

From the Pit of Decay and Dust

The Emergence of Zionist Identity in a Sanzer Family in Early-20th Century Safed

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In 1940, Mordechai Kahana sat at the Shabbat dinner table in Howard Beach, Brooklyn with his brother Charles and recounted stories “continuing Arab cruelty” and “Jewish heroism” to his eight-year-old nephew Meir.¹ Mordechai solely blamed the Arab population of Palestine for what he saw as a concerted effort to destroy the Jewish presence in the region. By the 1940s, still reeling from the loss of his wife, daughter, and mother-in-law in a 1938 attack on a taxicab along the Acre-Safed highway, Mordechai was transfixed by continuing interethnic violence and increasingly argued that the only way to counter Arab violence was through equally aggressive “counter-terror.” Though Mordechai was a native Palestinian, by the end of the 1930s, he permanently left the region, marking a drastic shift in Kahana politics, and the largest disruption in the family since they arrived in Palestine in the late-19th century.²

The Kahana family arrived in Palestine as part of a pre-Zionist Hasidic religious migration in the 1870s. As members of the Sanz Hasidic Dynasty, the family migrated to Safed not because of an attachment to Jewish nationalism or as an

1 Since “Kahana” is a Hebrew and Yiddish last name not derived from the Roman alphabet, there is no single transliteration, and individual family members often differed in the way they chose to spell their name in English. In this article, “Kahana” is used to discuss the family in general. “Kahane” refers to the spelling Charles, Meir, and their branch of the family used, and “Cahana” refers to Moshe and his branch of the family;

2 Robert I. Friedman, *The False Prophet: Rabbi Meir Kahane, From FBI Informant to Knesset Member* (Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 1990), 23-24

escape from European antisemitism, but rather because of the city's importance to Jewish mysticism and Talmudic literature. While in Palestine, the family actively eschewed Zionist politics and instead placed ideological emphasis on Torah study and religious practice. As Jewish communities around them grew in size and Safed became a center of Zionist immigration, the Sanz Hasidic community became increasingly entrenched in a religious rejection of Zionism and older members of the Kahana family barred political activism in their family.

The interethnic violence of the British Mandate in Palestine quickly eroded the Kahanas' rejection of Zionism and within a generation the Kahanas would be a prominent family within the Zionist struggle for statehood. The deaths within the extended Kahana family in 1938 served as a flashpoint for the family and the city of Safed. Though it was a small part of a wider wave of violence between Arabs and Jews in Palestine, previous incidents lacked the direct impact on Safed's Hasidic community. The attack on the taxicab on the Acre-Safed highway not only killed eight Kahana family members, it ripped the family apart. It created political divisions, prompted migration to Europe and the United States, and thrust younger generations into the throes of anti-colonial struggles in the British Mandate.³

The struggles of the Kahana family under the British Mandate are representative of the struggles of Haredi Jews in early-20th century Palestine. Haredim, or ultra-Orthodox Jews characterized by a strict adherence to Jewish law and practice, were not immune from the interethnic violence, despite their wishes to abstain from

3 Moshe Cahana, *Saba Moshe: Memories*, interview by Michael Cahana, 2000; Libby Kahane, *Rabbi Meir Kahane: His Life and Thought, Volume One, 1932-1975* (Jerusalem: Institute for the Publication of the Writings of Rabbi Meir Kahane, 2008), 4-9.

it. This forced Jews to adopt ways to combat or avoid rising violence, which in the case of the Kahana family, resulted in the adoption of militant Zionism. Hasidism's contribution to the growth of Zionism in Palestine under the British mandate is often overlooked. Previous works primarily address Orthodox embrace of Zionism in static terms, best exemplified by Yosef Salmon's dichotomous view of Haredim and neo-Haredim. Haredim, he argues, rejected Zionism in every sense and eventually became its bitterest opponents. Neo-Haredim, however, fully embraced Zionism and eventually became Religious Zionism's strongest proponents. Salmon argues that this split came from a disagreement over who had the right to rebuild a Jewish state, as neo-Haredim believed Jews should build a state to prepare for the coming of a Messiah and Haredim believed only the Messiah could build a Jewish state.⁴ According to Salmon's interpretation, the split only diminished later, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, and the territorial gains in 1967 that spurred a sharp rise in Religious Zionism. Absent from these interpretations, however, are the Haredi Jews in Mandate Palestine who, caught in the middle of the political struggles in the region, had to navigate a life between political Zionism and Haredi political rejection, and ultimately decide between the two. Because of this dichotomous approach, scholars have placed Haredi Jews outside the analytical frame examining the development of Israel.

The struggles of the Kahana family in Palestine challenge Salmon's dichotomy and exemplify the ways in which Haredi Jews confronted Zionism throughout

4 Yosef Salmon, "Zionism and Anti-Zionism in Traditional Judaism in Eastern Europe," in Shmuel Almog, Jehuda Reinharz, and Anita Shapira, eds. *Zionism and Religion*. Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1998, p. 26-27.

the twentieth century. The Kahanas demonstrate that the ideological line between Haredim and neo-Haredim was not firm and the distinctions between the two were seldom static. As an anti-Zionist Hasidic family, the Kahanas rejected all aspects of statecraft, despite a Jewish colony and state developing around them. Despite the family's rejectionist politics, the violent ethno-political conflict that accompanied the development of Palestine eventually thrust them into the center Zionist politics. As their entanglement within the conflict became too deep for family members to successfully navigate both Haredi rejectionism and everyday life in the British Mandate of Palestine, members of the Kahana family were eventually forced to choose between the two, with members deciding to either join the Zionist struggle or leave Palestine.

Examining the Kahana family in this way demonstrates how Haredi Jews in early-20th century Palestine were political actors. Instead of treating Haredim as passive figures in the development of Palestine and Israel, the experiences of the Kahana family suggest that Haredi Jews often directly affected the course of Jewish history in Palestine through their political choices. Even in their religious rejection of secular politics, the Kahana family actively engaged in Zionist politics of the early-20th century, as their rejection was in itself, a political stance. Focusing on the Kahana family therefore reconceptualizes how Haredi Jews engaged with Jewish statecraft in Palestine, placing them in the center of Zionist politics instead of on the periphery.

Origins in Nowy Saż

Long before their arrival in Palestine in the late-19th century, the Kahanas emerged as a large Orthodox family

in Eastern Europe. The Kahana family joined the Hasidic movement when David Magid Hakohen, the chief rabbi of Radomyśl Wielki in southeast Poland and patriarch of the Kahana family studied under Jacob Isaac Horowitz, the Seer of Lublin, who was the most influential Hasidic leader in Poland at the dawn of the nineteenth century. This Hasidic tradition carried on with Magid Hakohen's son, Levy Itzchak who adopted the surname Kahana and became chief rabbi of Nowy Wiśnicz. Levy's eldest son, Baruch David, moved to Nowy Sańcz and joined Chaim Halberstam's Hasidic dynasty. It was Baruch David Kahana's devotion to Halberstam that would eventually bring the Kahana family to Palestine.⁵

Nowy Sańcz was founded as a town in 1292, and saw initial Jewish settlement beginning in the mid-17th century. Throughout its history, the Jews of Nowy Sańcz experienced Cossack rioting, pogroms, and blood libels aimed at the Jewish community as Austrians, Hungarians, Poles, and Russians all vied for territorial control of Galicia. Despite these struggles, a Jewish community flourished in Nowy Sańcz, eventually constituting nearly 50 percent of the city's population.⁶

Jewish life in Nowy Sańcz centered around the Hasidic rabbi Chaim Halberstam, who arrived in Nowy Sańcz in 1830 when he was taken on as a *moreh tzedek dayan*, an auxiliary rabbi whose job was to assist the

5 "Kahana Genealogy and Family History," Geni.com, November 20, 2018 [<https://www.geni.com/family-tree/index/6000000003683488088>] accessed February 24, 2020; The Kahana family tree was compiled by Nachman Kahane, Meir's brother, and is based primarily off of familial records rather than government documents. However, many details align with limited government documents, denoting the credibility of the genealogical findings.

6 Lehrer, Shlomo Zalman and Leizer Strassman. *The Vanished City of Tsanz*. Jerusalem: Targum Press, 1994.

town's Rav, or chief rabbi. By Halberstam's arrival in 1830, Nowy Saçz's Rav was in his 57th year as the town's rabbi. Within the year, Halberstam became the Rav, a position he held until his death in 1876. During Halberstam's tenure, Nowy Saçz became a vibrant center of Hasidism, attracting tens of thousands of followers.⁷

Hasidism was often antithetical to mainstream Jewish movements in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. When the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, spread across Europe in the 19th century, Hasidic leaders perceived it as a dire threat to the future of Hasidism. As a Jewish offshoot of the larger Enlightenment, the Haskalah stressed rationalism, liberalism, and freedom of thought and enquiry. Proponents of the Haskalah sought communal, educational, and cultural reforms in both religious and secular institutions. This modernization of the Jewish community allowed Jews an opportunity to embrace a secular political identity for the first time and eventually gave rise to secular Jewish political movements such as Zionism.

Since political Zionism arose in Europe as a secular movement, Orthodox leaders voiced strong objection to the movement. Leaders feared that the secular nationalism of Zionism would replace the Jewish faith and the observance of religion. They also viewed Jews reconstituting Jewish rule in *Eretz Israel* (the Land of Israel) before the arrival of the Messiah as forbidden. While these early leaders often supported Jewish settlement in Palestine, they did so with no intention of conquering Palestine from the Ottoman Turks, and many leaders argued that only strictly observant Jews should migrate.

The Hasidim were particularly vociferous in their opposition to Zionism and often protested the

7 Ibid., 21-30.

Zionists. They even went as far as banning the Star of David, originally a religious symbol appearing only in synagogues, believing it to have become “defiled” by the Zionists. In 1889, Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveichik had proclaimed early Zionist initiatives as resembling a resurging Sabbateanism.⁸ His son Rabbi Hayyim Soloveichik further warned: “The people of Israel should take care not to join a venture that threatens their souls, to destroy religion, and is a stumbling block to the House of Israel.”⁹ When the Zionists in Brisk claimed that Zionism would stem the tide of Jewish assimilation, Soloveichik felt that what mattered most for Judaism was the quality, not the quantity.¹⁰

Throughout the Sanz Hasidic movement’s development in the early centuries, Chaim Halberstam and his followers in Nowy Saż remained committed to political anti-Zionism. For Sanz Hasids, the secularism of Zionism represented a heresy and an affront to messianic prophecies. As devoted Sanzer Hasids, the Kahana family rejected the secularism of political Zionism for generations, instead placing a premium on religious devotion and study.¹¹ Despite these qualms with growing political Zionism, in the late-19th century, a number of Sanzer migrants left Europe for Palestine, seeking further religious revival in lands hold great biblical significance.

8 Sabbateans were followers of Sabbatei Zevi, a 17th century rabbi who proclaimed himself to be the Messiah; Newton, Adam Z. *The Fence and the Neighbor: Emmanuel Levinas, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, and Israel Among the Nations*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001, 233

9 Ibid.

10 Salmon, Yosef. *Religion and Zionism – First Encounters*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002, 349

11 While ‘Sanz’ is the name of the Hasidic dynasty, ‘Sanzer’ is the adjective for things relating to the Sanz dynasty such as rabbis, institutions, and members of the community.

Among these would be the earliest members of the Kahana family to arrive in northern Palestine.

Migration to Safed

The Kahana family arrived in Palestine in 1873, following the establishment of a Sanzer community in Safed. Baruch David Kahana was the earliest member of the family to migrate to the region, arriving with his wife Rivka and their four-year-old son Nachman. Kahana was a leader in the new Sanz community in Safed, helping build the Sanz community's synagogue and dining hall shortly after arriving. He spent most of his life travelling back and forth between Nowy Saçz and Safed collecting money for *halukah* (charity) and helping Jews migrate to the Palestinian city. Kahana also wrote two books concerning the laws, customs, and holiness of *Eretz Israel*, *Hibat Ha'aretz* and *Birkat Ha'aretz*.¹² In *Hibat Ha'aretz*, Kahana expressed the importance of observant Jews returning to Eretz Israel. By returning, Kahana believed, Jews could end the European Diaspora and bring about the messianic redemption promised in the Hebrew Bible, putting an end to Jewish life outside of the Land of Israel.¹³ Though he called for widespread migration to Palestine, Kahana's motives were apolitical as he mentioned nothing of state-building or the existing Arab population.¹⁴

While there had been Jews migrating in and out of Safed over the city's 800-year history, the arrival of

12 *Hibat Ha'aretz* translates to *Love of the Land* and *Birkat Ha'aretz* translates to *Blessing of the Land*.

13 Though Kahana does not overtly emphasize a solely European migration, the Hasidic life and struggles he discusses are unique to European Jewry at the time.

14 Baruch David Kahana. *Chibat Ha'aretz*. Jerusalem: Goldenberg Brothers, 1897.

large numbers of European immigrants marked a change in relations between Arabs and Jews in northern Palestine. Previous immigrants to the city were either Sephardic, Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal in the 15th century who settled in the Middle East and North Africa, or Mizrahi, Jews who remained in the Middle East in the wake of ancient expulsions. The culture of early migrants varied little from that of their Arab neighbors and thus precipitated relatively little social change or potential for conflict. However, as Jewish immigrants from Europe arrived in Palestine and strengthened bonds between local communities and European institutions, local Arab populations became increasingly distasteful toward new immigrants. As a result, ethnic tensions arose in northern Palestine, even before the rise of competing nationalisms in the 20th century.¹⁵

Hoping to develop a Jewish imprint on the region, Baruch David's son Nachman attempted several businesses in northern Palestine. The first of these was a prayer shawl factory in Safed, which sought to build upon the long history of textiles in the city. This business, however, encountered several financial setbacks. The largest of these was Nachman's hiring of a traveler to purchase wool for Nachman from Damascus that resulted in the traveler fleeing with the entire investment, which forced Kahana to shut down the factory shortly thereafter. Following the factory closure, Kahana leased an orchard in Kfar Hittim, near Tiberias in the North. The orchard grew etrogim, a Levantine citrus, which Kahana then brought to the port at Jaffa to ship to Poland and Russia.¹⁶

15 Klein, Menachem. *Lives in Common: Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem, Jaffa and Hebron*. London: Oxford University Press, 2014.

16 Kahane, Libby. *Rabbi Meir Kahane, His Life and Thought Volume One: 1932-1975*. Jerusalem: Institute for the Publication of

Following the purchase of land in Kfar Hittim by the Jewish National Fund, the area became a point of contention between Jews and Arabs who both claimed ownership of the citrus groves. This dispute put Kahana's business in a precarious position and resulted in frequent theft of fruit by Arab residents. Tensions came to a head in 1893 when one of the orchard's watchmen killed someone attempting to steal fruit. When the watchman discovered he had killed the head of a nearby Arab village, he panicked and dragged the body to where Kahana had fallen asleep in the grove. Kahana awoke to Arab villagers surrounding him, believing him to have killed their village head. They beat Kahana severely before handing him over to Turkish police for arrest, where he was beaten again. Kahana remained imprisoned until his family was finally able to compel the local Austrian Counsel to act on his behalf and convince Turkish authorities to release him.¹⁷

This incident was indicative of rising ethnic tensions in the region. As Jewish populations increased in the mid- to late-19th century, competition over land and labor markets increased as well. Newly arriving Jewish immigrants typically acquired land through purchase by Jewish philanthropists and foundations and they switched agricultural ventures from a plantation form that depended on hired Arab labor to a self-employment form which privileged collective and cooperative systems of labor. This replaced Arab land tenancy with Jewish land ownership, displacing Arab residents who had worked the land for generations prior. This established a separate Jewish economy in Palestine that laid the groundwork for an eventual separate state. Though Nachman Kahana was not a political Zionist, his purchase of the citrus grove in

the Writings of Rabbi Meir Kahane, 2008, 3.

17 Kahane, 3-4.

Kfar Hittim bolstered the Zionist project of colonization and state-building, putting him in conflict with local Arab populations.¹⁸

In 1884, Nachman Kahana married Pessia Faige, the daughter of Sanzer rabbi Moshe Yehuda Tzvi Yavetz-Miller. The two of them eventually had eight children, five of which were boys. The second oldest of the boys was Mordechai and the youngest was Yechezkel Shraga. Mordechai Kahana spent most of his life traveling Europe collecting *halukah* for the Sanz community in Safed. He was a pious and apolitical Sanzer rabbi who desired, above all else, a strong attachment to the Hasidic teachings of the Halberstams for himself and his family. He eventually married Tzipporah Barol and had six children.

Yechezkel Shraga, the youngest of Nachman Kahana's sons was born in Safed in 1905. He lived there until the First World War broke out in the mid-1910s. As the British army advanced on retreating Ottoman forces, Turkish soldiers destroyed much of northern Palestine, including several prominent Jewish institutions and Talmudic academies. This strife prompted Nachman Kahana to leave Palestine with his younger children, including Yechezkel Shraga who was 13 years of age, and migrate to Oświęcim, Poland, where they could continue religious studies at a Polish yeshiva.¹⁹ Following his studies, Yechezkel Shraga moved to the United States, where his older brothers Chaim and Levi Yitzchak moved years earlier. Upon arriving in New York in 1925, Kahana adopted the name Charles, changed the spelling of his last name to "Kahane," and became the rabbi of

18 Shafir, Gershon. *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

19 The town of Oświęcim became more famous in subsequent decades under its German name, Auschwitz.

Congregation Anshe Sholom in Brooklyn. While in the United States, Charles Kahane diverted from the rest of the Kahana family. He abandoned Hasidism and became a rabbi in what eventually became Modern Orthodoxy; he was active in American politics, leading protests against American inaction during the Holocaust; and he was a staunch and active Zionist.²⁰

By the end of World War I, the Kahana family was increasingly split between Palestine and the United States. Nachman and three of his children left Palestine as nationalist politics arose, choosing instead to remain in the Diaspora rather than navigate increasing nationalism in Palestine. The Kahana family members who remained in Palestine increasingly became embroiled in the nationalist politics of the region and found themselves thrust into the center of interwar ethnic conflict resulting from the state-building occurring around them.

Ethnic Tensions in Safed

The fortunes of Palestine changed drastically in 1917. At the height of the First World War, Ottoman control weakened substantially from an ongoing revolt by Arab nationalists throughout the Empire. Emboldened by British and French promises of postwar autonomy, Arab fighters fought Ottoman forces from within, eventually forcing Ottoman withdrawal from the war and eventual dissolution of the Empire after the armistice in 1918. This emerging nationalism in Palestine suffered a blow in 1917 when British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour drafted a statement which promised “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people” and that Britain would “use their best endeavors to facilitate

²⁰ Kahane, 4-8.

the achievement of this object.”²¹

This declaration marked the culmination of years lobbying the British government by Jewish organizations, which had increased during the war, and the Balfour Declaration became the philosophical mandate upon which Zionists rallied Jews around their cause. As a result, the Jewish population rose from 12 percent of Palestine in 1922 to over 31 percent in 1939.²² The League of Nations codified the Balfour declaration in 1922 by passing a mandate to “secure the establishment of the Jewish national home ... and the development of self-governing institutions, and also safeguard the civil and religious rights of all the inhabitants of Palestine, irrespective of race and religion.”²³

Beginning in 1920, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Haj Mohammad Ain al-Husayni used his position to become a leader in the Arab nationalist movement in Palestine. He influenced nationalistic passions and incited religious protests and violence against Jews in Palestine by claiming that Jews sought to rebuild a Jewish Temple on the site of Al-Aqsa Mosque. There were no less than 15 major incidents between 1920 and 1938 that resulted in over 800 deaths. The largest of these was in Jaffa in May 1921. The violence resulted in the death of 47 Jews, the injury of another 146, and the displacement of thousands of Jewish residents of Jaffa to neighboring Tel Aviv. Other

21 Balfour, Arthur J. “Letter to Lord Rothschild, 2 November 1917,” in Friedman, Isaiah, ed. *The Rise of Israel: Britain Enters into a Compact with Zionism, 1917*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1987, 257.

22 Kelemen, Paul. “The Labour Party and the Zionist Project” in *The British Left and Zionism: History of a Divorce*. Manchester, Eng.: Manchester University Press, 2012, 11-43.

23 “League of Nations Palestine Mandate” in Klieman, Aaron S. *The Rise of Israel: Giving Substance to the Jewish National Home, 1920 and Beyond*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1987, 27-28.

major riots occurred in Jerusalem in 1920 and 1929, and Hebron in 1929.²⁴

Throughout the bulk of the 1920s, violence between Jewish and Arab Palestinians primarily occurred in dense population centers in central Palestine where large Jewish and Arab populations existed alongside one another. This changed in the late-1920s and early 1930s, however, as Jewish populations in northern Palestine increased from 19,672 in 1922 to 40,928 in 1931, which would affect the city of Safed.²⁵ Arab Palestinians felt increasingly dispossessed and responded to this Jewish population increase with nationalist fervor. By the end of the 1920s, Jews accounted for 27 percent of Safed's population, the third-largest Jewish population in northern Palestine, behind Haifa and Tiberias. Local Arab officials proved unwilling to accept incoming Zionist Jews into Safed society and the disconnect between Jews and Arabs in the 1920s grew more pronounced. The growing divide accelerated as Revisionist Zionists arrived in the city in large numbers.²⁶

Tensions finally came to a head in 1929 with the *Meora'ot Tarpot*, a series of pogroms in August 1929 during which 133 Jews died and another 241 were injured. The violence initially stemmed from a dispute over access to

24 Cohen, Hillel. *Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1929*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2015.

25 J.B. Barron, Report and General Abstracts of the Census of 1922 Taken on 23rd of October 1922; London: British Government of Palestine, 1922; E. Mills, *Census of Palestine 1931, Population of Villages, Towns, and Administrative Areas* (Jerusalem: Goldberg Press, 1932).

26 Revisionism was a stream of Zionism founded by Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky in the 1920s as a response to what he felt was excessive kowtowing to British imperial goals. It emphasized Jewish militarism, Jewish control over the whole of the Palestinian Mandate, and noncooperation with Arab Palestinians; *Ibid.*, 191.

the Western Wall and spread across Palestine as both Arab and Jewish populations engaged in increasingly violent reprisals. In Hebron, Arab mobs converged on Jewish neighborhoods raping men, women, and children, Arab demonstrators torched the Hadassah hospital in Hebron, Jewish vandals desecrated the Nebi Akasha Mosque in Jerusalem, and at the local branch of the famed Slabodka Yeshiva, Arab rioters killed over seventy students with staves and axes.²⁷

Despite the higher death tolls in Jerusalem and Hebron, the violence in Safed proved to have a far greater impact on the Kahanas and their fellow Sanzer Jews. A week after the initial violence in Jerusalem, tensions in Safed remained high. Despite local leaders urging calm and restraint, tempers boiled over when British authorities mistook a murdered Sephardic Jew for an Arab, sending rumors of immanent Jewish reprisal into overdrive. In response, several Arab bands stormed into Safed's Jewish neighborhoods, and over the course of an hour, these bands went from house to house with knives and axes, killing and maiming, dousing the houses with combustibles and setting them on fire. Thirteen Jews died in Safed in the first hour, two were killed on the road into town, and another three burned alive in Ein Zeitim, a kibbutz two kilometers north of Safed.²⁸

When violence broke out, the children of the Kahana family all gathered in one house and the adults were in various parts of the city. After the violence began, adults in the family ran home and they all gathered and hid in the cellar while their house was attacked by a group of Arab Palestinians. Rachel Kahana, 16 years old at the time,

27 Ibid. 295-313; Auerbach, Jerold S. *Hebron Jews: Memory and Conflict in the Land of Israel*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.

28 Cohen, 188-194.

recalled the general feeling of fear and despair present in the cellar and how many family members trembled with fear and alarm. The Arabs moved on after being chased away from the Kahana house. Following the flight of the perpetrators, the Kahana family emerged to find a scene of chaos. As Rachel Kahana described it, “We went up to the roof and there it was, wow, the city was in flames and Hebrew boys were running and shouting...each of us put a child on our shoulders and we are running, running in the crowd with our knees buckling, our hearts pounding, pounding like a hammer.” In her description, Kahana described police inaction during the violence. She noted that “The Arab policemen, amusement showing on their faces, urged it on...those Arab policemen, they are to blame for it all, for all the horrible destruction.”²⁹

Rachel carried her toddler cousin Budik across the city as the family searched for some form of refuge. Once the rioting began dying down, community leaders led affected Jews into the courtyard of a government building hoping to protect surviving Jews from further violence. Nearly 3,000 Jews crowded into a courtyard typically reserved for housing horses, straw, and garbage.³⁰

Despite the Kahana family’s political anti-Zionism, the violence brought on by competing nationalist movements in 1929 was unavoidable. It enveloped both secular Zionists and religious objectors, drawing no distinction between the two. Orthodox Jews could not avoid the state-building occurring around them and were often reluctantly thrown into the center of the conflict. The Kahana family abstained from the Zionist activism that spurred violent disputes between Jewish and Arab Palestinians, yet they still found themselves directly

29 Kahana, Rachel. “1929 riots”, Beit Hameiri Museum and Archive, Safed, Israel

30 Cohen, 198-201.

affected by the violence and forced to seek refuge. As the interethnic conflict picked up in the 1930s, the Kahana family found themselves in the throes of violence, claiming the lives of several family members.

Arab Revolt of 1936

The 1930s proved to be a defining decade for the Kahana family, as it marked the point at which they could no longer idly weather the region's conflict. Violence between Jews and Arabs in Palestine continued throughout the 1930s, escalating even further in the second half of the decade as Arab Palestinians launched a nationalistic uprising in response to increasing Jewish immigration and land purchases. Between 1922 and 1931, the Jewish population of Palestine more than doubled, and by the late 1930s, an average of 20,000 Jews immigrated every year, fleeing Nazi persecution in Europe. These demographic changes increasingly displaced Arab workers and by 1935, not only did Arab-possessed land have to accommodate ten times the amount of farmers as Jewish owned land, leading to smaller plots for each person, but only five percent of the Arab workforce worked in Jewish industries.³¹ More immediately, Arab Palestinians reacted to the killing of nationalist leader Izz ad-Din al-Qassam at the hands of British military officials in 1935. What began as a general strike from April until October 1936 morphed into a violent revolt by end of the year as a peasant-led resistance movement arose to counter British responses to the general

31 Bernstein, Deborah. *Constructing Boundaries: Jewish and Arab Workers in Mandatory Palestine*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002, 20-21; Yazbak, Mahmoud. "From Poverty to Revolt: Economic Factors in the Outbreak of the 1936 Rebellion in Palestine," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 36, July 2000, 93-113.

strike. Over the next two years, Arab protestors clashed with the British Army and Palestine Police resulting in the death of over 2,000 Arabs in the clashes, another 108 hanged, and 961 killed in “gang and terrorist activities.”³²

Caught in the middle between Arab protestors and British authorities, Jewish leaders attempted to weather the violence as best they could, while still focusing on migration away from an increasingly hostile European continent. Given the concurrent violence in Germany and Palestinian leadership’s sympathy towards Nazism, many Jewish leaders viewed the 1936 Revolt as immoral, terroristic, and an offshoot of the Nazi campaign against European Jews.³³ Between 1936 and 1939, roughly 300 Jewish civilians died as a result of the fighting. While not as damaging to the Jewish population as *Meora 'ot Tarpat*, the Arab Revolt of 1936 caused a radicalization and militarization of the Jewish populace. Across the region, Jewish involvement in paramilitary organizations such as *Haganah*, *Etzel*, and *Lehi* rose, and Jewish leaders started a metalworking industry to begin crafting armaments.³⁴

Perhaps the most notable event in Safed during the early months of the 1936 Revolt was the murder of the Unger family in August 1936. On the night of August 13, two Arabs entered the Unger family house and opened fire on the family, wounding several members, before detonating a bomb inside the house as they left. The attack killed Alter Ungar and his three children Abraham, Haws, and Shneidel.³⁵ British authorities arrested numerous

32 Levenberg, Haim. *Military Preparations of the Arab Community in Palestine: 1945–1948*. London: Routledge, 1993, 74-76.

33 Morris, Benny. *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881–1999*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001, 136.

34 Morris, 160.

35 “Arabs Kill 4 Jews in Safed Bombing; U.S. Citizens Ask Protection,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, August 16, 1936; “Justice

suspects in relation to the murder, however, none were convicted by the British Court of Criminal Assize.³⁶

The Jewish community in Safed reeled after the acquittals, feeling that the British government failed to protect the Jewish community. Jewish residents in Safed not only directed their anger at the High Commissioner and British government, they also expressed outrage at the Arab mayor of Safed. In the wake of the murders, the mayor wrote British authorities pleading for restraint while refraining from condemnation the murders. Jewish residents believed this letter condoned the murder of the Unger family and argued that the mayor actively refused to protect the city's Jewish residents, further fueling outrage and despair over the loss of the Unger family.³⁷

Over the next few years, Safed was a center for violence between Jews and Arabs as nationalist movements promoted increasingly hostile actions to garner publicity and support for their plight. Arab Palestinians bombed Jewish houses in and around Safed, injuring multiple people each time; during the regional boycott of Jewish businesses in the fall of 1936, a crowd gathered and stoned Arabs who continued to work with Jews; Revisionist activists detonated bombs in Arab-occupied public spaces, buses traveling the highway between Acre and Safed were routinely attacked by both Jewish and Arab militants; and Arab bands regularly fought the British military in

Palestinienne," *Israël*, November 13, 1936, Historical Jewish Press Archive, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem

36 "2 Arabs Acquitted in Ungar Murder Case," *The Palestine Post*, November 10, 1936, Historical Jewish Press Archive, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem

37 "Jewish Delegation Sees the High Commissioner," *The Palestine Post*, August 25, 1936, Historical Jewish Press Archive, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem

towns surrounding Safed.³⁸ In the wake of these events, British authorities increased their control over the city, establishing curfews, military details, and making several arrests. Despite an increasing British presence, violence in Safed never dampened. The opposite, in many cases, occurred. The more the British cracked down on local populations, the more violent the revolts became.

The violence of the 1936 Revolt reached the Kahana family in 1938, as it claimed the lives of four members of the extended Kahana family, and two close family friends. Several members of the Kahana family had been in Tel Aviv in March 1938 for a family wedding. While much of the family returned to Safed directly from the wedding, Tzipporah Kahana, her daughter Rivka, brother-in-law Zvi Segal, and his son David, traveled north to Acre to pick up Kahana's mother Bashe Baharah and bring her to Safed to visit the family. As their taxi traveled the recently opened Acre-Safed road, they were stopped by a band of about 20 Arabs outside the village of Sajur, between Majd el Kurum and Rama. Once the taxi stopped, the Arabs opened fire on the vehicle killing everyone except the one-year-old Rivka Kahana. She survived the attack because she was shielded from bullets by Baharah's slumped body and when the shooters approached the car, she was thus hidden from view. The taxi driver, Behor Shachrour, and a fifth passenger traveling to Safed for her wedding, Allegra Mosseri, managed to escape the initial attack. Police found the two, days later, murdered about 150 meters from the scene of the original attack.³⁹ British authorities arrived on the scene of the murders a

38 Various Articles, *The Palestine Post*, Historical Jewish Press Archive, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

39 "Funeral of Safad's Road Sacrifices," *The Palestine Post*, March 30, 1938, Historical Jewish Press Archive, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

short time after the violence and engaged in a fire fight with the group of attackers, killing three. The remaining few eluded capture. In the days after the attack, British military authorities devoted resources, including aircraft, to searching for Shachrour and Mosseri hoping to find them alive. The local police headed up the search for the escaped attackers but yielded little to no results for their efforts.⁴⁰ For their part in the grisly murders in the Kahana family, no one was arrested nor faced any form of justice.

The funerals for the slain members of the Kahana family occurred a few days later and the entirety of Jewish Safed attended. Schools suspended classes, Jewish shops closed, there was a general cessation of work throughout the day, and the entire city sat Shiva in mourning.⁴¹ The funerals for the Kahana family attracted thousands of visitors from across Mandate Palestine's Northern District and saw eulogies from high-ranking officials in *Va'ad Leumi*, the Jewish National Council, and the Jewish Agency.⁴² The grief of funeral attendees was prevalent. One police officer, who was a police escort for the bodies arriving in Safed, was so distressed by the scene of grief that greeted him in the city that he lost control of his vehicle, seriously injuring himself and another police officer.

40 "Police Find Bodies of Driver and Girl," *The Palestine Post*, March 31, 1938, Historical Jewish Press Archive, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

41 Shiva is a week-long period of mourning in Judaism that embraces a time when individuals discuss their loss and accept the comfort of others; *The Palestine Post*, March 30, 1938, Historical Jewish Press Archive, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

42 These latter two groups served as the primary governing institutions for Jewish settlements under the British Mandate with *Va'ad Leumi* handling internal issues and acting as a legislature and the Jewish Agency focusing on external relations and assisting migration.

The deaths in the Kahana family sparked outrage from numerous Jews in Safed and many actively sought ways to exact revenge on the local Arab population. During the Kahana funeral procession in Safed, an Arab garbage collector continued his normal route, despite the cessation of work throughout the city. As the procession came upon his route, his presence and insistence on working provoked anger and a large group of mourning Jews attempted to attack him, seeking revenge for the murders. These efforts, however, were thwarted at the last minute by Moshe Cahana, who stepped between the mob and the Arab man, believing the group's anger was misplaced. When members of the procession saw that, despite his immense grief, Cahana was willing to defend this man, they went back to the funeral proceedings, saving the garbageman's life.⁴³

Following the deaths in the Kahana family, British authorities placed Safed under a strict curfew and closed roads into town. Included in this was the Acre-Safed Road where the Kahana murders occurred. This road, however, was the main passageway between Safed and large Jewish settlements on the coast. Shutting down the road proved detrimental to Jewish merchants in Safed who could not ship goods in and out of the city. This move inspired anger among Jewish residents of Safed, feeling that they were being unduly punished for the actions of Arab Palestinians.⁴⁴

Burgeoning Zionism

43 *Saba Moshe: Memories*. Interview by Michael Cahana, VHS, 2000.

44 "Troops Carry Out Highway Searches," *The Palestine Post*, April 26, 1938, Historical Jewish Press Archive, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

Following the death of his wife, Mordechai Kahana left Palestine and moved in with his brother Charles in Brooklyn in 1939. By Mordechai's arrival, Charles Kahane was already a fervent Zionist. He was an active member in the Zionist Mizrachi Organization of America and served on their executive committee for many years. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Kahane raised funds for Revisionist Zionist organizations, even hosting Revisionist founder Ze'ev Jabotinsky and movement leader Hillel Kook when they visited New York in 1940. Kahane and Kook, who used the Alias Peter Bergson in the United States, worked together throughout the 1940s. By 1942, Kahane was a member of Kook's Committee for a Jewish Army and participated in the Rabbis' March a year later.⁴⁵

Mordechai Kahana, though he never joined the Zionist movement in any formal capacity, developed a strong attachment to Jewish independence, antipathy toward the British, and outright hostility against the Arab population. While living in Brooklyn, Mordechai routinely discussed the murder of his wife and the need for Jewish protection through independence with Charles, a stark contrast to the political antipathy he previously held.⁴⁶

The younger generations of Kahanas gravitated toward Zionism even more than Mordechai and Charles' generation. Many of Nachman Kahana's grandchildren joined the Zionist struggle through paramilitary organizations such as *Haganah* and *Etzel*, with others

45 "Jews Fight for the Right to Fight," *New York Times*, January 5, 1942, p. 13; and "When the Enemy's Gun..." *New York Times*, April 21, 1942, p. 17.

46 Friedman, Robert I. *The False Prophet: Rabbi Meir Kahane, From FBI Informant to Knesset Member*. Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 1990, 23-24.

becoming involved through support organizations in the United States. The impact of this younger generation lasted decades beyond the struggle for independence with some of them becoming some of the most important figures in Zionism.

Mordechai Kahana's move was perhaps the most impactful event on the early life of Charles Kahane's son Meir. Kahana's grief and anger, however, colored much of his life in Brooklyn and his presence in the Kahane household impacted Meir's early life by imbuing him with strong anti-Arab ideas. Charles and Mordechai discussed the murders regularly during Shabbat dinners, and Charles regaled Meir with stories of Jewish heroism and Arab cruelty in Palestine each night. His cousin, Moshe Cahana, recalled years later that "Charles imbued Meir with a sense of Jewish pride in every aspect...He taught his son about the spiritual strength as well as their physical prowess with stories from the bible," a message that gained extra veracity when coupled with the biblical notion of "an eye for an eye."⁴⁷

Like his father, Meir Kahane served the Jewish fight in Palestine from Brooklyn during the 1940s, as a member of *Betar*, the Revisionist youth organization, Kahane participated in numerous protest around New York including storming the British Consulate in New York and taking over the British Admiralty Delegation office in New York in 1947 to protest the intercepting of the Exodus. In late September 1947, Kahane participated in the "Monster Protest Demonstration" against a visiting fleet of the British Royal Navy which resulted in a police crackdown. *Betar* materials linked this protest to not only the intercepting of the Exodus, but also the hanging of Shlomo ben-Josef and latter "patriots of Israel" by the

47 Friedman, 23-24.

British.⁴⁸ Meir Kahane continued both Orthodox and Zionist activism throughout his life, eventually becoming the face of religious ultra-nationalism in Israel before his death in 1991.

Meir Kahane's brother, Nachman, became an Orthodox rabbi. Born in 1937, Nachman remained too young to partake in the Jewish struggle for independence and statehood. Nachman, however, inherited his father's Religious Zionism and moved to Israel as an adult. Following the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967, Nachman established Congregation Chazon Yechezkiel in East Jerusalem with the hope of reigniting Jewish life in newly acquired areas of Jerusalem. For Nachman, this endeavor served to legitimize Israeli claims to a unified Jerusalem and sovereignty over Jewish settlements in Palestine.⁴⁹

Though he had been a rabbinical student studying under famed rabbi Avraham Karelitz, Moshe Cahana struggled to return to a religious life following the death of his mother Tziporah. Before long, Moshe Cahana dropped out of his Hasidic yeshiva and joined secular Jewish society. When he turned eighteen in 1940, Moshe Cahana joined a Revisionist political organization for the first time. Cahana spent a few years in this organization before joining the Revisionist paramilitary organization *Etzel* in 1942. Cahana served in *Etzel's* intelligence division *Delek* for several years, where he eventually worked his way up to the rank of *Samal*, serving as commander of the Jerusalem district in 1946 and Haifa-Galilee in 1947. As a district commander, he became a close confidant of Menahem Begin and was instrumental in the planning and

48 "By His Orders..." flyer, March 30, 1947, Jabotinsky Institute in Israel, Betar Collection, Box16 Folder 8.

49 Kahane, Nachman. "Become a Builder of Yerushalayim." https://nachmankahana.com/build_yerushalayim/

execution of the King David Hotel bombing in July 1946, for which Cahana became one of the most-wanted men in Palestine by British authorities.⁵⁰ Despite this history as a militant, Cahana completed his religious training after the 1948 War and became a prominent voice in Religious Zionism.

Mordechai and Charles Kahane's nephew, Fred Kahan, partook in numerous wartime Zionist efforts like his American cousins. An avid Zionist, he believed that the creation and maintenance of a national home was paramount in Jewish identity. His activism extended beyond statehood as well. As a longtime resident of Los Angeles, Kahan worked with the American Jewish Congress and eventually became the director of the Jewish National Fund of America and the Bnai Zion Foundation. Kahan spent his entire life working to build up Israel as a state, donating millions of dollars over the course of his life. So great was his contribution to post-statehood Zionism that he earned the Israel Freedom Medal in 1966 and had a forest named for him following his death in 1987.⁵¹

The latter half of the 20th century entrenched the Kahana family deep in Zionist activism. Moshe Cahana and Fred Kahan became Zionist figureheads in their respective cities, Nachman Kahana became a religious face for Israeli settlers, and Meir Kahane became one of the most controversially radical Zionists in Jewish history. This Zionism continued into further generations

50 "Palestine Police (Eretz Israel) WANTED poster, February 1947," PS 1220, Jabotinsky Institute in Israel, Tel Aviv, Israel.

51 "Fred Kahan; Ex-Director of Jewish National Fund," obit. *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 1987; "Los Angeles Jewish Leader Bequeaths \$1,000,000 to J.N.F. Foundation," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, June 17, 1966; "Los Angeles Jews Honor Christian Minister for His Pro-Jewish Act," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, March 1, 1965.

as all four men's children took up the mantle of their fathers' Zionism and expanded upon it, in the case of Meir Kahane's son Binyamin and grandson Meir Ettinger to a violent level. The Hasidic apoliticism that dominated the ethos of their Sanzer forbears lay abandoned for the ethos that autonomy breeds security.

This new politicism marked a seismic shift in the way the Kahana family approached Zionism. Early generations of the family devoted all their time to religious study and rejected all forms of Zionism, believing it to be heretical. Their beliefs aligned with the dominant political stance of Hasidic Orthodoxy in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, which argued that migration to Palestine should be reserved only for religious pilgrims. Any migration beyond this, for Hasidism, constituted false messianism and was an affront to Judaism.

The rising nationalisms, and accompanying violence, in the 1920s and 1930s chipped away at the Kahanas' Hasidic anti-Zionism. Under the yoke of British imperialism, Arab and Jewish nationalisms boiled over into outright violence. During the *Meora'ot Tarpat* in 1929, the Kahana family had their home burned to the ground and during the Arab Revolt in 1938, Arab Palestinians killed a large contingent of the Kahana family, including Moshe Kahana's mother and grandmother. These events, and the perceived lack of British response to them, proved to be the tipping point for anti-Zionist Kahanas, who increasingly believed that the only recourse to this violence was an independent Jewish state. By the time Moshe and Meir Kahane's generation matured, the Kahana family was a monumentally important family in the evolution of Revisionist Zionism.

Through this transformation, the Kahana family exemplifies how, for many Orthodox Jews in pre-state Palestine, there was rarely a strict dichotomy between

religious anti-Zionism and the everyday struggles of state building. Haredi Jews did not exist outside the Zionist project, but instead, through their participation in nationalist ventures such as settlement and farming, were instrumental in the development of an Israeli state. As a result, Orthodox Jews often navigated both the religious and political worlds of pre-state Palestine as the world changed around them, embracing specific elements of each as they saw fit. For the Kahanas, anti-Zionism eroded as a form of religious nationalism grew and by the latter-half of the 20th century, the family successfully merged Orthodoxy and Zionism, becoming a dominating voice in Religious Zionism.