

Non-Jewish L.A. Zionist John Henry Patterson buried in Israel

by Orit Arfa



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stands during a reinterment ceremony for Patterson's grandfather Lieutenant-Colonel John Henry Patterson and his wife Frances in the agricultural cooperative of Avihayil north of Netanya on Dec. 4. Photo by Orit Arfa

Days after announcing the dissolution of his coalition, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu closed a circle in modern Israel's history, and his own family's history, when he fulfilled Lt. Col. John Henry Patterson's final wish to be buried among his Jewish comrades in Israel – 67 years after Patterson's burial in a Los Angeles cemetery.

“Your grandfather, Col. Lt. John Henry Patterson, was the commander of the first Jewish fighting force in nearly two millennia,” Netanyahu said at the reburial ceremony on Dec. 4, personally addressing Patterson's only living descendent, Alan Patterson. “As such, he can be called the ‘godfather of the Israeli army.’ He also

happened to be the godfather of my late brother, Jonathan, who was named after him. So I feel in doing what we're doing today, we're repaying a great historical debt and personal debt."

Born in Ireland in 1867, Patterson became an ardent Zionist as he commanded the Zion Mule Corps and, later, the 38th and 40th battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, also known as the Jewish legions fighting under the British army in mandate Palestine. Raised Christian, Patterson grew up on biblical tales, which animated his support for a Jewish state and the resurrection of the Jewish warrior.

"He himself re-instilled in them – you're the descendants of Joshua," Netanyahu recalled. "You're the descendants of Judah the Maccabee."

Patterson died in Los Angeles in 1947, penniless, buried in obscurity at L.A.'s Angelus-Rosedale Cemetery, despite three Hollywood movies dramatizing his exploits hunting man-eating lions in East Africa. (Val Kilmer played him in 1996's "Ghost and the Darkness"). But it was his bravery in organizing and befriending Jewish fighters, much to the chagrin of his anti-Semitic British officers, that was dutifully commemorated at the Jewish Legions Museum in Avihayil, a coastal town in central Israel founded by Jewish legionnaires and whose name aptly means "my father the soldier."

The Prime Minister described how Zionist firebrand Vladimir Jabotinsky heeded the advice of his father, Ben Zion Netanyahu, to move their base of operations from England to the United States. In the U.S., Patterson and Netanyahu Sr. together advocated for the formation of a Jewish army. "They, too, were dismissed sometimes as fringe elements," Netanyahu said. "But this was the basic thing that changed our fate, and it was a grand partnership."

Patterson's Zionist advocacy led the British to cut off his army pension. He died in the Bel Air mansion of Marion Travis, a Zionist who looked after him.

The transfer of Patterson and his wife Frances' cremains was spearheaded by Jerry Klinger, head of the Jewish American Society for Historical Preservation and somewhat of an expert in granting Zionist figures rightful rest in the Jewish state. He had campaigned successfully for the transfer of the remains of Stephen Norman, Theodor Herzl's grandson and only descendent, from a neglected Washington D.C. gravesite to Israel's national Mount Herzl cemetery in Jerusalem.

Klinger learned about Patterson's final wish after reading Alan Patterson's afterward in Denis Brian's biography "Seven Lives of Colonel Patterson." Alan, a Boston resident, took him up on his offer to fulfill it.

"One thing I learned in the army is that you don't leave your own behind," Klinger, an Israel Defense Forces veteran, told the Jewish Journal while in Israel. "This is the right thing to do, and I'm glad I was able to have a part in it."

To his dismay, the Jewish attorneys he approached asked for steep fees to facilitate the transfer. Then Doris Wise Montrose, head of the L.A.- based Jewish Children of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, introduced him to L.A. attorney, Myrna Strapp, who took up the cause pro-bono.

“I remember I said to him it would be an honor and privilege to help,” Strapp said in a phone interview. “I couldn’t promise any results, but I’d see what I could do. I never tried to go to court to get custody of cremains prior to the event.”

She succeeded. The ashes were disinterred at a private ceremony held at the peak of Operation Protective Edge, the day after the memorial of slain Los Angeles-born Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldier, Max Steinberg. “All things are linked,” Klinger remarked on the timing.

Netanyahu’s participation as Israel’s leader in this historic reburial resounded throughout the auditorium.

“In the *brit* [circumcision], your grandfather gave to my brother a silver cup which we have in our family - should have brought it here,” he continued to Alan. “It says: ‘To my dear godson Johnathan, from your godfather, John Henry Patterson.’ Now there’s a link of fate here and it’s not accidental. . . The progenitor of the Israeli army was at the birth of one of the future brave commanders of this army. Both of them are gone now.”

Jonathan “Yoni” Netanyahu died an IDF hero during the historic 1976 Entebbe raid.

As the choir and IDF soldiers performed tribute, and the Prime Minister extended his salute, Lt.-Col John Henry Patterson officially achieved the status of time-honored Christian Zionist legend.

“When I began to consider how I would accomplish it, I felt that his reburial might very well be a case of ‘next year in Avihayil,’ ” Alan Patterson told the children and grandchildren of Patterson’s comrades present in the audience. “Happily, we are here together *this* year in Avihayil, and the Colonel, together with my grandmother Frances, are resting under the bright sky and fresh air of Israel, far from the dusty corners in Rosedale cemetery.”

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12/8/14