

MAGAZINE SECTION

By EDWARD ALEXANDER
SPECIAL TO THE CHICAGO JEWISH STAR

MILCHEMET ACHIM! — *Brothers at War!* — is a subject that has preoccupied Jews throughout their literature and history, from the narratives of Cain and Abel, Joseph and his brothers, in Genesis, the mutiny of Korach against the authority of Moses in Numbers, and the post-biblical civil war that undermined the Jewish state from within while Roman legions were besieging it from without in the year 67 C.E. That was when Jewish national sovereignty came to an end until 1948.

In his *War of the Jews*, Flavius Josephus, the Jewish military commander (and deserter), recounted the Jewish conflict within the larger one between Jews and Romans.

If Josephus' account is to be believed, the Roman general Vespasian told his warriors (who had already killed 40,000 Jewish men) to hold back from further battle because

"The Jews are vexed to pieces every day by their civil wars and dissensions, and are under greater misfortunes than, if they were once taken, could be inflicted on them by us.... Permit those Jews to destroy one another."

It is against the background of these wars between brothers that Jerold S. Auerbach, professor emeritus of history at Welles-

ley College and the author of numerous distinguished books about Jewish and American history, has written *Brothers at War: Israel and the Tragedy of the Altalena* (Quid Pro Books, 2011, 161 pp., \$27.49 pb).

It is a luminous and probing history of the calamity of the *Altalena*, the ill-fated Irgun ship that tried to bring desperately needed refugee fighters, arms and ammunition to the soldiers of Israel in June 1948, just weeks after the declaration of statehood and the ensuing invasion by five Arab armies.

REVISIONIST LEADERS bought a mothballed American ship, named it *Altalena* (using Vladimir Jabotinsky's pen-name), and recruited a 25-year-old Navy veteran from Chicago named Monroe Fein, who had commanded a similar ship in the Pacific,



BRIAN HENDLER PHOTO

BOOK MARKS

to be its captain. His ship sailed on June 11 from Port-du-Bouc with 940 passengers, including 120 young women.

For the *Altalena's* mission to succeed, its planners would have to secure the cooperation of France (whence it originated), to evade the British navy (which had already diverted the *Exodus* and *Ben Hecht* ships from their course), and to coordinate the plan with the Provisional Government of David Ben-Gurion, who loathed Menachem Begin.

On May 26, that government had established the Israel Defense Forces as the army of the State of Israel and prohibited the "continued existence of any other armed force" (such as Palmach to its left and Irgun and Lehi to its right).

Ostensibly, Begin accepted this decision: "Within the boundaries of the Hebrew independent state there is no need for a Hebrew underground. In the

State of Israel, we shall be soldiers and builders. We shall respect its Government, for it is our Government."

But there was a hitch. Jerusalem was outside the boundaries of the new state.

Shmuel Katz, member of Irgun's High Command, later explained: "We never forgot Jerusalem, where the Israeli government refused to claim sovereignty."

In the event, the cooperation of the French was secured: they armed and supported Irgun's project because it would hasten British departure from Palestine. The anticipated attack on *Altalena* by the Royal Navy did not occur (perhaps because Fein chose to travel mainly at night).

But, Auerbach tartly observes, "no one on board imagined the attack would come from the government of Israel" and destroy sixteen lives and millions of ammunition rounds.

BEGIN, alarmed by a BBC broadcast announcing both an agreed UN ceasefire and news of the Irgun ship headed to Palestine, decided to abort the mission. But faulty radio communication kept his message from reaching the *Altalena*; and Eliahu Lankin, Irgun commander of the ship, ordered Fein to "continue en route to Israel with all possible speed."

In the beginning, Jew vs. Jew

In view of the calamitous outcome of the whole episode, one is still surprised at the degree of mutual understanding that seemed to exist.

Begin was willing "that the government decide and tell us whether the *Altalena* should proceed and arrive in Israel, or whether we should send it back."

Deputy Defense Minister Yisrael Galili told Begin that "we agree to the arrival of the vessel. As quickly as possible..." and designated Kfar Vitkin, near Netanya, as the place

to land.

On June 16, Ben-Gurion mentioned the *Altalena* in his diary: "Tomorrow or the next day their ship is due to arrive.... They should not be turned back."

The Irgun units were to be equipped to fight anywhere beyond Israeli rule, i.e., Jerusalem. The sticking point was the distribution of the ship's weapons and munitions; Galili insisted that all be turned over, unconditionally, to the IDF.

This was more than a technical matter; it brought to the fore Ben-Gurion's determination that there be a single government and military under his exclusive command.

"There are not going to be two armies. And Mr. Begin will not do whatever he feels like. We must decide whether to hand over power to Begin or tell him to cease his separatist activities. If he does not give in, we shall open fire."

IN THIS CONTEST OF WILLS, Ben-Gurion had a distinct advantage over Begin: he had little compunction about ordering Israeli soldiers to shoot fellow Jews. Begin, by contrast, commanded his loyal fighters not to return fire.

Yaacov Meridor, his second in command, conveyed the order: "Don't shoot back."

Ben-Gurion seemed almost to relish the prospect of firing at Jews who (or so he imagined) were challenging his authority, planning "a *putsch*."

PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 12

By GILA WERTHEIMER
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

THIS YEAR marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Lea Goldberg, one of Israel's most beloved writers, best known as a poet, but also an essayist, dramatist, translator and author of children's books.

Her only published novel was written in 1946. *And This Is the Light*, now translated into English for the first time by Barbara Harshav (Toby Press, 2011, 224 pp., \$24.95), is now available.

It is a coming of age story, a story of unrequited love, written with the lyricism, cadences and atmospherics of the poet.

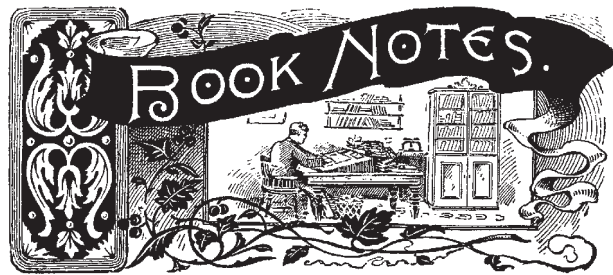
Lea Goldberg (1911-1970) grew up in Kovno, Lithuania, and while her first language was Russian, as a teenager she began to write poetry in Hebrew. She received her doctorate in Semitic languages in 1933, and two years later, immigrated to Palestine.

For the next 17 years she lived in Tel Aviv, where she, together with Natan Alterman and Avraham Shlonsky, were central figures in the burgeoning literary life, creators of modern Hebrew literature.

She moved to Jerusalem in 1952, where she founded and chaired the Hebrew University's Department of Comparative Literature, also continuing her literary activities.

Goldberg was a prolific author — 10 volumes of poetry, some 20 children's

books, essays of literary criticism, several plays as well as translations into Hebrew of European classics by Tolstoy (including *War and Peace*), Gorky,



Chekhov, Petrarch and Shakespeare.

She also translated two Ibsen plays, and it is not coincidental that the name of the young woman at the center of *And This Is the Light* is Nora, Ibsen's heroine in *A Doll's House*. (Goldberg also makes a direct reference to the name in the novel.)

Both rebel against the past and the conventions that confine them as they seek self-definition so they can know that (in Goldberg's words) "the long string of days called life, are mine."

Goldberg's Nora — Nora Krieger — is also somewhat autobiographical.

A 20-year-old student at the University of Berlin (where Goldberg earned a doctorate), Nora returns home to Lithuania in 1931, to spend her vacation with her family. Her father, cap-

tured and tortured when Nora is a child, now suffers mental illness.

Goldberg's description is breathtaking in its simplicity and power. Accused

of espionage, Nora's father was arrested and locked up in a barn.

"And day after day, for ten straight days, they executed him, as it were. For ten days in a row, that game went on. And the man was broken, then, for the first time."

Goldberg's father, too, was arrested and tortured, and suffered mental illness.

The father's madness shames the family, it haunts Nora (as if cursing her, an old aunt tells her that madness is in her family, "in your blood"), and even as she reminds herself that mental illness is an illness like any other, she fears she cannot escape it.

When she returns for her vacation, her mother tells her she has divorced her father, and Nora approves.

As a young woman,

Nora is also vulnerable to affairs of the heart, and these take the shape of an older man, Albert Arin. He is a friend of the family, with ties to both her mother and unmarried aunt that are not at first clear. He had left Lithuania years earlier, settling in California.

His return for a visit to Kovno coincides with Nora's, and she falls for him. In her romantic fantasy, he is an exotic figure who has escaped from his past. But of course, reality tells a different story, dispelling Nora's fantasy but offering personal growth.

Nora gains in maturity from her painful experience.

GOLDBERG WROTE *And This Is the Light* in 1931. She, and her readers, knew what was to come: "Death, death, death is walking before you." Goldberg writes these words in a different context, but it is as if she is warning of the future for Europe's Jews.

In this way, Goldberg reminds a reader of a writer who came after her but who writes from this perspective. Novelist Aharon Appelfeld approaches the Holocaust indirectly, so that a reader's own knowledge of the events adds an essential dimension to the lives he creates.

Goldberg escaped the Holocaust; Appelfeld, a young boy at the time, did not. Israel gave them both their literary lives. □

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Wagner, Once Again

► ISRAELI ORCHESTRA TO PERFORM WAGNER AT BAYREUTH

By GILA WERTHEIMER
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

The Israel Chamber Orchestra has announced it will present a concert at the Bayreuth festival in Germany this summer, featuring Wagner's "Seigfried's Idyll", as well as works by Mendelssohn, Mahler and Israeli composer Zvi Avni.

While not officially banned, public performances of the music of the virulently outspoken anti-Semitic 19th Century composer Richard Wagner are taboo in Israel.

Orchestra members were given the choice of whether or not to perform the piece. All but one of its 36 members agreed to do so.

The irony of an Israeli orchestra performing Wagner, the musician revered by Hitler, in Germany is compounded by its appearance at Bayreuth, the Bavarian town where Wagner is buried and the festival

was attended by Hitler in the 1930s.

In his book *Toward the Final Solution*, George Mosse described Bayreuth, where Wagner's operas were performed from 1876, "as a cultural center [that] became a center of racism, where neophytes could worship at the altar of Germanic blood and Teutonic myth."

There have been periodic attempts to break the Wagner taboo in Israel, most notably by Daniel Barenboim.

In 1991 Barenboim conducted, in the guise of a rehearsal, the Israel Philharmonic in works by Wagner; in 2001, a planned performance at the Israel Festival in Jerusalem was cancelled.

Unexpectedly, Barenboim conducted the Wagner piece anyway (JEWISH STAR, July 13, 2001). ❏



From the Depths, an Altalena Anniversary

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon participated on June 19, 2003, in a Tel-Aviv memorial ceremony for the victims of the arms ship "Altalena", sunk 55 years earlier off the Tel Aviv coast on the instruction of David Ben-Gurion.

A "luminous and probing" history of the 1948 tragedy by historian Jerold Auerbach is the first published in over 30 years, the first in English, and the first by a professional historian. ❏

Altalena

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Giving the *Altalena* 10 minutes to accede to his demands for surrender, he said:

"Accept orders and carry them out, or [we] shoot.... The time for agreements has passed ... and force must be applied without hesitation."

Not all Ben-Gurion's soldiers shared his readiness for fratricide: the air force, for example, refused to bomb the ship.

Although assured by Chief of Naval Operations Yanai that the ship could be disabled merely by using smoke grenades and boarding it from nearby naval vessels, Ben-Gurion insisted that destruction of the *Altalena* was the only way to prevent civil war.

The task of firing the first cannon shots that destroyed *Altalena* fell upon a young South African volunteer named Hilary Dilesky, who had been in the country just two months, and felt very strongly that he had not come to Israel in order to fight and kill other Jews.

Decades later, by which time he had become the distinguished literary scholar Hillel Daleski, he recalled that "My heart was broken when we began firing. This has been a burden all my life, and still is."

Nor was he the only one who felt the deep shame that Israel, while fighting for its very existence against the Arabs, could not make peace within its own family.

AUERBACH'S BOOK about "the pariah ship" is the first to be published in over 30 years, the first in English, the first by a professional historian.

It brings up to date the long history of *Altalena* analogies. These have been used, with varying degrees of licentiousness, in countless Israeli disputes over the establishment and also demolition of settlements beyond the Green Line.

But the Arabs and their apologists have also gotten into the act with Arafat-*Altalena* analogies, as when Thomas Friedman, always eager to offer Palestinians a free ride on the mournful coattails of Jewish history, declared that Arafat needed his "Altalena moment."

The deftness with which Auerbach explores the ramifications of this noisy, tenacious Israeli conflict of half-truths about *Altalena* shows how study of history, as literary critic Northrop Frye once wrote,

"leads to a recognition scene ... in which we see, not our past lives but the total cultural form of our present life." ❏

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