

Pieces of Israeli history found in father's house

BY ROSANNE SKIRBLE

For The Chronicle

I spent a week packing up a lifetime of memories. That was in February. I am still sorting. It is not easy. It is like living in some in-between-world. Every dish, book and button has a story.

I grew up in Pittsburgh in a house built in the early 1900s. It had three floors, six bedrooms, high ceilings and big picture windows. My parents lived there for more than 30 years. Fifteen years ago they moved into a three-bedroom apartment. They gave me my college books, my old photo albums and the abstract painting from a charity auction that hung in my bedroom when I was a teen-ager. They were stewards of their own stuff. They had a yard sale and moved on.

In February my 85-year-old mother, Paula — widowed five years before —

moved into a tiny one-bedroom assisted-living apartment. She had been married to my stepfather, Ralph Atlas, for 40 years. She took her desk, a bookshelf, an overstuffed flowered sofa, two matching chairs, family pictures and artwork to cover every white wall. She was ready to let go and live in a smaller space. I had to figure out what to do with the things left behind in the closets and cabinets, under the beds, and on top of the counters and tables.

As I peeled away the household layers I got closer to the core of the onion and to family history and lore. I spent most of the week in the den, a room stacked with bookshelves and photo albums and file cabinets and folders stuffed with newspaper clippings, resumes, old bills, and letters. The white dress with the Red Cross symbol that my mother wore as a hospital

volunteer during World War II was in the closet. I put my hand on the certificate she was awarded for the work. And, side by side in plastic dry cleaning bags were three British army uniforms that my stepfather — who had emigrated to Palestine from Russia in 1920 — wore as a captain in the British army in the 1940s.

Ralph Atlas joined the Haganah in high school, went to college at Carnegie Tech and, shortly after he returned to Palestine in 1936, rejoined the Haganah as a weapons instructor. A few years later, he received a commission as a Royal Engineer in the British army. I knew he had translated Carnegie Tech R.O.T.C training manuals into Hebrew and introduced new military jargon into the language that way. This was a time when tens of thousands of Jews in Palestine volunteered for the British army. I knew my father



British army photo

Ralph Atlas in 1941

trained those volunteers and that former Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan was his student.

"He didn't care for foot drill," my father once said of Dayan.

This is also where he met Orde

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Atlas: Notebooks given to museums

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Wingate, the British army general considered a pioneer of guerilla warfare. Wingate organized Jewish volunteers in Palestine into special night patrols to defeat Arab terrorists and had used my father's skills as a translator during one such engagement in 1938 involving the northern settlement of Hanita.

My father's friends were generals and poets and painters; they played a role in the creation of the State of Israel. They visited our home. They wrote him letters. They met him in Israel. Here in this room in February, I began leafing through the documents that told me all of that and wondering what to do with them all. I cannot read Hebrew. So, I called for help.

Isaac Shina and Zelik Ratchkauskas answered the first call. Both knew Hebrew. Shina, 78, an Iraqi-born Jew, left that country in 1949 and never returned. He and my father met at the same Pittsburgh engineering firm. Shina picked through the books, reminiscing in his own way about his own history. I handed him a tiny book that fit into the palm of his hand. His eyes brightened. The commemorative Haggadah triggered a long-ago childhood Passover in Baghdad.

"I'm going to sing to you the way I sang from the Haggadah when I was a boy," he said, and he began to sing and to chant. He went on like that for several minutes. Zelik and I were transfixed. Then Shina closed the book, looked up and cried. I gave him the book to keep.

Also that day we found a book with Hebrew military terms credited to my father and a thick manila folder wrapped with string. Across the front in my father's script was written: "British Army 1941-43." Stuffed inside were British army identity cards, letters from commanders and military orders and honors. Other boxes on the floor overflowed with photographs and negatives, newspaper clippings, transcripts of oral history done in the 1980s and letters documenting his emigration to Palestine, his exploits in the Haganah, the death of his first wife, his citizenship in the United States and his lifelong passion for Israel.

Before I left Pittsburgh I gave away dozens of boxes of books to the Carnegie Library, to Robert Morris College and to Rodef Shalom Congregation, where my parents were lifetime members. I met with Susan Melnick, curator of the Rauh Jewish Archives.

"I was impressed that all had been so well kept and was not moldy or dam-



Atlas family photo

David Ben-Gurion (center), then-head of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, visits Hanita, the frontier settlement established by the Hagana near the Lebanese border in April 1938. Pictured here are Atlas (left), Paula Ben-Gurion, Eliahu Golomb, David Hacohen, Ben-Gurion and Josef Fein.

aged," Melnick later told me. She said the file would be an "unusual one" for the Rauh. "This Jewish journey is so well documented from the photograph of the Atlas family in Russia before they emigrated to a copy of his eulogy."

I closed up the apartment, readied for the sale and returned home with a minivan crammed with family history: china, silver flatware, crystal glasses, a mink hat, army uniforms and a tin of brass buttons that belonged on the uniforms. In the following days and weeks I scanned photographs, photocopied documents and organized them chronologically into five gigantic four-inch black binders.

"We would be glad to have a sight of these papers with view of their retention in the museum," wrote Simon Robbins, archivist at the Imperial War Museum in London, in response to an e-mail I sent him, explaining that my 13-year-old son and I would be in London in late March. Robbins met us at the museum and ushered us behind the scenes. We walked through a room lined with archived materials in boxes and in cabinet drawers. He stopped and pulled out a drawer to show us a folder of letters with elaborately drawn cartoons that a father had written

to his son during World War I.

"These are the kind of things we have in the museum," he told us. The museum — housed in what was once the Bethlem Royal Hospital, known as Bedlam — is today the national repository for collections of private papers, letters, diaries and memories of men and women who have served the British Commonwealth since 1914.

Robbins directed us into a private reading room and began to leaf through our notebook. He zipped past army form, "O. 1646: Claim for Issue of Allowances at Married Rates (officers only)," "Inventory of Military Stores of Lend Lease Origin Held on 2nd September 1945 (marked confidential)," and smiled at the copy of a program for "Royal Engineers 2nd Race Meeting," a charity horse race for the Royal Engineer P.O.W. Fund put on by the British Service Club. A picture on the CD we brought captures the event. On the back my father praises, "The dark horse of the race, the fastest filly of the Middle East (is) owned by 2nd Lt. Ralph Atlas, R.E."

"The papers would be placed in the museum's archive under your father's name," Robbins told us. "Any member of

the family would, of course, always (be) welcome to call there and see it."

"In the database of the Haganah Archives there (are) 62 references to records that have the name Atlas, Rafael (Rafa) in them including oral histories, and photographs," wrote Ilan Shtayer, assistant director of the Haganah Archives in Tel Aviv in response to an e-mail. He knew my parents started a foundation to support research there in 1993. In April, I sent the four-inch notebook. "What I see," Mr. Shtayer later wrote, "is an exciting story" and "an honor" to add to the collection.

The notebooks are now distributed to the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society, the Imperial War Museum and to the Haganah Museum and Archives. We must now decide how to distribute the original documents. The process has forced me to witness history in a way I never appreciated while I was growing up. I wish my stepfather were here to talk about the pictures and the documents. For now I have packed up enough memories to last a lifetime.

(Rosanne Skirble is a reporter for the Voice of America. May 8 was the fifth anniversary of her stepfather's death.)