

*Leslie J. Paldon (born László Popper)
with Marie Walter*

The Survival of an Incorrigible Optimist

From Fascist Persecution to the Battlefields of Palestine



Edition **Andreae**

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*This book is for my beloved Grandchildren, so they may understand
the big picture behind all the stories they heard.*

*It is dedicated to the blessed memory of the members
of the Jewish Brigade without whom there would be no Israel.*

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PREFACE

Translation by Marie Walter

“If you don’t concern yourself with politics, politics will concern itself with you” as the saying goes. The same could be said of History. It is therefore essential that History be told and told again, thereby warding off the repetition of its darkest hours.

We must be grateful to men and women of conscience who, after coming to terms with the, sometimes, terrible ghosts of their past, have the courage to gather its remains and convey its substance to present and future generations. Among these men and women of conscience, we must pay tribute to Leslie J. Paldon.

In this book, Leslie Paldon relates his life, a rhapsody of unlikely events which, paradoxically, kept him alive, bringing him from Hungary to British Palestine; from the Shoah to Israel’s war of Independence; from the Middle East to the West. This tale is written in the direct simplicity of the true heroes, with the sincerity and warmth of the *Mensch* – “A man who knew to strive to be worthy in a place where there were no worthy men” as the Talmud teaches in the *Ethics of the Fathers*.

Leslie Paldon makes no secret of it: many men crossed his path for the worst but also often for the best, men to whom he owes a tremendous debt of gratitude that this book attempts to repay.

Now in his nineties, Leslie Paldon also breaks with a burdensome silence. The silence by means of which many survivors of the Shoah, tormented by the culpability of having survived and crushed by the persecution they experienced, have tried to comfort and protect themselves and their children.

But if it continues ad infinitum, this silence ceases to be a relief and a protection by becoming an oppressive burden. Leslie Paldon understood this, thankfully in time. He therefore proceeded to write, for himself certainly, but also for future generations by means of a message to the world, the closing chapter of this book.

We shall read with care, with emotion and with admiration the many unexpected turns that this uncommon and fully Jewish destiny has taken: that of, in the author’s words, an “incorrigible optimist”.

Thomas Gergely, *Professor at the University of Brussels*
Director of the Martin Buber Institute for Jewish Studies (Institut d’Etudes du Judaïsme).

INTRODUCTION

How can I still be alive? I often wonder.

It took me over sixty years to tell my story. After decades of silence, writing turned into a necessity that I became unable to ignore. For someone like me, looking back is no easy task. When I contrast the sepia memories of my peaceful childhood with the fate that awaited that little boy, my family, my friends, I do not know whether anger or pain is strongest.

My personal destiny intertwines with the tragic fate of the Jewish population of Hungary, almost wholly eradicated during the very last year of the Second World War, the greatest part of my family among them. The monstrosity of the crimes committed by the Nazis and their Hungarian lapdogs repeatedly exposed me, along with innumerable others, to mortal danger. Within a couple of years, I then jumped from one war into another, taking a rifle in my own hands to fight in Israel's War of Independence. Each time, against all odds, I miraculously remained unharmed.

Why did I escape the Nazi gas chambers and the Arab bullets when so many lost their lives? I can never make sense of it. The only thing I can do is to speak in memory of the men and women who were murdered during the Holocaust for no other reason than being Jewish, and of the courageous fighters who died in battle, defending their right to a homeland. It is my moral obligation to lend them my voice.

What was done to the Jewish People may never be forgotten. Because even the most credible works of history are no substitute for personal recollections, speaking about the horrors of the past is a fundamental obligation that we, survivors of the Shoah, have to live up to for the sake of the education and guidance of new generations. Today an old man with many blissful years behind me, I therefore travel back to these dark years to tell my version of events.

Eighty-nine years of age, Hungarian by birth and an Israeli national, I lay no claim to complete objectivity. However, fighting against the mark of time, I have done my very best to report as sincerely as I could. As much as it cost me to dive into my dolorous past, I owe this to the people I loved and who are long gone.

This book is my testimony, the tale of my unlikely survival.

Leslie J. Paldon
(*Born László Popper*)

Chapter 2: How I became a Zionist and how I was proven right

My parents were by no means religiously orthodox. Though they taught me to pray facing towards Jerusalem, I was never very fervent. We did observe the holidays and many traditions but not in a strict manner. Indeed, the main legacy that my parents transmitted to me was not religious: they brought me up to be proud and respectful of my heritage, and conscious of the responsibilities that came with it.

Father and Mother taught me to understand that our past and descent are constitutive of whom we are, and that the heritage of which I was the depository went far beyond monetary wealth. As Father used to say, there was reason to be proud to be related to Joseph Popper-Lynkeus and the other great men of the Popper family not because of their noble title, but because of their multiple and remarkable achievements in philosophy, science and business. The recognition that, despite the many obstacles in their way, these great Jewish men had gained in society was of paramount significance.

And yet, despite centuries of struggle for equality, the progress made under the Austro-Hungarian Empire had been obliterated by fascist dictatorship. Once again, the Jews were submitted to a regime of discrimination. Confirmed in his views by these developments, Father, a second generation Zionist, regarded activism in favour of the return to Zion of the Jewish people as a fundamental obligation. So did my Mother, despite her anti-Zionist education. Rather than motivated by religious beliefs, their Zionism was modern and secular, grounded in the realities in which I grew up. Together, they raised me to share their ideas with my own informed opinion. This constituted the solid and undefeatable set of convictions to which I identified all my life.

Though loved and respected, Father was quite isolated in Budapest in terms of his ideas. Indeed, in those times, the majority of the Jewish community of Hungary – my Mother's family included – had a strong Hungarian nationalist sentiment and casted a disapproving gaze over Zionist ideas. Therefore, most Hungarian Jews had no interest in the project of the Jewish National Home

in Palestine and, in spite of the many anti-Semitic measures implemented by the Horthy regime, did not perceive how different they were from the broader Hungarian society.

Mirroring this position, my school was officially anti-Zionist. Most of our professors were very attached to – not to say fanatics of – the Hungarian language and supported the interdiction of Zionist teaching and Zionist associations among students. Even the trade of commemorative stamps of KKL for the Palestinian Foundation Fund was strictly forbidden.

Father was not alone however: Sándor Eppler, the powerful and respected Secretary General of the Jewish community, was also a Zionist. He was my Father's best friend and colleague from the Academy of Commerce, and they had served together in the Army. Together, they managed to resist the pressure of the assimilationists.

That was no easy task. Indeed, President Samu Stern strongly disapproved of their convictions. He was the most prominent advocate of the mainstream nationalist position. To him, we were all Hungarians of Jewish confession, period. Our right place was not in Palestine but integrated within Hungarian society. Samu resented the idea that some of us wished to give up the country of their birth in favour of the dream of a Jewish nation and used all his power to contain Zionist proselytism. He tried to clamp down on any Zionist activity within the community. In a phone call to my Father, Stern even quipped that he would become a ballet dancer before any Zionist activity would be undertaken in the premises of the community.

Well, it took a few weeks only until Mr Stern got a call from my Father telling him that the ice was broken:

“Mr President, congratulations: you can go take ballet classes now. We held the first Zionist meeting in the Community Centre of my district last night and we did very well. A nice amount was collected for KKL.”

I honestly could not believe that my Father, who was always so very serious, would dare make fun of Samu this openly. Between us, Father had long been used to refer to him under the nickname of *Mopsli* after the German word for “Pug” because of dear Samu's tendency to muzzle any talk of Zionism. This, however, had never left our living room and both were so very polite, formal and respectful to one another.

Samu was not exactly amused by what we came to name the “ballet dancer joke”, but as Father and he were the best of friends, he backed down and let Father have his own way. When, in the midst of the war's worse darkness, Father turned to him in desperation and asked for his help to save my life, Samu did not hesitate for a second.

Considering the general opposition to Zionism, not many of my friends shared my ideological background. Nevertheless, following my Father's footsteps, I got involved in the Zionist movement from a young age, together with a few childhood friends such as Eppler's daughter Elisabeth, Lilly Glück or Marika Böhm.

At first, of course, I did not reflect on what I was doing when collecting money for KKL or accompanying Father to meetings. That changed as I grew up, and gradually, I became consciously committed to Zionism. I have very vivid in my mind the memories of how, trusting in my understanding and intelligence, Father talked to me as a man for the first time. It was during my Bar Mitzvah, which we celebrated in 1937. The ceremonies usually took place at the school's synagogue but Father insisted that mine be organised in the synagogue of his district, the VIIth of Budapest.

The Rabbi who conducted the ceremony was my teacher Benjamin Schwarz. Wearing the Tallit, the prayer shawl, I performed the reading of the Torah scriptures as the cantor had taught me. Once I finished reading, the Rabbi gave us all food-for-thought about the parashah (or chapter) that I had just read. I did listen, but really did not

take any of it so seriously. All my friends from school attended, which was a great joy for me, and I was mostly looking forward to celebrate that big day with them.

The Rabbi asked Father to say a few words. I will never forget what he said to me, grave and serious in his address.

"You are now a man Laci. As a man, you must take responsibility for yourself." He paused. Everyone was silent and listened to him, their eyes laid on me.

"My son, you must take this responsibility seriously, even more so since you are a Jew. In a few years, you will make your way on your own. There is one thing that you must never lose sight of: your destination is Eretz Israel."

This was a revolutionary statement that surprised many of my friends. Making an openly Zionist statement the core message at my Bar Mitzvah was most unusual. It would have been condemned by Samu Stern and the school administration. It explained of course why Father had insisted for the ceremony to be held in his district.



Portrait (1943)

It is with the words of my Father in my head that I then went on rather sobered, to shake hands and receive greetings and presents during the reception that was hosted in the afternoon within the premises of the VIIth district's community cultural centre, in an annex which had a big hall, situated right below the apartment of the Epplers.

Father's words had sounded rather too serious and gloomy on such a happy day, but I never forgot them. They summarised all that he had been trying to convey to me since I was a little boy. By saying that, because I was a Jew, I had to take my responsibilities as a man even more seriously, he meant to explain that, to prove myself worthy of my great ancestors, it was my obligation to strive to be outstanding at what I would do. Most importantly, I had to remain a "Mensch" in every sense of the term: respect all fellow human beings, be always ready to assist the underprivileged, and stay true to my principles. For Father, supporting the advance of the Zionist movement was one of the most important responsibilities that a Jewish man could assume.

Encouraged by his affectionate but unforgiving expectations, reflecting and studying Zionism became my most earnest interest. Shortly after my Bar Mitzvah, I read from cover to cover Father's signed copy of Lynkeus's book on Bismarck and Anti-Semitism, as well as, of course, Herzl's *Judenstaat*.

Father was not the only one who accompanied me on this intellectual journey. Another person played a very special role in making me the Zionist that I am. My Mother being most particular in promoting my linguistic progress, she decided to ask her friend Katarina Szenes whether her talented daughter Annikó could help me study Modern Hebrew. Three years my elder, Annikó – or Hannah as she is best known – acted as my Hebrew teacher for about two years.

Hannah was a very unique person, a poet and a convinced and very cultivated Zionist. By spending time together, we developed a lot of affection for each other, but what truly fascinated me were her ideas. In our exchanges during my Hebrew lessons, we had intense discussions on Jewish culture and politics. She suggested that I should read more of the writing of Herzl to explore the idea of a Jewish State. Thanks in part to our exchanges, I came to the conscious acknowledgment that I was a Zionist, which had until then remained more of a diffuse feeling. I owe to her my understanding that, contrary to most of my acquaintances, I was, like my Father, a Zionist supporting Herzl's ideas as expressed in *Judenstaat*, a core commitment for my future life.



Annikó Szenes

Hannah helped me in my choice of books. Thanks to her, I rediscovered the depth of the Zionist writing of my great Viennese ancestor Joseph Popper of whom my parents thought very highly. It is to my utmost gratification that I discovered how as early as 1886, several years before Theodore Herzl's emergence as the head of modern Zionism, Uncle Lynkeus had suggested in his essay *Prince Bismarck and anti-Semitism* that the Jews could be saved from discrimination and persecution if they possessed their own State. He already considered the creation of such a State as a most urgent need. For him, the type of regime that would be adopted in the beginning did not matter: Even a monarchy could be acceptable. These ideas made perfect sense to me.



Theodor Herzl, Basel, 1897

Photographer: Anonymous

In my eyes, the purpose of Zionism is the creation of a permanent home for the exiled Jewish people, today a reality. I developed this conviction under the benevolent eyes of Hannah and Father by reading the writings of Herzl, Nordau, Weizmann, Ben Gurion and other leaders of the movement, but also early Zionist religious thinkers from the Hovevei Zion and Bilu movements as well as the modern works of Martin Buber. In recognition of the beliefs we shared, I bought from my savings a large volume of Herzl's collective works as a present for one of Father's birthdays. He was delighted and proud.

Hannah Szenes was the first person outside my family with whom I could talk about the practical aspects of Zionism. In particular, I remember how interested I became in understanding her devotion to the importance of agriculture in Zionism, an idea that was very far from our reality. She helped me accept the isolation that our beliefs meant in the Hungarian context and the aspiration to go and settle in Palestine in the future. What Hannah taught me was that being a Zionist gave me the responsibility to take action. She was herself a committed member of the Hashomer, a youth Zionist organisation. She helped me develop the will to act in order to further my ideals. Soon, I became involved in secret activities with a group of schoolmates. Braving the ban on Zionism imposed by our school, we organised underground Zionist meetings. The level of our discussions was quite good, since all of us were relatively well read. One of our favourite games was to test each other's knowledge on the geography and history of the *Yishuv*, the Jewish community in the British Mandate of Palestine. In addition, we organised the selling of KKL stamps to collect money for the

Jewish National Fund, and not without success. I was very proud of my little rebellion.

At school, only one of our teachers was a Zionist and supported us. His name was Benő Marton and though I did not attend any of his classes, we liked each other a lot. He dared traditions and I admired him for refusing to wear a tie as a manifestation of his disagreement with the mainstream position of the world. As a kind of signal of our beliefs, whenever we met we immediately switched to speaking Hebrew.

I took Hebrew lessons with Hannah until the summer of 1939. She then told me that she was going away for some time. I expected to see her again within a few weeks, but she never reappeared. Ivan, her cousin and my schoolmate, did not say a word about where she was or what she was doing, even when asked with insistence, which was very frustrating as I missed my mentor. It is only much later that I learned that she had actually immigrated to Palestine in order to study in the Girls' Agricultural School at Nahalal.

Many saw it as a remarkable choice for someone who had grown up as a rather spoiled child in an intellectual family, but she decided that she wanted to contribute to the building of the Jewish State with the work of her hands. As far as I was concerned, I understood that resolve perfectly after all we had exchanged. Her degree in hand, she settled in the leftist Kibbutz Sdot Yam to work the land. She wrote wonderful verses during this time. I never heard from her for years. It is only well into the war that I learned of her tragic fate.

Shortly before Hannah's disappearance, my family decided to leave our home in Zugló. The increased presence of Fascist hooligans had made our neighbourhood so unfriendly for Jews that we decided to move to an apartment in Thokoly Street, closer to the school and the factory, which was to be my last home in Hungary. Our move opened a period of my life in which the shadow of brutal realities attached to being a Jew started to become obvious and unavoidable.

As the 1930s drew to a close, Hungary became very close to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, and the Jewish community started to suffer more acutely from the regime's hostility. New anti-Semitic legislation was passed by the Parliament, modelled on the Nuremberg Laws. Zionist convictions thus started to become less and less exotic and politically incorrect. Though it was very late to do so, a share of the Jewish youth became engaged in Hahshara, the training of candidates for subsequent immigration to Palestine. Hahshara programmes had been initiated rather early by the Hungarian Zionist Federation led by Otto Komoly, a Veteran of WWI like Father. In courses and youth camps, the history and work of the Zionist movement was taught and training given, with an emphasis on agriculture. For the Jewish community of Hungary, the growth of these activities marked a beginning of departure from the general hostility to Zionist ideas.

In increasing numbers, Jews started to leave Hungary to seek safety abroad. Using his powers as Secretary General of the community, Sándor Eppler established regular contact with other pro-Zionist leaders from Jewish communities in Europe and worked actively to support Jewish immigration to Palestine.

* * *

In spite of the dark clouds that were gathering over our heads, my late Father remained an incorrigible optimist. He always firmly believed – however harsh the situation – that things would ultimately turn for the best. Because I had inherited this attitude to life, I managed to remain rather positive too, even in the face of everyday anti-Semitism.

But an unforgettable event convinced us that we were both wrong. It must have been August 1938 when, one afternoon, Samu Stern and Sándor Eppler called on us. All three of them locked themselves up in my Father's office for a discussion of major importance, as they told me and Mother. I was surprised to hear Stern call Father Lajos and my Father calling him Samuel. With Sándor, he was on a first name basis, but Father and Stern always remained quite formal. On this occasion, however, they dispensed with the well-known Hungarian respect for titles.

Samu and Sándor had just returned from the French shore of Geneva Lake. With much effort, Sándor had managed to convince the reluctant President to attend the historic Evian Summit on behalf of the Hungarian Jewish community. Samu conceded to Father that this infamous event had opened his eyes.

This international conference, called by President Roosevelt in 1938, was supposed to find a way to solve the so-called "Jewish Question". By 1938, half a million German and Austrian Jews were desperate for refuge and a total of seven million were watching Hitler's moves with dread from various corners of Central and Eastern Europe. The exodus of Jews from Czechoslovakia was already on going and the same movement was starting in Hungary and Romania.



Samu Stern, President of the Jewish Community from 1932 to the end of the war

Thirty two nations agreed attended the Conference as well as observers from the Vatican, Jewish organizations from France and Britain, Zionist groups from Palestine, countless NGOs and around 200 journalists. The Reich officially boycotted the conference but there was arrangement for representation.

Indeed, the Nazis had a proposition: they offered to allow the Jews to emigrate for a payment of \$250 per head or \$1,000 per family, provided they found a new home. Put more crudely, Nazi Germany was offering to sell the Jews to countries willing to absorb them, thinking especially of the USA, France, Britain and Zionist groups from Palestine as potential candidates for this transaction.

Golda Meir, then a young Palestinian leader of Executive Committee of the Histadrut, was there to represent the Jewish Agency of Palestine, but she had not even been granted a participating role. The Austrian Jews and practically the entire Jewish community of continental Europe were represented by Professor Heinrich Neumann. A prominent and respected elderly man, he was a renowned Professor who had formerly been the personal doctor of the Austrian Emperor but had refused to treat Hitler. A much respected personality of the medical world, he had however no particular political skills, and was neither active in the life of the large Austrian Jewish community, nor a practicing Jew. He was a typically assimilated Jew married to Christian lady, and his views were far from Zionist. Nevertheless, he tried to argue our case to the best of his abilities.

Professor Neumann's efforts had practically no success with the delegations present. Nevertheless, he pleaded the cause with eloquence and dignity, ignoring his failing health, and despite the pressure of constant supervision by the Gestapo. Although he had not arrived with many illusions about the likely result of the Conference, Professor Neumann was deeply affected by the failure of the world to show solidarity with the millions of endangered Jews of Europe.

As Samu Stern explained to Father, the United States, who had not even bothered to send a real governmental delegation to the Summit, offered to take in 30,000 German and Austrian refugees per year, no more. Britain conceded to a similar contingent but strictly maintained its limitations on immigration to the Palestinian territories. South Africa agreed to family reunion only, while Canada and Australia refused to make any commitment. France, followed by many European countries, excused itself by saying that it had reached saturation of its capacities. Only the Dominican Republic offered a – considering its size – significant number of 100,000 visa, but that represented less than half the Jewish population of Budapest alone.

At Evian, an ultimatum was presented to the western world, a last chance to save the Jews. It was entirely ignored. The Holocaust was announced even before the war started. The world proved that it was insensitive to the moral obligation of saving the lives of fellow human beings threatened by annihilation. The democratic powers failed their chance to prove that civilization had a meaning. In the words of Chaim Weizmann, Chairman of the Jewish Agency, "The world seemed to be divided into two parts – those places where the Jews could not live and those where they could not enter."

Only sixteen years earlier, the League of Nations had entrusted Britain with the mandate of setting up a Jewish National Home in Palestine. Closing the door of their future National Home to the Jews that had been promised a haven was an inadmissible double foul play on the side of Britain. Putting aside the complete lack of solidarity and humanity of almost all countries represented, that could be unwilling to the slaughter of millions, would it not have been the most natural solution to “repatriate” all European Jews to their ancient home? Even Hitler had suggested deporting all European Jews to a Jewish State – although he envisaged the island of Madagascar, rather than Palestine.

Evian had a sad epilogue: the Jewish community of Geneva wanted to keep Neumann personally safe in Switzerland but he was resolved upon returning to his wife in Vienna. Tragically, he died of a heart attack on the train that took him back. His remains were casted away by the ignorant police who considered him as a Jewish smuggler because he was bringing back a beautiful dress to his wife as a present.

Although I guessed the seriousness of the situation in the severe faces of the three men when they stepped out of Father’s office, it is only years later that I understood what had happened and why Samu Stern and Sándor Eppler had felt the urgent need to discuss the brutal realities with him. They were both his personal friends and knew of my Father’s plans to emigrate to Palestine. After what they had witnessed in Evian, they anticipated the worse for the peaceful Hungarian community and the European Jewry as a whole.

“It is time for you to go”, they suggested. “Hungary is next.”

But Father was not ready to leave. Soon, it would be too late: in 1940, Hungary joined the war on the side of the Axis.

In my memories, the image of the three grave faces of Stern, Eppler and Father coming out of his office is inextricably connected with the eve the war. That day became unforgettable. In my eyes, the result of the Congress of Evian was the death knell of the entire Jewish community of Europe. Nazi Germany and its allies received a tacit license to murder all the Jews of Europe. And that is what the monstrous enterprise that they started to implement.



Peeping into the night between the planks of a cattle wagon's door, young László Popper wondered with anxiety where the train, driving at full speed across the Hungarian countryside, was taking him. Over the course of World War II, there were numerous occasions for his life to find a premature ending. Helped by courageous friends, warm-hearted strangers and an uncommon amount of luck, he endured persecutions, forced labour, deportation and a murderous siege, and lived to see the Red Army drive away the Nazis from his native Budapest.

Fascism and war having obliterated a solid share of the foundations of his life, the young offspring of a respected family from the Jewish community soon turned his gaze towards Palestine. He left to follow his Zionist dream, only to find himself caught in another war. Alongside the future leaders of the country, he fought for the promise of a Jewish National Home. Many perished around him, but he survived, as did the young State of Israel.

Under his chosen name of Leslie Paldon, inspired, in homage to his industrial heritage, from the Hebrew word for steel, he built himself a future with relentless optimism, in spite of all the obstacles in his way. Thus passed the years and many stories were left untold, dormant but tormenting. Decades later, the questions of his grand-children brought these back to the surface. It was time for Leslie to break his silence. This book relates the tale of his uncommon life, of his unlikely survival.

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