

The Palestine Police Oral History Project

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The last years of the British Mandate in Palestine were marked by great violence. Jewish insurgents had launched a terror campaign against the British presence in Palestine, while Arab militants and British renegades attacked Jewish institutions. Whole buildings were reduced to rubble as massive bombs rocked the major cities of Palestine. Most of the victims were innocent civilians. The impossible task of policing this conflict-torn society fell to the Palestine Police.

Founded in 1920, the Palestine Police was a rare institution in which Palestinian Arabs and Jews

worked together with British servicemen. At that time, some 18 British officers headed a police force commanded by 55 Palestinian officers and 1,144 Palestinian men from other ranks — in other words, a handful of British officers overseeing a largely indigenous police force. When the British used the word 'Palestinian' they referred to both Arabs and Jews who lived in the country. Both Arab and Jewish officers and 'other ranks' were active in the police from the very beginning.

Although Palestinian Arabs tended to boycott the institutions of the Mandate, in protest against both



British and Arab members of the Palestine Police secure a road against riots in Jaffa, 1933 (Middle East Centre Archive (MECA), Faraday Collection)

21. The unremitting attacks by terrorists on Arab Police during which eight of them were shot in the back in crowded streets in Jaffa, resulted in a severe deterioration of their morale. Rifles and ammunition were captured from them by the rebels in circumstances that showed they had offered little resistance. A glaring instance was the raid on the Central Police Station, Jaffa, in September, when all the arms were stolen by rebels. It was decided, in September, to disarm the Arab police and this action was followed by their being relieved of all but the most routine duties. This, of course, threw a heavy burden on the already overworked British Police, particularly in the C.I.D., owing to the paralysis of the Arab investigation branch.

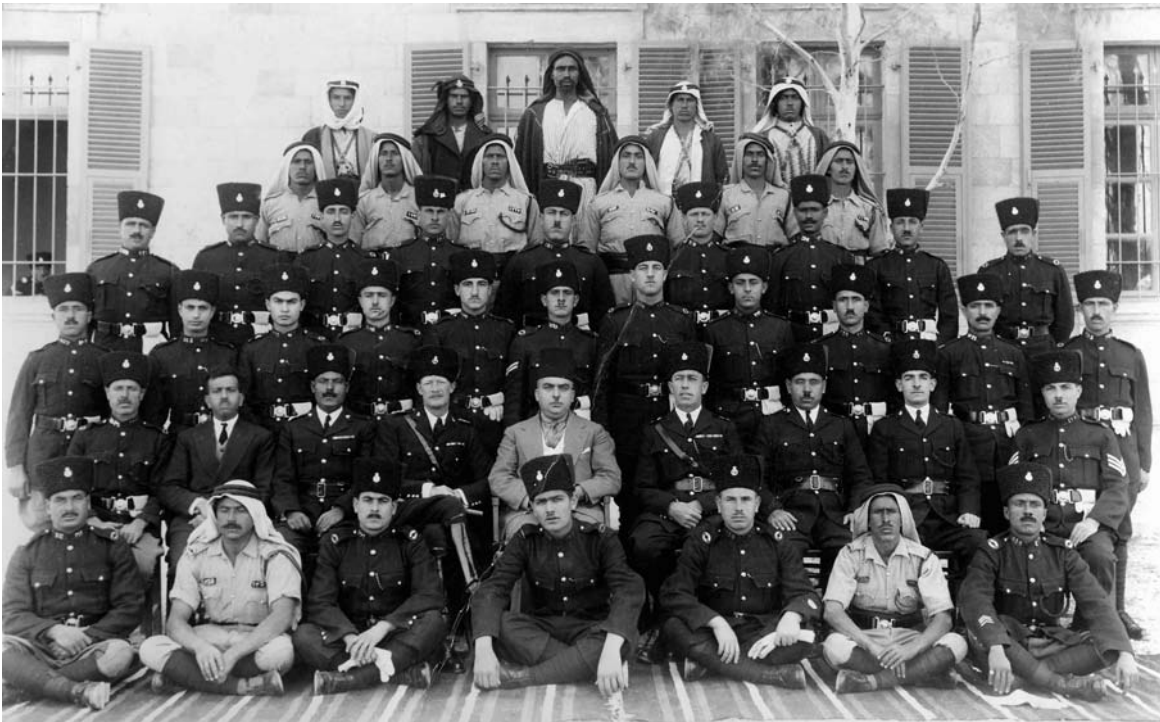
Excerpt from the 1938 Annual Report on the disarming of Arab members of the Palestine Police during the Arab Revolt (MECA, PPOCA Collection, Southern District Police Annual Report, 1938)

British imperial rule and the Jewish National Home Lord Balfour promised to create in Palestine, it was only natural that they would play a large role in the police. The Ottoman-era police force the British inherited when they occupied the country in 1917 at the height of the First World War was largely an Arab force. The British had every incentive to work with these men, not least because, unlike the British, Arab policemen spoke the language of the people they were policing.

The population of Palestine was not exclusively Arab, nor was the police force. Palestine had a significant Jewish population by 1920, as waves of

new immigrants had settled in the country in growing numbers since 1882. Palestinian Jews were already a large component of the police by 1920. The Zionist Commission reported there were 250 Jewish policemen at work in 1919–1920. Here again, the British relied on Jewish servicemen to assist in policing towns and rural settlements with large Jewish populations.

The size and composition of the Palestine Police began to change gradually across the 1920s, with the creation of a 'British Section' of some 30 officers and 150 men added to the 70 Palestinian officers and 1300 men, or a total force of 1,550. By the mid-1930s, the



Arab members of the Palestine Police, Beersheba, c. 1936. Regular policemen are shown wearing the distinctive Kalpak, while the mounted and camel corps wore traditional Arab headdress (MECA, PPOCA Collection)



Jewish Supernumerary Police c. 1938 (MECA, PPOCA Collection)

British section had grown to 50 officers and 650 men, and the Palestinian contingent grew to 80 officers and 1600 men, or a total force of nearly 2,400. During the Arab Revolt of 1936–1939, police numbers were reinforced by British Army forces. However, the deterioration in the security situation following the Second World War led to a massive expansion of the Palestine Police to a force of nearly 9,000 officers and men, over half of whom were British, mostly demobilized soldiers and recruits on National Service. Most of the veterans of the Palestine Police alive today served during this period, from 1945 to the end of the Mandate in 1948.

The idea of an oral history project was inspired by the gift of two major collections of documents on the Palestine Police, deposited in the Middle East Centre Archive in St Antony's College, Oxford. In 2002, the Palestine Police Old Comrades Association donated their collection of private papers, photographs and ephemera to the Archive. These materials were collected by Edward Horne, himself a former Palestine Policeman and the Force's official historian, and the basis of his history of the Police, *A Job Well Done* (Sussex, 2003). This was a major collection, filling some fifty archival boxes.

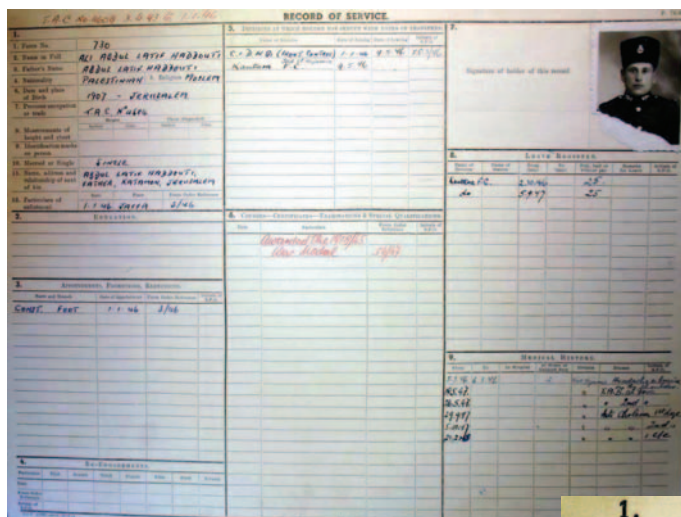
By pure coincidence, the Middle East Centre Archive was approached at much the same time by the National Archives in Kew, who were looking for a suitable archive in which to deposit the service records of the Palestine Police. The service records had been held by the Department for International Development, which had inherited the records from the Crown Agents for the Colonies, against any pension claims that might be made by retired members of the colonial service. With the passing years, DfID had fewer and fewer queries from former Palestine Policemen, and the thousands of service record files took up an enormous amount of storage space. The National Archives recognized the historic value of the records and sought a good home for the collection. The collection of several thousand service record files was too large for the Middle East Centre Archive to absorb (these were to be deposited in the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol), but we were able to house the more compact collection of some 5,000 service record cards, providing vital statistics of mostly the British, but also some Arab and Jewish, servicemen in the Palestine Police when the force was disbanded in 1948.

We had all the elements for an amazing oral history project. The Middle East Centre Archive now held private and official records from the Palestine Police, had a direct connection to surviving veterans of the force through the Palestine Police Old Comrades' Association, and a partnership with the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, with its vast experience in oral history sources. And, working in one of Britain's leading academic centres for the

study of the Middle East, I had the additional benefit of highly motivated research students with great interest in the Palestine Mandate who were able and willing to conduct interviews. I organized a special research seminar on the Palestine Mandate, in which we focused on the police, with presentations from former Palestine Policemen Denys Hodson and Gerald Green. The British Empire and Commonwealth History Museum put on a day-course in oral history methods. We secured the permission of the Old Comrades Association to write to their members and invite them to take part in the oral history project. In 2005, we launched the project among British veterans of the force.

In the course of our interviews with the British servicemen, it was clear that while they were bound to their Arab and Jewish comrades by a strong sense of *esprit de corps*, they nonetheless saw real distinctions between themselves and their Palestinian colleagues. The politics of Palestine had made its mark on these men. Some Britons in the force came to sympathize with the plight of European Jewry after the Holocaust, and the desperate efforts of Jews to break through the immigration restrictions to relocate in Palestine after the War. Many Palestine Policemen were involved in deporting Holocaust survivors who had reached Palestine on dilapidated tramp steamers, like the infamous 'Exodus'. Others were sympathetic to the Palestinian Arabs who were fighting to defend their homeland from a partition imposed on them by the international community. Moreover, they were all in a colonial situation where Britons represented the imperial power, and the Palestinians were colonial subjects. British policemen distinguished between the Arabs, as a subject Asian people, and the Jews, who were mostly European immigrants, and thus closer to their own culture. In this complex situation, it was clear that the experiences of Arab and Jewish servicemen would be quite different from those of Britons serving in the Palestine Police.

This gap in our project was filled by a generous grant from the CBRL, awarded in 2006. The CBRL award funded fifteen interviews with Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon, fifteen interviews with Palestinians living in the West Bank, and fifteen interviews with Israelis — all of whom served in the Palestine Police. In the course of my research, I had made contact with local oral historians who had identified a number of subjects for interview. Mahmoud Zeidan is a Palestinian historian based in Beirut who has made a remarkable video oral history project of the refugees of the 1948 Palestine *Nakba*, or 'catastrophe'. Adel Yahya heads the Palestinian Association for Cultural Exchange in Ramallah, and is a recognized authority in the oral history of Palestine. Yoav Alon is Associate Professor of Middle Eastern History at Tel Aviv University and a scholar of the Mandate Period in Transjordan and Palestine.



Example of a service record card for an Arab member of the Palestine Police (MECA)

Personal details of a Jewish member of the Palestine Police, taken from a service record card (MECA)

1.			
1. Force No.	144.		
2. Name in Full	Joseph Elemer Rosenfeld.		
3. Father's Name	Sharon Dov.		
4. Nationality	5. Religion Jew.		
6. Date and place of Birth	26.6.1906 Karika Hungary.		
7. Previous occupation or trade	mechanic.		
8. Measurements of height and chest	Height		Chest (Expanded)
	Inches	Cms.	Inches Cms.
		165	36.
9. Identification marks on person			
10. Married or Single	married		
11. Name, address and relationship of next of kin	wife :- Esther Etel Rosenfeld, Zichron Ichim Or, Hamadregit Street, Wittenberg House, Jolem		
12. Particulars of enlistment	Date	Place	Force Order Reference
	1.11.45	Jerusalem	46/45.

The project was quite simple. The Middle East Centre and the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum provided the digital recorders and lapel microphones to each team, with standard settings to enable broadcast-quality recordings. Each team was to conduct fifteen interviews, provide a summary, transcription and translation of the interview. The budget per interview was £200. The results would be deposited in both the Middle East Centre Archive and the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum to ensure maximal diffusion and to protect the collection against accidental loss of data. I met with the oral historians in Amman, Jordan, in 2006 to provide the equipment, agree the interview questionnaire for each group, and to discuss the legal and ethical issues involved in the project. We needed each participant's informed consent for their testimony to be made available to the general public through the Archive and the Museum, and for each participant to sign over their copyright so that their words might be cited by scholars.

We encountered some difficulties in completing the project on schedule. In the past year, the work in Lebanon has been disrupted by the effects of the

summer war of 2006. Mahmoud Zeidan is only now beginning to conduct his interviews, but he plans to complete all fifteen before the end of 2007, and the CBRL has kindly consented to this delay. Moreover, we had underestimated the time it would take to transcribe and edit the Arabic and Hebrew interviews, and soon discovered that commissioning full translations from Arabic or Hebrew to English would rapidly consume our budget. Given the advanced age of our subjects, we decided to put the emphasis on recording as many testimonies as we could, and to transcribe those interviews, deferring translation to a later date when more funds might be raised.

The results from Israel and the West Bank have been remarkable. Adel Yahya has now completed 22 interviews with Palestinians who served in the police, most in the Ramallah area alone. 'Not all the interviews are of the same quality as some of the interviewees are too old and too weak to remember and to talk about their experiences in the 1940s.' In Yahya's view, this only demonstrates the importance and urgency of the project. 'People are getting older and many of them, along with their memories, are being lost to history.'

The following persons belonging to the Stern Group escaped from Latroun Detention Camp on 31-10-45 and should be arrested on sight.

Itshak Ben Shlomo RUBENSTEIN <i>DNS/354/P/EJ.</i>	Born 3-5-17, Height 165 cms, Build Strong, Eyes Brown, Nose Concave, Hair Black going grey, Mouth & Teeth Mouth wide upper teeth false, Complexion Pale, Speaks Hebrew, Polish, German & Yiddish, Nationality Polish, Address Shumat Ben Zion, Hothanya, Occupation Diamond Polisher.
Moshe Ben Haim ARMONI. alias KESTENBAUM. <i>DNS/48/P/EJ.</i>	Born 3-3-20, Height 160 cms, Build Slim, Eyes Blue, Nose Normal, Mouth & Teeth Normal, Hair Fair, Complexion Fresh, Speaks Hebrew & Hungarian, Nationality Stateless, Address Beith Torstein, Smilansky Street, Hothanya, Occupation Labourer.
Sheul HAGALILI alias FURMAN.	Born 1918, Height 178 cms, Build Slim, Eyes Brown, Nose Normal, Mouth & Teeth Mouth regular teeth good (2 gold filled left front), Hair black no parting, Complexion Fair, Small scars on left cheek and left wrist, small mole over right eye brow, Speaks Hebrew & Polish, Nationality Polish, Address Beith Asman Nummer, Opp: Migav Ladaik Hospital, Old City Jerusalem, Occupation Bookkeeper.
Pinhas AUERBACH.	Born 1921, Single, Height 178 cms, Build Medium, Eyes Grey, Nose Normal, Mouth & Teeth Good, Hair Fair, Moustache Small Fair, Complexion Heat, Wears spectacles, Speaks Hebrew, Nationality Palestinian, Address Beith Hasha'on, Herzl Street, Haifa, Occupation Clerk.
Menschem SCHLIF.	Born 5-5-22, Single, Height 178 cms, Build Medium, Eyes Brown, Nose Long, Mouth & Teeth Big, Hair Black, Complexion Sunburnt, Speaks Hebrew, Yiddish & Polish, Nationality Polish, Address Own House, Keif Sebe, Occupation Printing press labourer, Agricultural worker.
Avraham AARONLATT. alias Avraham CHYOHOGUR. alias Avraham BEN HAIL.	Born 30-5-18, Single, Height 171 cms, Build Slim, Eyes Brown, Nose Normal, Mouth & Teeth Normal, Hair Black, Complexion Dark, Speaks Hebrew, Polish Russian & English, Nationality Polish, Address Zichron Yo'acov, Occupation Labourer.

List of wanted members of the Jewish Stern Gang issued following their escape from Latroun Detention Camp (MECA, PPOCA Collection)

One of the men interviewed by Yahya was Atallah Samadar, who was born in Bir Zeit in 1922, and served in the Police for the last five years of the Mandate. He was posted to Jaffa and Tel Aviv for most of his time in service. 'We were Palestinians, Jews and Englishmen in one station. There was a Jewish policeman with me. When the fighting broke out in 1947, I told him, 'We will get rid of you soon! Seven Arab countries are coming!' He told me: 'No, Mr Attalah, now the sign says 'Palestine Police' and tomorrow we will change it to 'Police of Eretz Israel'. I still remember the discussion.' The English were no less alien to him. When asked about his relationship with his British colleagues, Samandar replied: 'It wasn't strong, we were by ourselves and they were by themselves. The stations were separate, and where we slept was separate. Everything is separate, they did not stay with us.'

Samandar believed the British favoured the Jewish Policemen 'a little bit'. Jewish salaries, he claimed, were twice those of the Arab Policemen. 'I mean, we got ten dinars, and they got twenty dinars.' He went on: 'The Jews were closer [to the British]. They talked to them more than us.' To some extent this reflected the common European culture of the Britons and the Jews in Palestine. 'The British went to Tel Aviv to

drink and to meet girls. There is nothing like this with the Arabs,' he explained. The British policemen, he continued, 'were drunk a lot and they came drunk to work. We were not able to ask them where they were going, they were always drunk. We Arabs were different.' Yet familiarity did not breed respect between British and Jewish Police in Samandar's view. 'The Jews didn't respect [the British]. I mean if a British officer told him something, a Jew wouldn't listen to him.'

In Israel, Yoav Alon headed a team of two graduate students, Ayelet Rosen and Idan Barir, to locate the veterans and conduct the interviews. They began with the records of the Mandatory Police Veteran Association in Haifa, and were able to identify fourteen former policemen, two Arab and twelve Jewish Israelis, to interview in the course of the past year. The list of surviving veterans is being constantly updated, however, and they plan to continue the project beyond the initial commitment of fifteen interviews. They have travelled around Israel, conducting interviews in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa and Tiberius.

Summarizing their findings from the first fourteen interviews, Alon reported that most Jewish

Policemen suffered from divided loyalties. They 'were encouraged by the Hagana to enrol with the police. While in the service, they helped the Yishuv [the Jewish community in Palestine] in many ways, ranging from passing on alerts on forthcoming British operations against the Jewish forces, through turning a blind eye to Jewish underground activity, to using British weapons and ammunition to train members of the Jewish forces.' As relations between the British and the Yishuv deteriorated in the post-Second World War years, 'the Zionists took advantage of a large Jewish presence in the police to fight the British and increase their military capacity'. Jewish policemen found themselves caught between loyalty to the force and their commitment to support the Yishuv. 'With the termination of the Mandate, nearly all veterans joined the new Israeli police. Thus, the Palestine Police was an important component of the 'state-in-the-making,' and contributed to the Zionist victory in 1948 and to the transfer from the Mandate to the State of Israel.'

One of the veterans interviewed by Alon was Nahum Buchman, who was born in Kiev c. 1917 and immigrated to Palestine as a child in 1925. He entered police service as a member of the Jewish Community Police Force on the outbreak of the 1936 Arab Revolt. In 1938, he was transferred to the Palestine Police main force. After receiving basic training, he was posted to Tel Aviv, where he had little or no contact with Arab policemen. He remembered the Arab members of the force by their distinctive *Kalpak* headgear.

Buchman was an unusual policeman, however. A professional actor, his loyalties were divided between the police and the theatre. He clearly remembered that he had to struggle in order to gain recognition as a professional actor by the police so that he would be able to attend rehearsals. Eventually, a Jewish police officer named Schiff saw Buchman perform in a play and was so struck by his talent that he allowed him to take some nights off from duty to attend his

rehearsals. Buchman recalled the British as generally fair to Jewish policemen, and believed he received special treatment from the British officers who knew that he was an actor. Yet Buchman openly admits that he was driven to join the police by the Hagana, and that he turned a blind eye to the activities of the Jewish underground. His own brothers were working in the Irgun and the Stern Gang. However, Buchman left police service before the Jewish insurgency gained ground. In 1941, he resigned from the police to fulfil his real ambition and joined the Habima Theatre Company as a professional actor.

By the time we conclude the CBRL-funded portion of the project, the Palestine Police Oral History Project will comprise some seventy interviews with excellent representation from British, Arab and Jewish participants. Many more subjects have been identified in the course of our work, and we will press on interviewing as many veterans as we can — in the UK as well as in the Middle East. Given the advanced age of all our interviewees, who are now in their 80s and 90s, the window of opportunity is quite limited. But for the support of the CBRL, we would not have had the chance to capture for the historic record the valuable memories of Arab and Jewish men who served with the Palestine Police at the end of the Mandate.

For further information on the Palestine Police Oral History Project and archival sources on the Palestine Police held by the Middle East Centre Archive, please consult the Archive's web page:
<http://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/mec/meca.shtml>

Eugene Rogan is the Director of Oxford's Middle East Centre. A Fellow of St Antony's College, he lectures in the modern history of the Middle East at Oxford. He is author of Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850–1920 (Cambridge University Press, 1999), and is co-editor of The War for Palestine: Rewriting the History of 1948 (Cambridge University Press, 2001, Second Edition, 2007).