during the birth of the State. I had encouraged him to develop it into a book for the family. The narrative was chiefly anecdotal and associative – he recorded his recollections, supported by a few old articles and some research, drifting from one topic to another with little logic. I had grown up hearing many of these stories, time and again, and was basically tired of them. Nevertheless, I wanted to be supportive and help him get it done, so I edited and produced it. But I had no idea that he had kept this trove of letters from the period.

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My ambivalence toward the memoir reflected my ambivalence toward my father. I loved him, or at least wanted to love him, but he was hard to like. He was remote and self-involved; interested in ideas, not in people. He saw everyone, even his children, through the prism of his own needs and thoughts, and was a poor judge of character. He did not know how to engage and was the least empathetic person I have ever known. He could be charming when first meeting someone, but did not know how to behave in many situations. After he moved to Israel, I was compelled to adopt my mother's former role of telling him how to act and what to say. I doubt our relationship was unique among fathers and sons. Some of my friends' fathers were truly engaged, but I had only the sketchiest understanding of the kinds of relationships they might share. I brought my father to Israel for the last six years of his life and took care of him, but always felt guilty about my inability to give him the kind of affection and admiration he craved, despite his inability to bestow it himself.

The cache of letters I found had not featured at all in my father's memoir, and he had never mentioned their existence to me. There were about 400 in all – 65 that the family exchanged during the 1935–1936 trip to Palestine, roughly 120 that my father wrote to his parents and siblings between 1947 and 1950, and approximately 230 that he received from them in return. There were also a few letters from friends and lovers, and half a dozen or so notes from Gershon Agronsky, founder and editor of the *Palestine Post*. Among his papers were also photographs, and dozens of articles that he wrote for the *Post*, *Hadoar* (a Hebrew language periodical published in the US), and other publications.

* * *

My father was born into an intellectual, religious, Zionist family in the US, the youngest of three children. Both his parents were immigrants: his father, Shraga Feivel (Paul), from Belarus; his mother, Esther, from Romania. Paul had rabbinic ordination and taught Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York. My father was twenty-five years old and had almost completed his own rabbinical degree at JTS when he moved to Palestine in 1947. That year, his brother, Gershon, was

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thirty-two, single, and a pulpit rabbi in Elizabeth, New Jersey. His sister, Naomi, was a trained psychiatric social worker; she was thirty years old, married, and living in Cleveland, Ohio. All five members of the family were ardent correspondents, often using carbon paper to preserve copies of what they wrote and, perhaps with an eye toward posterity, saved almost everything.

Mordecai's letters were personal, but not private. Many of them are addressed "Dear Family," with the expectation that they would be passed around and shared. Nevertheless, he clearly had a different relationship and therefore a different kind of correspondence with each member of his family. He and his father wrote to each other in Hebrew; loving, tender, lyrical, and inspired letters. His mother seemed often at a loss as to what to write, focusing on her own activities, family matters, and projects and assignments for her son to carry out for her in Palestine. Mordecai and his brother discussed ideas, books, and current events, while the longest, most detailed and most intimate letters were between Mordecai and his sister. Early in their correspondence, Naomi offered to be his "therapist," a position for which she was professionally qualified. He gladly accepted the offer and took full advantage. While it is clear that most of the letters to individual members of the family were passed around, some of *their* correspondence was confidential – not to be shared. Overall, the correspondence reflects a very close, deeply loving family who seem to care more for each other than for anyone outside of their nuclear unit, including spouses and lovers.

Mordecai's siblings both wrote that their father was keeping an extensive "double entry bookkeeping system" for the correspondence, tracking what letters were sent and received and when, and the subjects they covered. According to Gershon, Paul then supposedly outlined key points which warranted responses and assigned them to his two other children accordingly. Although I've never found my grandfather's ledger, I suspect this description is no exaggeration.

Beyond the affecting experience of reading what my family wrote sixty-five and eighty years ago, I was moved by the logistics of such a correspondence as well as by the tactile aspects of hard-copy letters. In our digital age, when communication is instantaneous, when we can hold real-time video chats and expect responses to text messages within

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minutes and to emails within a day, it is hard to process the reality of what we now call “snail mail.” People devoted hours to writing long, carefully composed letters, understanding that the letters would be read, reread, analyzed, consulted, and, ultimately, tied with ribbon and saved; that a letter could arouse strong emotions in those who read them and a response would be considered and composed with contemplation and deliberation. This exchange would have taken about six weeks during the 1930s and three to four weeks during the late 1940s. Imagine that this is all you have of a loved one; imagine not even hearing the voice of a parent or sibling for two years!

Even more important were the mechanics of composition. Word processing on a computer does not require forethought or planning. An author jots down ideas, rearranges them, edits, corrects spelling, and is, eventually, left with a finished text. But before word processing, writers had to plan and carefully organize what they wanted to say. They had to think and write in sentences, paragraphs, and whole sections. It was a very different, and more demanding, mental process.

Finally, handling the letters was a powerful tactile experience for me. The correspondence during the middle 1930s had traveled primarily by sea. Many of the letters were written with fountain pens, on thick, creamy paper. The letters between my father and his parents and siblings in the late 1940s were written on aerograms or thin onionskin, sometimes on both sides in an effort to save money. Most of my father’s letters were typed so that he could use carbon paper and save a copy for himself, but several were handwritten. Most of the letters he received were handwritten. I recalled the comment by the Israeli novelist Aharon Appelfeld, who wrote in longhand, claiming that writing is a sensual art, “You have to touch [the paper] and feel it.”¹ As I read the letters, holding paper my loved ones had handled, their pen strokes clearly visible, I had to agree.

As I read the letters, I began to realize how significant they were. Most were written during two of the most momentous years in Jewish history. They offer an eyewitness, real-time view of the struggle for Israel’s rebirth, from the perspective of a young, articulate, religious,

1. *The Paris Review* (Fall 2014), interview with Aharon Appelfeld.

idealistic Zionist New Yorker. Along with vivid descriptions of Jerusalem, the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine), and the fight for self-determination for the Jewish people, they offer a fascinating glimpse into the American Jewish community of the 1940s. I realized that the letters might have a wider appeal, beyond family, especially if placed in context.

I also came to see a more personal significance in them. These letters are the private, intimate thoughts and observations of my father as a young man. Besides descriptions of events, historical figures, and Jerusalem of yesteryear, my father wrote of relationships with women, professional successes and failures, triumphs and disappointments, and his thoughts and feelings on a wide range of issues. What an incredible opportunity to get to know my father in his formative years, one participating in one of the most miraculous events of the twentieth century! As a character in William Boyd's novel, *Sweet Caress*, says, "Who wouldn't want to travel back in time and encounter their parents before they became their parents?"² Indeed! Here was just such an opportunity. But what would I find? What was he like then? How did he think? What kind of person was he at that stage in his life? Did he change? How would it influence what I thought and felt about him so many years later? This treasure trove was my opportunity to confront and better understand both the emergence of the State of Israel ... and my father.

In his first letters, written in early 1947, Mordecai focused on settling into his new home in Jerusalem and finding work. They are somewhat self-centered but include some interesting historical and cultural information. With the UN vote to partition Palestine in November 1947, the story accelerates and the letters become much more interesting. Mordecai's description of the twenty-four hours following the vote is a masterpiece. The letters deal increasingly with events, circumstances, and people of national importance. Although Mordecai continued to tell his personal story, he was also a fine observer of contemporary events, as both analyst and participant. Sitting in the offices of the *Palestine Post* while simultaneously serving in the Haganah gave him unparalleled access to news and events. He was a good writer; he knew how to tell a

2. Bloomsbury USA, 2015.

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story that was gripping, informative, and (perhaps due to his interest in photography) visual. He was sometimes a bit aloof, seemingly removed and unaffected, rarely totally involved or committed – except during the bombing of the *Post* and his daring excursions between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv when the highway was very dangerous.

Considering the letters, alongside the memoir that my father wrote more than half a century later, added an important dimension. The memoir fills in, supports, enriches, and distorts the information contained in the letters. In the preface to his *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth writes that “poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” I would claim that, similarly, memoirs are descriptions of events and feelings recollected in tranquility, tempered by time, a lifetime of experience, imperfect memory, and a desire to justify or amend history. Mordecai’s memoir provides a different, mature perspective on the events of those years. It also fills in some important details missing from the letters – information that my father was unable to disclose to his family at the time due to security considerations. I have therefore included selections from the memoir that fill important gaps.

* * *

I have always preferred fiction to non-fiction. But these letters are not fiction and the story they tell is no invention. Reading the correspondence was a more profound and gripping experience than being immersed in any novel. A world was opened up to me, containing characters living during a critical historic juncture, all of them more interesting than any fictional character could possibly be. This world was real, vibrant, current, and perhaps most importantly, at least for me, it was mine. It was also a world and a perspective worth sharing with others. But in order to do so I realized I would have to place the letters in their historical context – political and historical developments, events, people, and places. I was doing this for myself, for my family, for a potentially wider audience and also for my father, in an effort to make the letters come alive. Perhaps it would allow me to give him, at least posthumously, the love and respect he always sought.

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In order to understand the letters more fully, I needed to immerse myself in the history of Israel's creation. For a basic source on the period I depended upon Benny Morris's *1948*, but soon found myself scouring many other sources for further information on everything my father mentions in his letters: events, people, speeches, places, etc. Many aspects of events remain controversial, especially the attack on Deir Yassin on April 9, 1948 and the Arab refugee issue, to identify just two. Since my purpose is not to advocate any particular narrative, but rather, to highlight my father's experience – in context – I made a concerted effort to present events as objectively as possible. To that end, I consulted a wide variety of sources, especially the accounts of key participants, including, for example, John Bagot Glubb, the British general who trained and led the Jordanian Arab Legion against Israel; UN mediator Count Folke Bernadotte; and Dov Joseph, Military Governor during the siege of Jerusalem, among others. Many of my sources are listed in the bibliography. The discovery of my father's letters and my subsequent research provided me with the opportunity to come to grips with the story of Israel's birth at a time when, seventy years later, its legitimacy is still questioned. It has significantly influenced my understanding of the current stalemate between the Israelis and the Palestinian Arabs.

In addition to books and articles, I skimmed every available issue of the *Palestine Post* printed during the period my father was in Palestine/Israel.³ I thought it important because in his letters my father makes frequent references to events and articles discussed in "today's paper." Moreover, as his place of employment, the *Post* was the center of my father's daily existence, its rhythms a kind of "heartbeat" for him. He had an important role in putting out the paper every day and was intimately familiar with the contents of each issue. Reading them made me feel as if I were standing right next to him. It helped me better understand what he was experiencing and confronting each day. He wrote many unattributed articles, but each time I encountered his by-line was, for me, poignant and filled me with pride.

3. Unfortunately, the *Post* archive is not complete. Some issues are unavailable and some are incomplete.

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It proved to be a fascinating exercise in historical research. A daily newspaper published during a tumultuous time period is a valuable primary source, a contemporaneous view of what will later be reinterpreted and massaged into history. I read about events the way my father experienced them – on an accretive, day-by-day basis, rather than as processed history. Reading articles written about events as they are happening is vastly different from reading about them after the fact, knowing how they will end. One unforeseen aspect of reading these daily accounts of events was the experiential.

A powerful example was the *Post's* ongoing coverage of the long odyssey of the SS *Exodus 1947*, a ship carrying 4,500 Jewish refugees from Europe attempting to reach Palestine in violation of the British limitations on Jewish immigration. The *Exodus* was part of the “Aliya Bet,” the illegal Jewish immigration (discussed in detail below) organized by several Jewish groups at the time. The ship was tracked from the moment it left France on July 11, 1947, and, when close to Palestine, was attacked by the British with the immediate deaths of two refugees and a Jewish volunteer crewman. The refugees were subject to appalling abuses. They were pulled off the *Exodus*, loaded onto three smaller boats, and sent back to Port-de-Bouc in the south of France, where they refused to disembark. The French declared that they would not accept any refugees who did not disembark of their own free will. In frustration, the British threatened to send the refugees to Germany. At the end of August, the boats approached Gibraltar for refueling. An article in the *Post* includes a detail I have not found in historical summaries; despite a heatwave that made conditions intolerable, the refugee men, women, and children were locked in barbed wire cages in the hold in order to prevent their escape. The ships were refueled and again put out to sea.

Eventually, after almost two months at sea, the refugees were forced to disembark in Germany and were taken to camps horribly reminiscent of the concentration camps from which many of them had been liberated. Some of the refugees made subsequent attempts to reach Palestine but were caught and placed in British internment camps in Cyprus. Many of the *Exodus* refugees managed to reach Palestine by the time the State was declared on May 14, 1948 – almost a year after their original departure from France. But those who were interned in camps

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in Cyprus, where fifty thousand other Jews were held, had a longer wait. The British released the detainees at the rate of 1,500 per month; the last were finally released in January, 1949, when Britain formally recognized the State of Israel.

To read of the seasickness, the appalling sanitary conditions, of adults and babies dying, of the desperate refugees' determined refusal to disembark anywhere but Palestine, to feel the deepening sense of "Pharaoh hardening his heart"⁴ as the British resolutely refused any mercy, despite worldwide condemnation and horror, is devastating. Even the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), present in Palestine at the time on a fact-finding mission, was appalled by the callousness of the British. The heartbreaking accounts of the agony of the victims unfolded in real time and it is impossible to remain dry-eyed. I found this a more "ethical" way to learn what happened, rather than reading massaged, historical summaries.

Reading the daily *Post* also gave me the opportunity to learn about contemporaneous events beyond Palestine, including the West's struggle with Russia over Germany and Berlin, Indian independence, the creation of Pakistan and "Hindustan," the communist takeover of Hungary, the "Texas City Disaster" (an industrial accident that killed over five hundred people), the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, and Europe's ongoing struggle to recover from World War II. I was also fascinated by the advertisements for cigarettes, face cream, real estate, vacuum cleaners, and tourist attractions. Equally absorbing were the announcements of arrivals in Palestine, social events, concerts, reviews of cultural events, letters to the editor, etc. It is extraordinary to see that, in spite of the constant attacks – the bombs and sniper fire – and the uncertainty of what the future would bring, life went on as usual: Palestinian Jews flocked to concerts, sporting events, and the cinema. There were eight active movie theaters each in Haifa and Jerusalem and seven in Tel Aviv!

Shifting between these three main sources – a daily newspaper, history books, and my father's letters and memoirs – provided a rich perspective on the period. But it is the letters that are the most powerful. Historian Anita Shapira articulates perfectly what I discovered:

4. Exodus 8:32, for example.

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“Autobiographical writing is an attempt to give expression to that fleeting moment, to freeze time, to perpetuate what happened in real time, before the historians and writers and agents of memory expropriate the past and control its shaping.”⁵

* * *

Finding the letters was like stumbling upon a beautiful, ancient mosaic where some sections of the picture are full – dazzling, detailed, and vibrant – while others are sparse, faded, or missing. For some months there are many letters, but for others, like the invasion period immediately following the declaration of the State, when there was no mail service, there are almost none. There are also time periods during which much of moment happened, but, frustratingly, Mordecai writes only about personal matters. I have filled some of the gaps in his narrative with articles that he wrote, with other contemporary eyewitness reports (mostly by people he knew), and with the fruits of my reading and research. The resulting “restored” mosaic is a combination of all these sources.

Mordecai’s parents and siblings were not only highly educated, but well informed about world affairs and the situation in the Middle East. They were also voracious consumers of news, especially with respect to Palestine. His letters home assumed this strong background in history, current affairs, culture, and literature. Therefore, in addition to filling in the gaps in the mosaic, I have tried to provide the background that Mordecai assumed in his readers. I am not a historian and do not presume to offer any novel interpretations of history or revelations. Nevertheless, I have included coverage of some aspects of the history of the period that seem rarely discussed, such as the tireless efforts by the UN to find a peaceful solution to the conflict, like the UNSCOP report and the proposals by UN mediator Count Folke Bernadotte. I have drawn on both primary and secondary sources in order to showcase the letters, but to a certain extent I have tried to restrict myself to what Mordecai knew or had read.

5. Anita Shapira, “Jerusalem in 1948: A Contemporary Perspective,” *Jewish Social Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2011): p. 119.

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This book is the result: a highly personal, subjective, and idiosyncratic work. It interweaves the letters – heavily annotated – with some of Mordecai’s published articles, “editorials” he supplied to his brother, sections of his memoirs, and pictures and documents, in order to create a coherent narrative – his narrative – placed in its historical context. The result is both an eyewitness account of the birth of the State of Israel by an acute, well-positioned observer and participant, and the story of the inner life of a sensitive, educated young man, strongly attached to his family and far from home.

From a practical point of view, I observed all the normal conventions associated with editing a collection of letters. I made only basic corrections, fixing typos, normalizing spelling, format, etc. The names of publications and sailing vessels are in italics, even though my father obviously could not type in italics on his typewriter. In some cases I left charming misspellings and explained my father’s word-play. I also deleted letters, or parts of letters, which I felt would not be interesting to the general reader.

All translations from the Hebrew are by Shira Koppel, except where indicated. People and places are identified only the first time they appear. Hebrew, and foreign language phrases are translated the first time they appear.

Finally, I suppose I should include what is known today as a “trigger warning.” Mordecai was politically very incorrect, freely expressing racist views and evoking ethnic, gender, and racial stereotypes. He and his family were also very concerned with meeting “the right people” and could be snobbish and manipulative. These are not admirable qualities, but Mordecai and his family were “real” people who lived at a particular time. Some of their sentiments and expressions may be considered cultural artifacts.

One of the great pleasures of immersing myself in this long-gone world has been the opportunity to meet the descendants of some of the people mentioned in the letters and, indeed, in at least one case, to communicate directly with someone who played an important role in my father’s life almost seventy years ago. Those encounters are described in context and in the acknowledgments. Perhaps this project will elicit responses from other participants in this drama. I hope so.

Chapter 1

Planting the Seeds: Palestine, 1935–1936

Mordecai's sojourn in Palestine/Israel during the late forties really began eleven years earlier, in 1935, when his mother took him and his siblings to Palestine for the academic year, leaving her husband in New York. (Paul would join them nine months later, for the summer months.) The trip was transformative for Mordecai. It established the Jewish homeland as the absolute center of his life, created the infrastructure that would sustain him during his later stay, and taught him how to manage on extremely limited resources. The letters he wrote to his father during that period, as a thirteen-year-old, foreshadow the issues, concerns, and habits that would be reflected in the letters he would write as an adult during the period leading up to and including Israel's War of Independence.

What was the complex political reality the family would encounter during their extraordinary trip?

Less than twenty years before, four centuries of Turkish rule in Palestine (from 1516 until 1917) had ended. Their Ottoman Empire had allied itself with Germany in World War I and had been defeated – specifically in Palestine – by the British. In recognition of the Jews'