

The curious case of Major Farran's hat

A saga in Israel's struggle against the British during the Mandate period

By BARRY SHAW

On the evening of May 6, 1947, Alexander Rubowitz left his home in Jerusalem. He never returned. Rubowitz lived at 22 David Yellin Street in the Mea She'arim neighborhood. He was 16 years old.

Rubowitz was a tall slim quiet boy, a quality that belied his role as an activist in the Stern Group – *Lohamei HaHerut b'Yisrael* also known as Lehi, the Freedom Fighters for Israel.

The British governance of pre-state Israel had become belligerent to the inflow of European Jewish refugees into Mandatory Palestine, many of them survivors of Nazi death camps.

Jewish political and action groups objected to the chokehold on immigration.

The British block on Jewish aliyah, immigration, went against their own policy enshrined in the Balfour Declaration to "use their best endeavours to facilitate the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish People."

In Jewish eyes, it was doing precisely the opposite. British officials were now preventing the achievement of that goal.

So intense had the opposition to British rule become that violence was applied in an effort to dislodge the British grip on Palestine.

Although the Zionist movement campaigned politically against the anti-Jewish British policy, an underground movement, led by the Irgun and Stern Group, mounted attacks against British targets throughout Palestine.

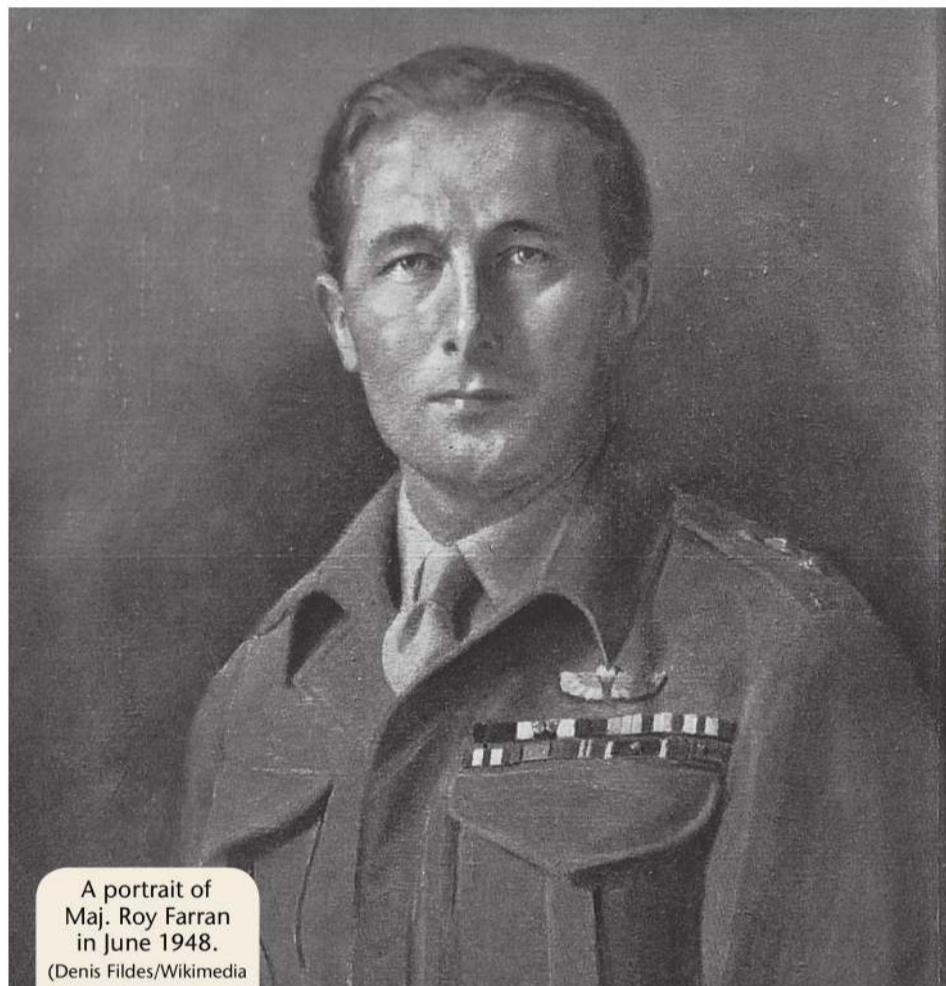
The Hagana, a semi-official militia of the Jewish Agency, worked stealthily to smuggle escaping Jews from the grip of the Nazis and bring them covertly to the Promised Land.

Prime minister Clement Attlee's government, with the antisemitic Ernest Bevin as its foreign secretary, introduced stringent means to quell the rising violence against the British presence. Into the breach stepped field marshal Bernard Montgomery, the war hero of the battle of El Alamein in North Africa where the British Eighth Army defeated Rommel's German Army.

Montgomery took up his position as chief of the Imperial General Staff in June 1946. He was tasked to stop the violence. He generally used the British police force stationed in Palestine. He visited Palestine and decided gen. Sir Alan Cunningham was not suited to be the High Commissioner due to being "quite unable to make up his mind what to do and pathetically anxious to avoid a showdown."

Montgomery's report expressed a plan of action against the Jewish opposition.

"All ranks must understand they are in for a very unpleasant job. The Army must strike a real blow against the Jews by arresting the heads of the illegal Jewish organizations and those members of the Jewish Agency known



A portrait of Maj. Roy Farran in June 1948. (Denis Fildes/Wikimedia)

to be collaborating with the Hagana. This would lead to a war against the Jews, a war against a fanatical and cunning enemy who would use the weapons of kidnap, murder and sabotage."

The outcome of Montgomery's policy would be that the British would do precisely that. Use the weapons of kidnap and murder against Palestinian Jews.

Montgomery's Operation AGATHA led to the arrest of leading, Jewish Agency staffers and Hagana officers. Weapons were confiscated from kibbutzim.

In retaliation, the Irgun struck at the heart of the British administration by blowing up a wing of the iconic King David Hotel housing sections of the civil administration and the offices of the British Middle East forces in Palestine. Ninety-one people were killed in the explosion, including 16 British personnel.

Following this attack, the British Cabinet Defense Committee, which now included Montgomery, gave the order to strike at the secret Irgun and Stern Group organizations in an operation codenamed SHARK.

By the end of July they had arrested several members of the underground groups and uncovered huge weapons stored in places like Tel Aviv's Great Synagogue.

The brunt of the operations fell on the

Palestine Mobile Police Force, which was severely understaffed. They were constantly patrolling the streets, questioning and arresting suspects.

The Stern Group frequently used teenagers to be couriers and paste notices. They knew the British would give lighter punishment to teenagers than they would for adult operators.

On that May evening, Rubowitz left his home to pin Stern Group messages on poster boards. He passed through the Mahaneh Yehuda market to perform his night-time mission. A woman, standing on her apartment balcony, saw a young boy running down the street being chased by a powerful looking man. She watched as the man caught the boy near the Ussishkin and Keren Kayemet Boulevard intersection. She later identified the boy as Alexander Rubowitz.

Two boys saw a man force a third boy into a waiting car. Another man assisted the attacker in throwing the boy into the car before they drove off at high speed. Other onlookers noted the vehicle number as 993.

During the attack, 15-year-old Meir Cohen walked up to the car to ask what they were doing. A man replied in English that they were police officers and were arresting the boy. He threatened to shoot



אלכסנדר רובוביץ

היכן הצעיר אלכסנדר רובוביץ

יום כ', ט"ו באייר ת"ש (6.5.47), הלך אלכסנדר רובוביץ, כיהודי, בן 16, לפגישה עם חבריו. במסגרת הפגישות קיימו אתר עיתון בריטי לטוב אורח, פוזיט באקדמי. הנער החפז סירב המישהו ונעלם למרחק. המישהו דרך אחריו ותפס עובד קניונים וזכרים התקשרו וניסו להגיד את אלכסנדר רובוביץ סירב הבריטי. הוא הודא למתקשרים הנקרות בלש. אלכסנדר רובוביץ נמסר על-ידי הבריטי אל סוכנות, שהובלת מסיבת הירחובות האנטי-בריטית-קדול. בוגר המבצעת ישבו עני כריזים טוספים. אחר מהם המש לראשו בוגר של שומר בריטי. אלכסנדר רובוביץ סירב לסיכום למבצעת קט שובי. בשעות התאבדות נשמע סוכנות של אחד הבריטים. אחר שמסמכות התחלפת ריש מן המסמך, נאסף הרכיב והמסא רישו במוסד השם, "אדק". אחריו שושעיק לא חזר למרו, מנו בני משפחתו למסדרי המלטה. קצוני המלטה חתלו, כיבולו, להקיר המסמכות העולם עי אלכסנדר רובוביץ ומרשו למסמכותו לחמש את גבו ככל כחוליהו המבצעות והמבצעות וההקוים בארץ. בשום מקום לא נמצא הנער קבוצתי נעלם. מאז ההמושו קטרו למעלה מסלמות שביקו. הקרות בדיוקת על המקרה משאירה קעה הקום להשיקה אתה על גורלו של הצעיר. אלכסנדר רובוביץ קונת עיר מוזה על-ידי הומופון הבריטיים בגיוריו הנעלמים. אם שלטונותיהוויים לא יגלו בימים הקרובים היכן נמצא אלכסנדר רובוביץ, תחשו החשיקה לניבולת. במסגרת זה ישולם לפושעים הבריטיים כמסולם. לוחמי חרות ישראל. מבצעת - סוף העיר

A missing person's poster for Alexander Rubowitz in May 1947 (Wikimedia Commons)

Cohen if he did not back away from the vehicle. Cohen saw the boy in the back being repeatedly hit by the second man. The kidnapped boy shouted in Hebrew, "I'm from the Rubowitz family."

As the car screeched away the boys who witnessed the scene found a hat on the ground. Inside the gray trilby was a label in English with the name "Farran."

Rubowitz had been dragged off the street by Maj. Roy Farran, who led a British covert police squad, whose role was going after Jewish underground operatives, even boys.

During this period there were four unsolved kidnappings, three involved teenagers. In May 1947, a 14-year-old boy was snatched from his hospital bed where he was being treated for police gunshot wounds after he had been discovered putting up Stern Gang notices.

When Rubowitz had not returned home by the following morning, his parents were frantic with worry. They went to the local police station to report him missing. They were told that their son was not in police custody.

They contacted the Hebrew press to have them report the boy's disappearance. On May 9, *Haaretz* published a small piece headlined, "Abducted or Arrested?"

Newspapers printed Rubowitz's picture. Two of the boys who witnessed the scene recognized him and told the press they had found a hat and taken it to the local synagogue. Rubowitz's parents rushed to the synagogue and retrieved the hat from Ivan Kaminsky, the synagogue's caretaker. They took it to the Mahaneh Yehuda police station and handed it over to a police inspector, named John O'Neill.

From a tip-off they were told their son had not been abducted by rival Jewish groups.

Asher Levitsky was employed as the family lawyer. He was an influential person with ties to leading Zionists. He met with the



SAS members on parade for an inspection by Gen. Montgomery, following their successful participation in the capture, behind enemy lines, of the port of Termoli in Italy. On the left is Maj. E. Scratchley DSO, commanding the SAS detachment, while on the right is Capt. Roy Farran holding a German Schmeisser submachine gun. (UK Government/Wikimedia Commons)

head of the Jerusalem CID (Criminal Investigation Department), who confirmed that the boy was not in police custody, nor was he being held by the British military.

Following publicity in *The Palestine Post*, later to become *The Jerusalem Post*, Miriam Rubowitz, Alexander's mother, received an anonymous letter. It told her that the name in the hat was that of a CID police superintendent – Roy Farran.

It was becoming clear that Alexander Rubowitz had been snatched by a police unit headed by a Maj. Roy Farran, whose middle name, coincidentally, was Alexander.

Farran was no ordinary policeman. He had been a British military hero, serving in the SAS, an elite covert squad of the British army operating behind enemy lines in World War II. Aged only 26, he was one of Britain's most decorated officers. Such was the level of counterterrorism being applied against Jewish resistance in pre-state British Mandate Palestine.

A Jewish teenager was missing, snatched off the street by a covert British police squad. The British were in denial. Where was Alexander Rubowitz, and what was his fate?

LT. COL. BERNARD FERGUSSON had fought behind Japanese lines in Burma in World War II using the skills of unconventional warfare. In 1947 he was in Palestine recruiting tough skilled officers to serve in a covert counterterror unit of the British police force. One of his officers was Farran.

The Jewish rebellion against British rule forced the Attlee government to bring in Gen. Montgomery to solve the Jewish problem in Palestine. The military giant directed the British police in Mandatory Palestine to, "Strike hard and with great speed and determination with the object of completely and utterly defeating the Jews as soon as possible."

The British High Commissioner in Palestine, Gen. Sir Alan Cunningham, objected. "What Monty was proposing would lead to war throughout Palestine and ruin any hope of a political resolution."

Montgomery remained adamant that his way was the only way to "suppress the lawlessness." The British cabinet decided "more vigorous action should be taken against the terrorists and that this would be welcomed by the law-abiding population."

Gen. Evelyn Barker, commander of British Forces in Palestine, was an antisemite. He had written about the Jews to his Jerusalem socialite Arab lover, Katie Antonius, "I loathe the lot, whether they be Zionist or not. Why should we be afraid to say we hate them? It's time this damned race knew what we think of them. Loathsome people!"

This was the officer who gave the order on January 23, 1947, "To kill or arrest terrorists and to obtain possession of their arms."

But 16-year-old Alexander Rubowitz was not a terrorist, and he was armed with nothing more than posters and a paste brush.

Even after Rubowitz had been missing for months after being snatched off a Jerusalem street by a police squad, the British offered only silence.

According to a covert report that Farran gave to Fergusson, his friend and commanding officer, he and his squad spotted a young Jewish boy carrying posters. They snatched the boy and drove to a remote spot off the Jerusalem-Jericho road to interrogate him in the dead of night hoping he would lead them to more senior members of the Jewish underground. Farran's vehicle was logged into the records of a British checkpoint on Jericho road. By Wadi Kelt, Rubowitz was dragged from the vehicle and tied to a tree. During the brutal interrogation, Farran picked up a rock and smashed the boy's head repeatedly until he died. Alexander Rubowitz's body was released from the tree.

He was stripped of his clothes and was allegedly stabbed numerous times to make it look as if the Jewish boy had been murdered by Arabs. They burned his clothing and returned to Jerusalem, their vehicle logged in at the same checkpoint.

Farran gave Fergusson a list of names they had found in the young boy's pocket.

Farran was not charged with murder. Neither was he arrested or suspended and he and his team received no punishment for the murder of a Jerusalemite teenager.

The Hebrew press published pictures of the missing boy, reports from eye witnesses and the revelation of the hat with the name "Farran" found at the scene of the kidnapping. In an attempt to defray the evidence, the British CID forensic laboratory reported it was impossible to confirm the name of the hat was Farran.

By now, however, it was becoming impossible for the British to stall the process and Farran was ordered to make himself available to stand trial. He was confined to Fergusson's house pending the outcome of the investigation. When he received a tip-off that he was about to be arrested, Farran stole a CID car, changed the number plates and drove at speed to Syria via Transjordan.

An arrest warrant was issued for his arrest. He was tracked down to Aleppo, but the Syrian Arab authorities had learned of his anti-Jewish actions and offered him sanctuary.

Extradition proceedings drew the British Foreign Office into the intrigue. They tried appealing to the Syrian president. Farran, the former British war hero, was causing great embarrassment to his country and to his friends. He was persuaded to return to Jerusalem to face trial on the assurance of influential friends they would raise the money for his defense by prominent British lawyers.

On June 17, 1947, Farran arrived in Rosh Pina and handed himself into the hands of the British Army.

Cunningham told the colonial secretary, "On May 6, a Jewish youth named Rubowitz suspected of Stern Gang activities, was arrested by British police in Jerusalem. He was taken by Major Farran, a Deputy Superintendent of Police, to a lonely spot between Jericho and Jerusalem where, in the course of interrogation, he was killed. It appears the body was stripped and left, and the police have found no trace of it."

In revenge for this killing, the Jewish underground raised their stakes in their war against the British. From June, 11 letter bombs were sent to prominent British leaders including foreign secretary Ernest Bevin; Stafford Cripps, the chancellor of the exchequer; Anthony Eden, and even to Winston Churchill. All the bombs were intercepted.

Stern Group members sent a letter bomb to Farran's home in England. The major was not at home. His brother was killed as he tried to open the package.

There were reports that officers involved in the disappearance and murder of a Jewish boy, were associated with the British Union of Fascists.

Again, Farran was under house arrest, rather than securely guarded. As his trial approached amid mounting publicity Farran decided, once again, to escape justice. He simply walked out of the compound.

Farran's disappearance was further embarrassment for London. Golda Myerson, later

Golda Meir, sent a letter from the Jewish Agency to the British government demanding to know the whereabouts of Farran.

Tensions were ratcheted up when four British soldiers relaxing on Tel Aviv beach were gunned down. In Haifa, an officer and friend of Farran was killed and two others injured in the Astoria Restaurant. The British administration in Jerusalem sent a report to London explaining the assassinations as "the work of the Stern Gang as a reprisal for the death of Rubowitz, the victim of the Farran case."

Farran heard about the violence in the wake of his disappearance. He gave himself up at the Allenby Barracks. The London War Office decided to bring charges against Farran not for murder but for going absent without leave.

This time Farran was under heavy guard but the Jewish underground was angry. On July 12, the Irgun kidnapped two British sergeants in Netanya. On July 29, their bodies were found hanging from a tree in an orange grove.

When news of this murder reached Britain there was anti-Jewish rioting in Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, Hull, Brighton and many other cities with synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses.

Farran's trial was set for September 24, 1947 at a military court in the Talbieh district of Jerusalem. The charge was that on the night of May 6-7, near the Jerusalem-Jericho road, Farran murdered Alexander Rubowitz. Farran pleaded "not guilty."

Despite the array of witnesses to the abduction, the judge advised the court that "where no body or body part had been found, the law was clear that the accused could not be convicted unless there was evidence of a killing."

Farran was acquitted. He was whisked out of Jerusalem and the next day was on a ship bound for England.

As described in the excellent book *Major Farran's Hat* by historian David Cesarani, Farran's fame was not diminished by this episode. On the contrary, he wrote an autobiography, unsuccessfully tried to win a seat in Parliament, then emigrated to Canada.

Alexander Rubowitz's family continued to pursue Farran not only to bring him to civil trial but to discover the exact location Farran had disposed of the body so that they could bring their boy back to a final resting place.

One year after Alexander Rubowitz's murder, the State of Israel was established.

Although the remains of Alexander Rubowitz were never found, a memorial can be found in the military cemetery on Mount Herzl commemorating this young Zionist hero, and a plague can be seen on Ussishkin Street in Jerusalem, the scene of his abduction by the British who left Israel in shame on May 14, 1948.

On his way out, British high commissioner, Alan Cunningham, wrote that the Jewish fighters that had driven out the British were "remarkably like those of Nazi Germany," proving the depth of antisemitism among the British officers who failed to use their best endeavors to facilitate the establishment of a national home of the Jewish people and, instead, were responsible for the murder and judicial cover up of a Jewish teenage hero.

The writer is the author of 1917: From Palestine to the Land of Israel and A Tale of Love and Destiny.