

Col. Mickey Marcus



The Non-Zionist Jew who Saved Israel

By Jerry Klinger

May 7, 2017, the American Veterans of Israel Legacy Corporation organized and commemorated the life of Mickey Marcus. It is an annual event at West Point, the last number of years held at the Jewish Chapel overlooking the Hudson. This year was the 51st commemoration. The commemoration honors an extraordinary American Soldier who served voluntarily under two flags. Marcus like most of the 4,500 volunteers, Jews and non-Jews, who came from 29 countries, came to help the newly born State of Israel and prevent a second Holocaust. The first Holocaust was a Nazi reality. 6,000,000 Jews were singled out and murdered while the world did little to stop the gas chambers of death. The second was promised by the Arabs.

They were called by a Hebrew acronym, Mahal – Mitnadvei Mechutz L'Aretz, volunteers from outside of Israel. The largest contingent was young and American. Every year as the annual Mickey Marcus commemoration takes places, the men and women of the American Veterans of Israel grow a bit fewer in numbers. Their eyes and stories still glisten with the idealism that guided their hearts though they are slower and bent a bit more by the weight of years. Never again is not a motto for them. They did what they had to do. They did what few were willing to do.

The theme for 2017 commemoration was the famed American Holocaust rescue ship the *Exodus*. I was invited to speak – a special honor.

The *Exodus* was American funded and American crewed by young, idealistic volunteers intent on helping the surviving, unwanted remnants of the Holocaust.



July 18, 2017, the first ever Memorial to the *Exodus* is being dedicated in Israel by the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation. It is ironic that there are Memorials to the *Exodus*, the most important and iconic story to the birth of Israel, in Germany, France, Italy and the U.S. but nothing specific to the *Exodus* in Israel.

Natan Sharansky, Chairman of the Jewish Agency, Minister Yoav Galant and Deputy Minister Jackie Levy will attend. Units of the Israel Navy and Army will be present along with 400+ guests. The new American Ambassador to Israel has not responded yet.

West Point has a long Jewish history. The first Jew to graduate from the United States Military Academy at West Point was Simon Magruder Levy. Levy had distinguished himself at the Battle of Fallen Timbers which secured the Old Northwest for the United States in 1794. Levy's commanding officer, Captain Benjamin Lockwood, observing Levy's courage, leadership and intelligence during the battle, recommended Levy for the Academy.

Levy graduated from the Academy in 1802. He was part of the first graduating class. Levy did not do as well at West Point as he might have hoped too. He graduated in the lower half of his class. But then, there were only two cadets in the class of 1802, Joseph Gardner Swift and Simon Magruder Levy.

Levy was posted to Ft. Jackson near Savannah, Georgia. He contracted a health issue at his post, dying in 1807. His place of burial is unknown.

One hundred and twenty two years later, Colonel Daniel David (Mickey) Marcus graduated near the top of his class from the United States Military Academy in 1924. His parents, Mordechai and Leah Marcus were Jewish immigrants from Romania. They lived in the lower East side of New York, the Yiddish speaking world of Hester Street. His father made a very poor living as a Push cart vendor.

Both his parents were against Mickey going into the army. The memory of having escaped the Old World's mandatory conscription into anti-Semitic armies was very fresh in their minds. Antisemitism in America was a fact, but it was nothing that rose to the vicious, hate filled levels they had known in Europe.

June 10, 1948..

Mickey told the sentry he was going out beyond the lines, to reconnoiter. It is not unusual for a good commander to try and see into the dark what his men will face in the daytime. It is unusual for the commander to go outside of his lines alone and at night. The sentry was not supposed to change until dawn. Unknown to Mickey, the sentry was changed early. The new sentry, 18 year old Eliezer Linski, was not told Mickey was outside the perimeter.

In the pre-dawn darkness, a shadowy figure approached Linski. Like anyone who has ever stood guard alone at night, he hoped what he saw was not what he thought it was. Wrapped in a night sheet about his shoulders, looking like traditional Arab clothing, Mickey calmly came closer. Nervous, the sentry called out in Hebrew, "Ma Ha'Sisma", what is the password?

Mickey did not speak Hebrew. He responded in English. The frightened sentry did not speak English. Suspecting the apparition was an Arab infiltrator, the guard fired in the air, then at the figure. Other sentries began firing. The man wrapped in the sheet was found dead. He had no fancy uniform on. Newly born Israel could not afford fancy uniforms. A small insignia, more of a ribbon, was found near the body identifying his rank.

Aluf (General) Mickey Marcus, the first general of a Jewish army in 2,000 years was ironically killed by friendly Jewish fire.

Marcus had engineered the miraculous liberation of Jerusalem, bypassing the Jordanian fortress of Latrun. The departing British had turned over the key police station controlling the Jewish lifeline to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv to the Jordan Legion. 1200 Jews had already died running the gauntlet. There were no delusions about the fate of the Jews in Jerusalem if the city fell.

Just six hours more and the U.N. mandated cease fire stopping the astonishing defeat of six invading Arab armies was to take effect, the leader of the Israel Defense Forces had been slain by one of its own. Or had he?

Ben Gurion, later the first Prime Minister of Israel, intimated he was assassinated. Before Marcus came in January 1948, the prospects for Israel were grim. There was no army. There was no central command, only a series of disjointed militias, Haganah, Irgun, Stern Gang, Palmach, and others. They did not trust each other. They frequently refused to cooperate with each other and even, in some cases, worked against each other.

At best, nothing larger than a brigade could be put into the fight for survival. Each militia refused to combine with the other. Ben Gurion was beyond frustrated. He saw that Jews were willing to fight their fellow Jews. Their dysfunction was greater than their desire to resist the Arabs. Ben Gurion understood there was no one from the militias who had the command and

organizational skills to weld the awkward, politically antagonistic militias into a single fighting army. He knew he could not draw the central command leadership from one group without creating even bigger problems.

Desperate, Ben Gurion did what he had to. He reached outside of Israel. The only one to answer the call was Mickey Marcus.

Marcus did what no Jew in Palestine had been able to do or could do. He took command and created an army out of pieces. He did so but not without resentment and mistrust. Ben Gurion never elaborated about how and who had Marcus assassinated. He left the cause of Marcus' death, a friendly fire tragedy.

In 1966, Hollywood made a star studded movie about Mickey Marcus, *Cast a Giant Shadow*, starring Kirk Douglas as Marcus. Douglas' real name was Issur Danielovitch. He was the son of Jewish European refugees. Six years earlier, 1960, Douglas starred as Spartacus, the leader of a Slave rebellion, a rebellion against Rome for freedom. Spartacus died, crucified.

Cast a Giant Shadow is dated and politically incorrect today. Hollywood needed a catchy reason for Marcus going outside into the dark dangerous night before he was shot. They created a love interest, a secret affair, to give jaded movie audiences something they could latch onto. It was far from the truth. Marcus was scheduled to go home to see his wife later in June. He missed her and his family deeply as any soldier does when far away and gone for long periods of time from those they actually love. The Hollywood version played better in 1966.

Old Veterans of the Israeli War of Independence say he went outside of the lines for privacy when nature called. Cynics claim he crossed over with a large bottle of brandy. No one knows. All agree he made the difference to Israel's survival precisely because he was not Israeli.

The nice Jewish neighborhood Marcus was born into was tough. Mythology aside about life in the lower East Side of Jewish New York, extreme poverty is grinding, destructive. To survive, Mickey became tougher. To get out he had to fight. He excelled in academics and athletics, earning his appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Trained as an infantry officer the army moved him to a seemingly dead end desk job. After his service, he completed a law degree; working throughout the 1930's prosecuting organized crime leaders such as Lucky Luciano. New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia so admired the hard driving prosecutor, he appointed him Commissioner of the New York Department of Corrections. Marcus' job was to break the back of mob control within the prison system. He did.

Marcus remained connected to the Army through the National Guard. When World War II broke out, Marcus sought a front line command. The army had a different idea for Marcus. They recognized his extraordinary genius for organization and moved him to Washington. 1943, He became chief of planning for occupation governments in areas liberated from the Axis powers. He was essential to the U.S. delegations to the Cairo, Teheran, Yalta, and Potsdam conferences. Marcus had a key role in the terms of the Italian surrender to the Allies.

But Marcus yearned to be where the fighting was. He convinced his superiors his organizational skills were best nearer the action. He was transferred to Britain. On D-Day, without knowledge or authorization of his superiors, he used his friendship with his former classmate, General Maxwell Taylor to jump into Normandy with the 101st Airborne Division, despite having no parachute training.

The landings of the Airborne were not the tightly coordinated assault envisioned by planners. Marcus quickly took command of broken, disparate units and molded them into effective fighting machines. His front line combat experience only lasted a few weeks before his superiors, livid, ordered him back to Washington where they felt his skills were most needed.

The end of the war saw Marcus back in Europe assigned to General Lucius D. Clay's command. Clay required all his officers to tour the infamous Dachau Concentration camp near Munich. Clay wanted the stench of the Nazi beast to be fresh in the nostrils and long in the memories of his men. Marcus saw first-hand how the Jews had been singled out and slaughtered.

1946, Marcus was named the Chief of the Army War Crimes division in Washington. He was present at the Nuremberg War Crimes trials making sure that the Nazi war crimes were thoroughly documented and presented. In Germany, Marcus came

into close contact with despondent Holocaust Survivors languishing in Displaced Persons Camps. No country wanted them, not even the United States.

Marcus had never been a Zionist. After Dachau, his attitude toward Zionism and a Jewish State began to change.

November 29, 1947, United Nations voted to partition British Mandate Palestine into two States, one Jewish and one Arab.

Marcus supported the idea. It seemed a fair, peaceful, democratically arrived at United Nations solution to a thorny problem.

For the Palestinian Arabs, who had never before had their own state, it was a new birth. For the Palestinian Jews, Holocaust survivors, Jews anywhere escaping anti-Semitic hatred, it was the realization of a 2,000 year old dream, the reestablishment of a Jewish State on their Biblical land.

Twenty years earlier, 1926, Chaim Weizman was told of the creation of South Africa's Kruger National Wildlife Park, the largest in the world, over 7,500 square miles in size. Weizman was the Chairman of the World Zionist Organization. He commented wryly, "the world has land set aside for animals; there is none for the Jews."

The surrounding Arab states of Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Trans-Jordan, and an Arab Liberation Army of foreign volunteers and Palestinian Arabs, rejected the United Nations peaceful solution. May 1, 1948, The Arab League's Secretary-General, Abdul Rachman Azzam Pasha threatened, *"If the Zionists dare to establish a State, the massacres we would unleash would dwarf anything which Genghis Khan and Hitler perpetrated"*.

Israel declared its independence May 14, 1948.

The next day, May 15, 6 Arab armies attacked Israel. Azzam Pasha reinforced his previous declaration: *"This will be a war of extermination and a momentous massacre, which will be spoken of like the Mongolian massacres and the Crusades"*.

The Arabs League States were very confident. Palestinians were not their true concern. Palestine would be their prize of war. They expected the new Jewish state, barely 600,000 people, weak, no air force, no navy, no armored corps, and only a rag tag collection of poorly equipped militias with no Army structure or common central command, to survive long.

The Americans embargoed the Jews and the Arabs. The Russians armed the Arabs. Reasonably, the world expected David to be slain by Goliath, very quickly, very easily.

The United Nations did nothing. It would not be the first time, nor would it the last time, when it came to peace and peace keeping, the United Nations was toothless. The Jews... the Jews were on their own, again.

April 21, 1947, the *Exodus* had escaped the British from Marseilles. The second mate aboard was a young American veteran of World War II, Bill Bernstein. He wrote to his brother Moe back in San Francisco.

"Dear Moe,

Today is our last day in Marseille... we sail tomorrow for Italy. From what I understand we will pull into some small port in Northern Italy and remain there for about 5 weeks while berthing facilities are put up. ***Our people have only one burning***

desire - - the second deliverance to Eritz Israel. The first migration was supposedly the handiwork of God; the second one, we fight for!!

Three days ago, the Jews here in Marseille and aboard our ship, celebrated the fourth anniversary of the resistance of the Warsaw Ghetto. Every one of the 60,000 Jews were massacred there, defending a street with small arms against the German army. *We held it for five days... only five days of resistance in 4,000 years of persecution! Something we should be ashamed of. However, the time isn't far off when we'll redeem our honor.* Perhaps you and I won't be around when it happens but I can see it taking shape...

I was at the refugee camp on the outskirts of Marseille yesterday. I saw practically all young men and women... A good many of these kids have numbers tattooed on their arms as proof of the life they have lived for four years."

July 18, 1947, the British attacked the unarmed Exodus, ramming the ship in international waters. She was trying to smuggle in 4,500 Holocaust refugees to British Mandate Palestine. Bill was bludgeoned to death by British Marines who boarded. He refused to let go of the steering wheel.

Every year the aging Machal warriors and friends gather to honor Mickey Marcus. They lay plain for all to see their own willingness to do what was right in an age of contemporary political correctness and cynicisms.



After the program at the Chapel, everyone files down the hill to the West Point Cemetery where Mickey Marcus is buried. Prayers are said. Flowers are laid against his tombstone. A military guard of honor fires a salute that echoes in the valley.

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