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INDEPENDENCE DAY

Daring and determined

The women of the Irgun

• By FERN ALLEN

The burning sensation on Devorah Kalfus-Nehushtan's leg was excruciating. The bottle of sulfuric acid she was carrying in her handbag, to be used to blow up the pipeline transporting oil from Iraq to the Haifa refinery, had overturned and spilled onto her. But as a member of the Irgun in 1945, she refused to abandon her mission to sabotage that British asset in Mandatory Palestine, despite her tremendous physical pain.

"It wasn't every day that the Irgun allowed a young woman to take part in such a dangerous operation," Dr. Naama Teitlbaum-Kassie, 39, who has researched women's activities in the pre-state underground, said. "But for Devorah, to be part of this Irgun cell was a unique opportunity." It was not until the next day that Kalfus-Nehushtan sought medical attention for her burns, which had already become infected.

Kalfus-Nehushtan was one of an estimated 1,000 women who joined the Irgun – the pre-state underground paramilitary Zionist group, headed by Menachem Begin – between 1931 and 1948. ("Irgun" is shorthand for "Irgun Zvai Leumi" and is also commonly referred to by its Hebrew acronym, "Etzel.")

By 1944, the Irgun had declared a revolt against the British Mandatory government in Palestine.

The Irgun women, often varying in age from teens to young adults, participated in every aspect of the underground organization's activities, including daring and dangerous subversive military operations against the British in Mandatory Palestine, spying, psychological warfare, disseminating propaganda, transferring messages to Irgun commanders, essential office work, and caring for injured Irgun fighters.

Only a small percentage of those women took part in the dangerous sabotage missions against the British or in the daring efforts to capture British munitions, characteristic of the underground organization's sensational activities. Nevertheless, any activity considered subversive by the Mandatory British authorities could land the women in prison, noted Teitlbaum-Kassie, who wrote her PhD thesis on women in the Irgun, receiving her doctorate from Bar-Ilan University in 2019.

"Most were very proud of their role [in driving the British out of Palestine] and what they did," Teitlbaum-Kassie added, citing the example of Devorah Rotem, tried by the British for her role as an Irgun commander. According to a transcript of the trial, Rotem said: "We know from history that the fighting spirit is not new for women; we have taken part in fights for ages. It's a mitzvah for women – not just for men – to be part of the fight."

However, most of the women "just saw themselves as part of an operation" and didn't formally view themselves as Irgun "fighters," Teitlbaum-Kassie said. That didn't stop the British from hunting them, however. Many were caught by the British authorities, tried, and convicted.

Between 1940 and 1947, she noted that 187 Jewish women detainees and prisoners affiliated with the Haganah and



A FEMALE Irgun fighter brandishes a rifle. (Courtesy of the Jabotinsky Institute in Israel)

other Jewish defense organizations were held in the Bethlehem women's prison. This number, she pointed out, does not include a small additional group of Jewish women who were incarcerated for non-security-related offenses, such as prostitution, or who were sent to Bethlehem as an alternative to psychiatric hospitalization. Of the total number of detainees and prisoners, 101 were affiliated with the Irgun.

The British, fearing a worldwide backlash, never executed any Irgun women, nor did they send them to prisons in Africa – unlike the punishments they meted out to Irgun men.

Nevertheless, the conditions in the Bethlehem prison for women were severe, with 10 people squashed into each small cell. When the British tried to cram in additional inmates, the women refused to stand for it and created a ruckus.

Teitlbaum-Kassie, who teaches history in the Open University of Israel's Department of History, Philosophy, and

Judaic Studies, estimates that six of the

women sent to that prison during the Mandate were mothers of young children who had to be taken care of by relatives; when that wasn't possible, the youngsters were cared for by another family.

One of the leaders in the Bethlehem prison was Esther Raziell-Naor, the first broadcaster of the Irgun's underground radio station, *Kol Zion Halohemet* ("The Voice of Fighting Zion"), and a senior member of the Irgun's command establishment.

In 1944, the British police found Raziell-Naor's radio transmitter, and she and her husband Yehuda were arrested. She was sent to the Bethlehem prison. Yehuda was sent to prison in Africa, where he remained for four years until the State of Israel was founded.

While in prison, Esther went on a hunger strike to force the British to provide the Jewish prisoners with kosher food, Teitlbaum-Kassie said. Like many women on hunger strikes, she had stopped menstruating. Eventually, to her surprise, she realized that she had become pregnant before arriving at the prison. She joyfully wrote to her husband that they would be welcoming their third child.

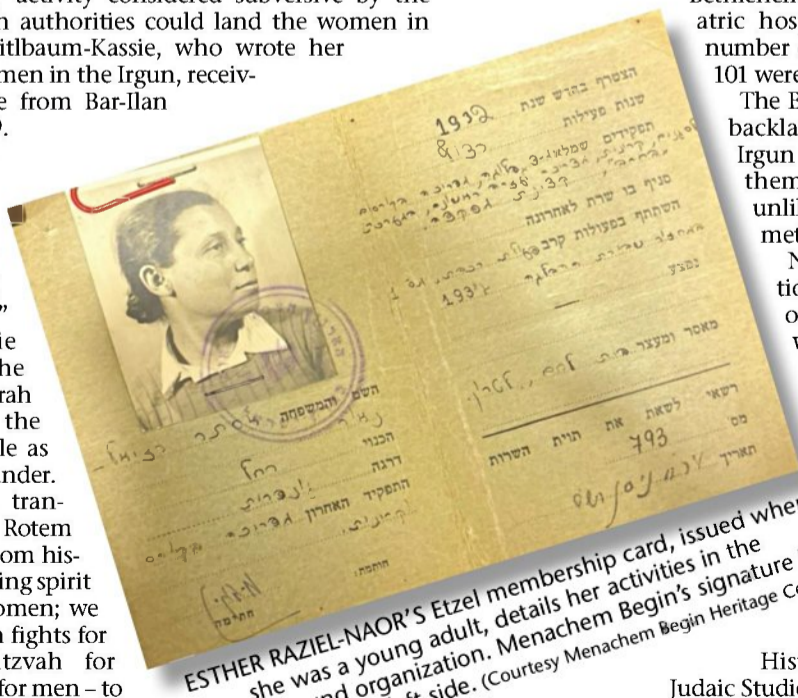
Raised in a religious home, Raziell-Naor gave Bible lessons to her fellow inmates, taught them Hebrew and Jewish rituals, and arranged women's *minyanim* ("prayer quorums"). She even asked a rabbi if mezuzahs should be attached to the walls of the prison cells, receiving the reply that there was no need, since it wasn't a permanent place of residence, according to Teitlbaum-Kassie.

After the state was established, Raziell-Naor was one of the founders of the Herut party and served in the Knesset for 25 years.

Spying on the British was also a mission that Irgun women readily accepted. "There is evidence that women used their femininity for the Irgun. Women dated British soldiers to get military secrets from them," Teitlbaum-Kassie explained.

She noted that Irgun women even managed to extract secrets from British intelligence personnel, which helped the underground Zionist organization plan its July 1946 bombing of the southern wing of the King David Hotel, where the British administrative headquarters for Mandatory Palestine were located.

The Irgun, established in 1931, was steeped in the ideology of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the founder of the Revisionist Movement. Jabotinsky was very "pro-women," Teitlbaum-Kassie pointed out, insisting that all women in the movement take first-aid courses in preparation for the fight ahead. Women also took part in commanders' training courses; some, such as Raziell-Naor, even reached senior rank status.



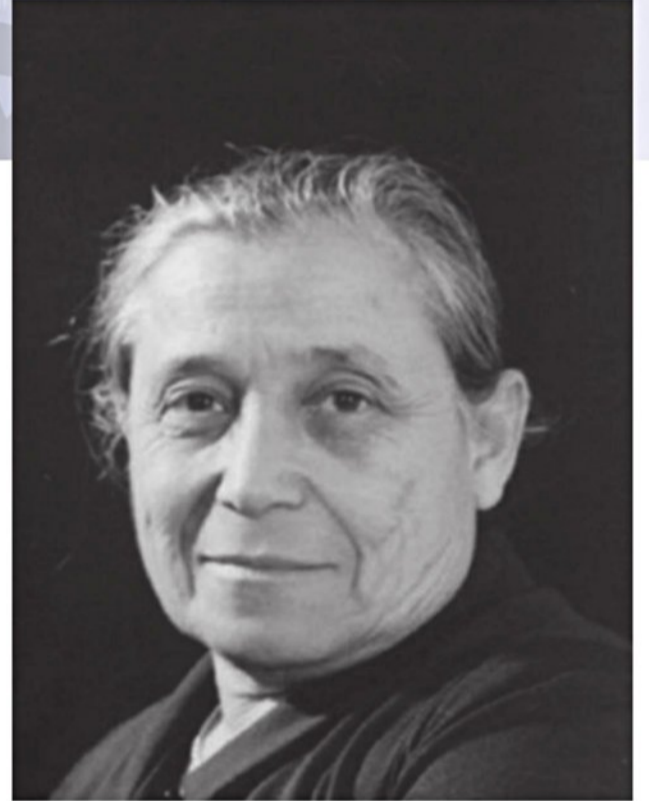
ESTHER RAZIEL-NAOR'S Etzel membership card, issued when she was a young adult, details her activities in the underground organization. Menachem Begin's signature is seen on the lower left side. (Courtesy Menachem Begin Heritage Center)



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THE SECRETS Irgun women gleaned from British intelligence personnel helped the underground Zionist organization plan its July 1946 bombing of British headquarters at the King David Hotel. (Wikimedia Commons)



AFTER THE State of Israel was established, Esther Raziel-Naor was a leader in the Herut party, serving in the Knesset for 25 years. (Wikimedia Commons)



THE STORIES of Irgun women need to be included in the educational curriculum, stresses researcher Naama Teitlbaum-Kassie. (Courtesy Ronen Kerem)

Disseminating the Irgun's messages to the public came with considerable risk, but many women were undeterred. Partnering with male escorts and feigning to be on dates, they surreptitiously pasted propaganda posters on the walls of buildings; if caught, their activity could land them in prison. The same punishment was meted out by the British if radio transmitters were found in their homes.

MANY STORIES of the Irgun women's heroism are detailed in Prof. Yehuda Lapidot's 2003 Hebrew-language book *Hayom Sarah Haketana: Sipuran shel Lohamot HaEtsel* ("Today, Little Sarah: The Story of Women Irgun Fighters"), published by the Jabotinsky Institute (<https://www.jabotinsky.org>) and the Etzel Museum Organization. Lapidot, now in his late 90s, was himself a senior Irgun fighter.

After the 1948 War of Independence, Lapidot studied biochemistry, teaching the subject at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. But in the 1980s, he left the world of science and devoted himself to writing about the Irgun and its revolt against the Mandatory British government.

Although his book is in Hebrew, Lapidot has provided an extensive summary in English of his research on Irgun women for the Jewish Women's Archive, which can be found on the archive's site: <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/author/lapidot-yehuda>. This is perhaps the only extensive

online accounting in English of the Irgun women's activities.

Among the many accounts of the Irgun women here, Lapidot details how Hadassah Tabak waited in a car when the Irgun blew up the King David Hotel and then tended to wounded Irgun fighters who had suffered extensive injuries as they retreated from the scene.

In addition to Teitlbaum-Kassie's academic research, Dr. Yitzhak Pass of Bar-Ilan University has published *Bemimlachat Hanishim Bebeit Lechem: Mechtavi Asirot Ve'atsirot Hamachatrat* (*In the Women's Kingdom in Bethlehem: Letters of Underground Women Prisoners and Detainees*, Herzl Institute for the Study of Zionism and the Center for the Study of Women in Judaism, 2023).

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, former Irgun members were socially and politically marginalized in Israel, Teitlbaum-Kassie noted. "Israeli society demonized these women."

In that same period, a struggle was taking place over how historical memory would be shaped.

"In my research, I argue that the effort to present Irgun women as fighters and warriors during the 1950s was part of this broader memory struggle," she said.

"This representation aimed to portray the Irgun as a radical underground movement that played a key role in expelling the British from Palestine – so radical that even

its women were depicted as combatants, even though only some of them actually were."

As these Irgun women, many now in their 80s and 90s, have been dying out, academics, such as Teitlbaum-Kassie, are racing to glean whatever information they can from those who are still left. She laments that their contribution to the greater legacy of the Jewish state's establishment still has not been included in the state educational curriculum.

"In general, gender studies is relatively new. But it's important that there be a place for these women's stories," she stressed. "I dream that this will be taught in history classes. We need to build up women's voices." ■