The first Jewish Spies of the State of Israel

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Tonight and tomorrow, we commemorate "Yom haZikaron", Israel's Memorial Day. We remember the heroes of Israel: soldiers, spies, and martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the establishment and continued existence of Medinat Israel.

A few years ago, I read a very interesting magazine given to me by Mr. Nathan Hasson from Manhattan Beach, Brooklyn. This monthly magazine, "MIKAN UMISHAM" writes about the Jews of Damascus (Sham) Syria, their stories, traditions, etc. One of these magazines is dedicated to the "mustaarabim comando" (or mista'arabim), a special unit of the Israeli army that was officially formed in 1943. Before Israel's independence in 1948 and the IDF's establishment, Jews living in Israel formed a clandestine army called the Hagana. The Hagana was organized to defend the Jewish colonies from the constant attacks and looting coming from the Arab population. Within the Hagana there was a military unit, Palmach, whose mission was to attack the enemy in a preventive manner and disrupt their military plans. In 1943 the Palmach organized a special elite group of espionage and counterterrorism called "The Arab Commando" or, in Hebrew, the Mustaarabim ("pseudo-Arabs"). This unit was formed by a handful of young agents and spies of Jews born in Arab countries. These young people spoke Arabic perfectly, knew the culture, and could dress and look like Arabs. In this way, they could go behind enemy lines, blend with the local population and gather intelligence information or perform special missions.

The most famous of the "mustaarabim" spies was undoubtedly Eli Cohen z "l (1924 -1965), whose espionage operations for Israel in Syria were crucial and determinant for the victory of

Israel in the Six-Day War.

Today, Yom Hazikaron, I would like to share with you the stories of other younger “mustaarabim” to honor their heroism and memory.

YOSEF COSTICA

Yosef Costica was born in Damascus, Syria, in 1921. At the age of 13, he emigrated to Israel.

In 1936, the year of the great Arab rebellion, Yosef volunteered in the Hagana. In 1940 he was recruited for a special mission in Tripoli, Lebanon. Costica changed his identity and his name. He was now “Abu Nuri”, a Lebanese Maronite businessman. Costica’s mission was to report the possible coming of Nazi troops into Lebanon. Why Nazis? Lebanon was “a French colony”, and at that time, France was under the control of Vichy, who supported Adolf Hitler □”□. It was expected that at any moment the Nazis would arrive in Lebanon and cross over to Israel, to deport and kill the Jews. Costica had to watch and report on these movements to his superiors and eventually sabotage the arrival of the Nazis into Israel by any necessary means: □□destroying bridges and roads, bombing ships or vehicles, etc.

Costica was later reassigned to reporting on the location of the city’s refineries, for which he reinvented his identity and posed as an athlete who ran several kilometers each day around the refinery facilities. He returned to Israel on foot to bring his superiors all the information and maps they needed.

The information collected by Yosef Costica was a great service to the future Medinat Israel in the most vulnerable time of our history.

YAAQOB BUCAY

The story of this young man is quite tragic. Yaaqob was born in Damascus in 1930, in a family of 10 children. At the age of 15, he made Aliyá, and at 16, he volunteered at the Hagana. Bucay stood out as much for his physical condition as for his great motivation to fight and defend Israel. His name reached the Palmah commanders, who recruited him for the "Mustaarabim unit" for his knowledge of the Arabic language. Yaaqob was assigned to a very risky mission: establishing an espionage network in Amman, Jordan. He received intensive training for 6 months. The plan was the following: in 1948, a truce had been signed between Jordan and Israel, and part of the agreement was that Israel would deliver to Jordan 450 Jordanian citizens who had crossed into Israel illegally. Yaaqob Bucay was going to infiltrate that group and pose as a Jordanian citizen, and once in Aman, he would begin to organize an intelligence and espionage unit there. The transference of Jordanian citizens took place in March 1949. But something failed, and the young Jewish spy was discovered. Some say that his blue eyes gave him away, or his Jewish appearance, that he wasn't able to disguise … Despite all the diplomatic efforts and the dispatch of several agents to rescue him, his whereabouts could not be found, and he could not be saved. It is thought that in the Jordanian prison Bucay, who was just 19 years old, was tortured to extract information from him. Yaaqob Bucay was sentenced to death and hanged in August 1949.

Two months after his execution, a letter written in his own handwriting arrived in Israel, in which he wrote to his superiors that he did not confess his identity or mission. "I have not betrayed [Israel]; my conscience and my heart are and will always remain faithful to you as long as I am alive."

It is unknown where he was buried, but a monument was erected in his honor in the military cemetery of Israel, "Har Hertzel".

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