

Overseas Diary

By **KATHERINE S. FALK**, *Chairman of the Speakers
Committee of the United Jewish Appeal*

PART I



Mrs. Katherine S. Falk

July 8 I found out at 4:00 P. M. yesterday that I could go to Israel at 2:00 P. M. tomorrow. What luck. And what luck that I have a valid passport on hand.

July 9, 10 Our party of six, five men and I, had an uneventful departure from New York City and trip to Paris on a TWA Constellation. Saw seats made into berths for the first time. No head room but otherwise like a train sleeper. No customs in Paris as the officials are on strike. A hectic few hours in which our plans were changed and we joined in the wake of Israel's Minister of Transportation Mr. David Remez, and went on through to Haifa without taking the days off in Paris that we had expected.

July 11 Passengers to Haifa, even with American passports, are not permitted off the airstrip in the Athens airport. So we stood out in the broiling sun for over an hour, unable to get a drink or even sit down, while our Air Force pilot got his papers cleared, the plane fueled up etc.

Arrived without further incident in Haifa at 7:00 P. M., Israel double daylight time. After 46 hours steady travelling, I was much too tired to feel any emotion except one of relief that here we were at last among our own friendly people. The formalities of checking our passports, paying a small visitor's head-tax and having our baggage examined were all quickly and courteously performed. Harry Beilin, known to us from his visit in the U. S. A. met us, since he has charge of the port area of Haifa. We sat down to our first drink of good Israel's orange and grapefruit juice before we set out by car for Tel Aviv. The weather was quite warm, the sky clear blue and the hills stood out round and clear and seemingly peaceful as far as we could see.

The trip to Tel Aviv was longer than it should have been. The quiet hills hid the battle that was going on around the two Arab towns which border the regular short route to Tel Aviv. For our safety, we were taken on back roads through the valley of Esdrailon so that we couldn't even hear the shooting. We arrived in Tel Aviv in time to eat a little dinner before being billeted with private families for the night. The city is so full of officials who have moved from Jerusalem to this new seat of Israel's government and of UN and other outside persons that our unexpectedly early arrival found the hotels all unable to house us.

July 12 I had dropped like a stone into the bed given me at midnight by my kind host and hostess Mr. and Mrs. Bodauoff so that air-raid alarm which awakened me at 6 A. M. was hardly a welcome sound, aside from the general implication of such a warning. We were on the top floor, the third one, and so were in more danger than anyone else, which meant that we got down to the air shelter as quickly as possible. This was not a true shelter but just the small space at the very bottom of the stair well. My host and hostess, a mother with a fourteen year old daughter and a ten year old son; another mother with three small boys all under six sat on the boxes and steps with us for the thirty-five minutes until the all-clear sounded. The children were sleepy and quiet; the adults talked softly; no one was overly excited but no one took the raid too lightly, particularly since this was the first really early morning one (4:00 A. M. by the sun) so far. We had hardly settled down to another bit of sleep when the next alert sounded. Again we traipsed downstairs. This time the conversation was more animated. The seventeen year old son of the Mother with two children had been taken off for military training two weeks before. What a shame that our young people had to spend their school years that way, but it can't be helped. The little ones played on the floor with stones and kept themselves amused. The parents talked of their own experiences and that of their friends. The general tone was that it would be fine to get back to

peace so that one could get on with the normal jobs of living. On our balcony overlooking a street of three-story white apartment houses, a breakfast of coffee and bread was eaten leisurely before the next alarm. There were five in all this morning and my reaction to them was one of impatience rather than of fear. There were so many more valuable things to do with the hours than just sitting them out. But good sense kept us all in the shelter since by then I had already been told that at least 75% of the casualties both here and in Jerusalem were to persons who either couldn't or wouldn't take such precautions.

Finally, during a longer lull, I was called for, moved to a hotel, rejoined to my companions and given lunch. We went to see Sarova, the seat of the Government in the afternoon. Mr. Eliezer Kaplan received us and, with his enormous kindness and seemingly boundless energy, made us his personal concern. He had us shown first the buildings in which the treasury department is housed. All of Sarona was once the section in which a colony of well-to-do Germans lived and it was bought by the Keren Keyeuruth some years ago. These private dwellings are now the seat of the Government of the State of Israel. Mr. Shertok has the finest of them since here he receives officials of other governments. We went in to him to pay our respects and were greeted warmly and with his usual humorous charm. After a chat, we went on to see Mr. Ben Gurion's offices though he was not in. Finally, we were shown the parchment sheets from which the original

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OVERSEAS DIARY

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declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel was read. Lying by its side in the safe where this precious document is kept, was a two inch gold amulet. Following an old Jewish custom, the Italian Jewish community of Rome sent a special messenger to the infant state with this charm whose properties were said to ward off evil from the new born infant. And standing there looking out over a field where we could watch the training maneuvers of some young recruits and on past them to sand dunes on one side and green tree-covered hills on the other, each of us breathed an "Amen."

The moon was half-full this evening and Tel Aviv suffered its first night bombing. One was at about eleven o'clock and the other around two o'clock in the morning. Probably only one plane each time, which meant four bombs each. We usually could hear the thuds of their explosion.

July 12 Today war stopped being something that happens to the other fellow. After two reasonably early air alarms, we got in the car and started out to do the things we had planned for the day. Rehovoth was our prime objective but on the way we wanted to pay a visit to Kibbutz Buchenwald. We drove out of the city some distance and finally got out of the car in a grove of eucalyptus trees that grew tall and helped hold the shifting sands of the dunes in this section of the country. We walked up a dry sandy road to a group of small buildings and were cheerfully welcomed by those of this young group who were not out on military assignments. There were ten babies here who had been born in the past two years since the libera-

tion of their concentration camp parents, a few young men and girls and the pregnant young women. We were told this was only a temporary place until the war was over and they could move to their permanent settlement. Meanwhile, a garden of vegetables was kept cultivated to feed them, a room had been dug out of the ground and carefully roofed to make a safe bomb shelter for the children and two slit trenches ran beside the vegetable fields to give cover to those who worked there. We walked around to see all of this, our hosts in khaki but we unfortunately in conspicuous white shirts. Suddenly our security officer said he heard a plane close by and suggested quietly that we drop into the slit trenches. In our innocence, we stopped to look why, but luckily not for too long. The aim of our machine-gunning enemy was good but so was our protection. We heard the bullets hit the ground, and realized suddenly the soft vulnerability of human flesh. Unless you wish to count as a casualty the seventeen prickles I acquired from the dried thistle branch which I landed on in my section of the trench, none of us were injured. We all climbed out when the plane was out of earshot, looked at each other with relief that all were unharmed, said small silent prayers of gratitude and then realized that we were shaking a little. Our hospitable hosts took us quickly to their dining hall where we were fed tea and grapes and had a chance to look at the large picture book of their odyssey from Concentration Camp Buchenwald to Kibbutz Buchenwald. It helped put our little brush with war into better perspective!

After the amenities were completed, we started on our way again to Rehovoth. Ten minutes of open road during which time our security officers gave us instructions on what to do should a plane come down towards us while we were in the car: First, the car would stop. Then we must get out and take to the shallow roadside ditches if no other cover offered, under trees, if those were at hand, but in no case far into a field or grove since this territory had been mined by the Arabs during their stay here and the mines had not all been found as yet. There hadn't been time and man-power as yet to do that very thoroughly. This is summer in Israel and the edge of the road is covered with shoulder-tall thickets of dried thistle plants, again because there is no time or labor to cut them down. I must admit I watched the road with some apprehension, wondering if I'd be more afraid of lying down in that quantity of prickles than taking my chances on the good marksmanship of our enemy gunners. I was lucky at that: when the plane did show up, just at the end of our officer's briefing, we were by an orange grove and each of us found a pleasant tree under which to sit for the few minutes it took for danger to pass us by. But this seemed to be enough risk for one morning so we returned to the city, much more respectful of the steady, purposeful, matter of fact way that we saw everyone going about his work though each one of them had this sort of experience as his constant companion.

A quiet early afternoon gave us reassurance that maybe we could go about a little. Because Mr. Kaplan had taken an interest in our doings, we were able to go into the evacuated city of Jaffa. There we saw the undamaged harbor with the flag of Israel flying from the highest watch-tower overlook the city. We saw the depot where Arab possessions were stored for safe-keeping. We saw the almost completely destroyed Meuslia quarter of the city where the fighting had been house to house. I might as well admit here that to me war is war and I expect to see destruction. Not that I like war; but given war, destruction and death and hardship are inevitable. Our people seem to feel this too. There is a price to be paid for freedom and if that price has to be this highest one, nevertheless nothing less will do and they have paid. There is a firm core of determination and purpose that is unshaken by all the handicaps they have had to overcome. The faces of the soldiers on duty, the faces of the people going about their work, all bespeak this same attitude. We found it even in the hospital which we visited where the amputees were recovering and making their readjustment to life again. Not that we American Jews don't know that our boys make brave soldiers. But Jews make brave soldiers, whatever country label once came in front of their names. The countries of origin of these wounded read like a list of the nations of the world and not least among them the "sabres" of Israel the native born (Sabre in Hebrew means "cactus"). Bravery was no monopoly of any one of them. Jews are not only brave soldiers but good soldiers as well. Two of the many fine South African doctors who have left big practices at home to come to help in Israel told me that the majority of the wounds were in the front and upper part of the bodies of their patients. That can happen only when a soldier is advancing against the enemy, and it is roof that he is attacking, not retreating, as a good soldier must.

In the evening we listened to Mr. Bernstein, Minister of Economic Affairs talk about the future possibilities of the country and some current problems. He was talking over a dinner table and was asked so many disparate questions that is hard to give even a summary of the conversation, particularly since there were many interruptions and a constant coming and going at our table. Maurice (Moshe to his friends) Pearlman came in among others. I had met him when he was covering the Exodus affair in Port-de-Bouc last year and was delighted to hear that so able a person had been called in by the government to set up a proper organization for the foreign correspondents who have been assigned to cover the news in Israel.