

24 December 1982 – *BOOK REVIEW*

ME'ALILOT HABRIHA MIGILGIL: MA'ASEI RAV (A Story of the Gilgil Escape: Activities of a Rabbi) by L. I. Rabinowitz. Tel Aviv, Ministry of Defence. 110 pp. No price stated.

Shmuel Katz

ON A brief visit to Kenya in February 1948, a respected rabbi from South Africa walked into a travel office in Nairobi and told the agent he was planning a trip to Leopoldville in the Belgian Congo where he had to deliver a lecture. He said he would probably be continuing from there to Brussels. Would the agent be good enough to work out a travel plan, with a timetable of alternative rail and air connections, would he explain the currency regulations – in fact, would he prepare a blueprint for the journey? Later that day the rabbi obtained a written authorization to take a sum of currency out of Kenya. The next morning, in an anteroom of the Residence of the Governor General, with whom he had been granted an interview, his eye fell on some official stationery piled on a table. It was the work of a moment to pocket several letterheads and greeting-cards.

The rabbi did not travel to the Belgian Congo, nor to Brussels. He was not granted a visa, because the local Belgian consul had authority to issue visas only to residents of Kenya. This was frustrating not because he was anxious to travel to the Congo (he had no intention of doing so) but because he needed the visa stamp in his passport. From there it was to be transferred by a competent, if amateur expert to the passports of several other people anxious to get to the Congo. The currency authorization was also needed for these travelers. By the time the document had been completed, the amount authorized had been substantially increased.

As for the official stationery, the rabbi had no particular need for it, he simply felt it would do no harm if the travelers carried an encouraging document from the Governor General of the British colony of Kenya.

This was not unusual for Louis Rabinowitz, then Chief Rabbi in South Africa. The official reason for his visit to Kenya was to bring a rabbinical message to the Jewish community, but he had really come to visit the 288 young Palestinian Jews, exiled by the British on suspicion of being members of the Irgun Tzvai Leumi (EZL) or the Lohamei Herut Yisrael (Lehi) and were now held in a British detention camp at Gilgil, some 130 kilometers from Nairobi. His actions on those two days and throughout the rest of his stay were devoted to completing a long nurtured plan of escape for six of the prisoners.

The story of that great adventure has been told by its leader, Ya'akov Meridor in his *Long Is the Road to Freedom*. Under the nose of the British guards, documents, visas and even passports were forged or fabricated by the detainees, while other teams took turns at digging a tunnel from the heart of the camp, under the well guarded perimeter fence to the road outside. All the detainees were in on the secret – most of them lent a hand – despite daily checks, and the British did not learn for two weeks that six men had escaped. Only when Meridor's book appeared years later did they even learn that a tunnel had been dug.

Rabbi Rabinowitz's support for the resistance to British rule in Palestine was no secret. He acted as a liaison between the Gilgil detainees and the South African

supporters of the underground who gave indispensable help to the escapees from the moment they emerged from the tunnel at Gilgil until they arrived in Europe. What was not known was that the rabbi had been working on a plan of escape even before he learned of the detainees' preparations. He now reveals for the first time his intensely active involvement in the inner workings of the escape plan.

This is all the more fascinating since it was all done while he was socially involved with the Jewish communal leaders in Nairobi (who for a long time were leery of any contact with the "terrorists") and with the British authorities including the commander of the camp, Colonel Rice. At one point, in desperation he gave Rice some friendly advice. Rice fortunately accepted it and thus a major blow to the plan was averted.

Telling his story in the form of a report enhances its dramatic impact. It is a pity he still felt obliged to conceal the identities of other South Africans without whose daring contributions the operation would probably not have succeeded.