


Hannah Senesh Her Life & Diary



Introduction by Abba Eban

“All the definitions of giant courage come together in Hannah’s life.”—Abba Eban

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Introduction

Wait on the Lord: be of good courage,
and He shall strengthen thine heart.
Psalms 27:14

Courage is the scorner of
things which inspire fear.
—Seneca

"I don't know whether I've already mentioned that I've become a Zionist." Hannah Senesh was seventeen years old when she confided this calm news to her diary. She went on: "One needs to feel that one's life has meaning, that one is needed in this world."

The note of dedication is spoken in simple prose. Indeed, from the first shy awareness of her identity right up to the tragic end, she never spoke a single pompous or grandiloquent phrase. Nothing, therefore, can be less apt than the trite comparison with Joan of Arc. It is true that after her execution in Budapest at the age of twenty-three, Hannah became a consecrated image in her people's memory. A whole generation came to see her as the symbol of a vast martyrdom. The personal symbol was necessary precisely because the Jewish bereavement is quite incomprehensible when its dimensions are measured in six million. It comes far more within the scope of perception when it is distilled in recognizable terms into a single life and death.

There is a terrible pathos in any torture or death, but the effect is somehow sharpened when the victim has the innocence of youth and the fragile grace of femininity. So it is not hard to understand how the individual Hannah came to epitomize the total disaster. Yet she sought no particular role. Unlike the Maid of Orleans, she claimed no privilege of divine revelation. She was not even attracted by heroism.

To die . . . so young to die . . . no, no, not I.
I love the warm sunny skies,
Lights, songs, shining eyes.
I want no war, no battle cry—
No, no . . . Not I.

The verses were written in Nahalal in 1941. In the Valley of Jezreel the summer is languid and gentle, and the wind seldom gives movement to the cypress trees which make a circle around the newly planted fields. The presentiment of death sounds strange amid such peace. Hannah Senesh had reached Nahalal from Hungary two years before. Nobody could have foreseen the full horror of the oncoming Jewish disaster, and Hannah's migration to Palestine a few weeks after the outbreak of war was more in the nature of an escape from the European danger than of an advance toward greater risks. Jewish Palestine in the early 1940's was a scene of relative comfort and security, and its sense of ease was enlarged by a creative vitality that never came to rest even in years of war. But from the first day of her arrival, Hannah ceased to be a girl enjoying the "love of warm sunny skies." She was caught up in the predicament of Jewish survival and identity, as were so many of her generation who would, by their own temperament, have preferred a private destiny.

A book about Hannah Senesh is essentially a commentary on the holocaust. Two and a half decades after Hitler's downfall, the terrible mystery is still unexplained. All the humanistic philosophies tell us that man is pulled both upward and downward by elements in his own nature. The Hebrew legend proclaims that man is "like unto the stars of heaven or the dust of earth." The movement of men between nobility and degradation takes up a great part of literature, art, and, especially, drama. But no generalization is sufficient to explain why the Jewish people is such a constant target of the barbaric assaults: nor how so savage a fury could have sprung from the German heart and been sustained by millions of individual cruelties including the flinging of babies into furnaces. Nothing in human history is even remotely similar to the ghastly violence committed by the Nazis against

the Jews. The legacy of the holocaust is still acutely relevant to an understanding of Israel's consciousness today. It explains the obsessive concern with physical security; the innate suspicion of Gentile intentions; the firm conviction that Israel's small sovereignty is a minimal justice in comparison to the vast inheritance of Arab freedom in eighteen states; the strong accent on historic recollection and on anniversary occasions; and the fear lest the sharpest and deepest of all injuries be forgotten not only by the outside world, but by the Jews themselves. Israel and Diaspora Jewry, despite all outward signs of vitality and exuberance, are gripped by an overriding melancholy that passes over them like an intermittent but never-ending cloud. Above all, if six million people are killed only because they are Jews, then being Jewish must obviously be something very important indeed. For its own health and sanity, mankind must come to terms with the Jewish condition.

These are some of the cosmic issues which erupt out of the story of Hannah Senesh's life and death. But the poignancy of the story comes from the normal, human, modest stature of its unwitting heroine. When all is said and done, she is a girl like countless others—restless, volatile, and of unconquerable charm. And, like countless others, her nobility is evoked by circumstance and ratified by sacrifice. She bequeathes to her survivors, especially the youth among them, the lesson of inescapable responsibility. In Cicero's words, "No man can be brave who considers pain the greatest evil of life; or temperate who regards pleasure as the highest good."

All the definitions of giant courage come together in Hannah's life. But the main impression is of a small and lonely figure. It was thus that a comrade-in-arms described her: "I watched her march confidently towards her unknown fate, and at the bend in the road she turned and waved farewell. I didn't know I would never see her again."

ABBA EBAN

December 1971

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Translator's Preface

In the national military cemetery, situated on top of the highest of the Judean Hills overlooking Jerusalem, there is a small circle set apart; within it are seven graves in the shape of a V, the outline of a parachute carved on each headstone. Buried in that circle are seven of the thirty-two Palestinian-Jewish parachutists, members of the British Armed Forces, who were dropped into Nazi-occupied Balkan countries during World War II in an effort to save their people from the Nazi holocaust. Of the thirty-two sent, seven fell. One of the seven was Hannah Senesh, aged twenty-three and the only one of the seven about whom there is clear, definite testimony regarding her fate from the time of her capture until her execution.

Hannah Senesh has been called the Joan of Arc of Israel; she is a national heroine who has inspired books and plays. There are few in Israel who have not read her diary and poems, which have been translated into many languages. A ship, a forest and two farming settlements have been named after her; thirty-two streets in Israel bear her name. The leading members of the government of Israel saluted her memory when she was buried with highest military honours among thousands of Israeli soldiers—her body having been brought from the 'Martyrs' Section' of Budapest's Jewish Cemetery where she was buried by unknown hands after her execution in 1944.

Hannah Senesh was born on July 17, 1921, and began her diary when she was thirteen. It opens the door to a surprising Jewish world that continued to exist, relatively normally, while the rest of Europe's Jewry was being decimated. At the same time it explains why the talented daughter of a distinguished, assimilated Hungarian family chose to leave home, friends and country to become a pioneering farm worker in Palestine.

When Hungary joined the Axis, Hannah, long since in Palestine, noted in her diary, 'Sometimes I feel like one who has been sent . . . to perform a mission. What this mission is, is not clear to me. . . .'

Although by then Palestinian Jews were fighting together with the Free French, the British, Tito's partisans, and operating in the vast European underground, it was not until August 16, 1942, when a group of Polish women arrived in Palestine and brought positive and shattering reports of the systematic decimation of European Jewry, that a decision was made by the Palestinians to attempt to rescue their brethren.

In January 1943 Hannah wrote in her diary, 'I have had the sudden idea of going to Hungary. . . . Regardless of how clearly I see the absurdity of this idea, it still seems possible and necessary to me.' And at that very moment a group in Palestine was making plans to reach the remaining Jews in the Balkans and in Hungary—by parachute—in order to help them flee for their lives. Hannah Senesh immediately volunteered for this mission.

It was a military operation without precedent, a crusade in which each member was a novice, and his own commanding officer. None had been drafted—all had begged and demanded to be chosen. They had been selected with infinite care. Each had outstanding physical and mental attributes, each required special linguistic qualifications. They had to be parachutists, secret agents and saboteurs. And they had to have that special brand of courage possessed only by those who are willing to die for a cause.

Their first objective, and the sole condition upon which the British military granted approval and cooperation, was the liberation of Allied pilots shot down behind Nazi lines and the organization of resistance in all occupied countries. Only after this mission was completed were they free to attempt rescuing, via the underground in partisan territory, the million and a quarter Jews still believed to be alive in Rumania, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

The parachutists, among them Hannah, took off on their mission from Brindisi, Italy, on March 13, 1944, and were dropped into Yugoslavia. Reuven Dafne, a fellow-parachutist whose account appears in this volume, said during a conversation: 'We parachutists were not supermen—nor superwomen. Supermen exist

only on television. We were small, frail, inexperienced romantic people with all the shortcomings of the average person. None of us was unique—excepting perhaps Hannah. She was different . . . a spiritual girl guided almost by mysticism. Perhaps one can say she had *charisma* . . . She was fearless, dauntless, stubborn. Despite her extraordinary intelligence and prescience, she was a kind of tomboy—a poet-tomboy—which sounds rather odd, I know. A girl who dreamed of being a heroine—and who was a heroine.'

Dafne parted from Hannah on June 9, 1944, at a village near the Hungarian border, just before she crossed into Nazi-occupied territory. 'When we said goodbye she pressed a piece of paper into my hand saying, "If I don't return, give this to our people." I was amazed by her attitude. It was so unlike her. I looked at the piece of paper and was even more surprised. At a time like that she had written a poem. I had had no idea she even wrote poetry. I almost threw it away. It was *Blessed is the Match*, the poem every Israeli, young or old, can now recite from memory.'

MARTA COHN

Memories of Hannah's Childhood

Catherine Senesh

The idea of chronicling my memories concerning Hannah—not for the sake of public acclaim, but merely to have a permanent record—has been haunting me for years, sometimes vaguely, sometimes acutely. Whether what she did was the consequence of circumstances, early environment, or a specific feeling of mission, she herself answers in her diary and other writings. There were, however, certain events in her richly endowed and tragically curtailed life to which I was the most intimate witness, and thus it is probably right that I should record them.

From earliest childhood Hannah's environment was warm and cheerful. With her brother, George, a year her senior, the question of a playmate was completely solved, and the gay, cheerful nursery, filled with joyous laughter, was not only their domain, but a wellspring of happiness for my husband and myself, and for 'Fini Mama'—my mother—who lived with us. Hannah's father was an author and playwright. He used to work mainly in the evening and often late into the night, and because of this, as well as because of a serious heart condition caused by an illness suffered in early youth, he would stay in bed most of the morning. Thus, unless rehearsals or the heat of work drove him to bed at dawn, the children were part of his morning routine. They would sit on his bed while he bantered with them and told them a wealth of stories created solely for their pleasure.

Foreseeing that his sick heart would take him from us at an early age, my husband knowingly attempted to provide the children with as many rich and happy memories as possible. There were all sorts of excursions, visits to the amusement park and the delightful Budapest Zoo, and innumerable 'story-telling' after-

noons arranged in our home for the entertainment of the children and their friends. But all this ended cruelly and suddenly in May of 1927, when a heart attack, suffered in his sleep, snatched their father from them. He was thirty-three.

A few days earlier my husband had risen very early, anxious to get to work on a half-finished play which was giving him trouble. I watched him in the mirror opposite my bed as he knotted his tie, so completely immersed in thought that he did not, consciously, see himself. I happily observed how well he looked, tanned from a recent holiday at Lake Balaton. Suddenly he said, 'You know, I was just thinking—I could end my life now. I've attained everything a Jewish writer possibly can in Hungary. I'm a respected columnist on the foremost newspaper,* my plays are performed at the Comedy with casts of my own choosing . . . the ink barely has time to dry before my work is in print. What more can there be? The gates of the National Theatre will never be open to a Jewish writer; but even if I had a choice, I think my plays are really far better suited to the Comedy Theatre. So what more can happen? Success abroad? Films? Money? I've had it all. Really, I could calmly go now.'

This was not the first time he had talked of death, and there are many posthumous poems that bear witness to a mood of resignation which—who knows how often?—engulfed him. But outwardly he seemed unchanged, his writing invariably filled with unstinted wit and humour.

Forcing back tears I asked, 'And don't you even think of us? Of what would become of us without you?'

'Naturally, that's the painful part,' he answered. 'But I entrust the children to you with complete confidence. I know they'll be in the best of hands.' (Had he but guessed!) He ended the grimly serious conversation with a humorous remark, and went to his study. A few days later the tragedy occurred. George was seven, Hannah barely six.

While their father was alive the children didn't see any of his plays. After all, they were written for adults. But after his death I took them to see those still running, to revivals, and to per-

* Bela Senesh wrote a popular humorous column in the Sunday magazine section of *Pesti Hirlap*, a paper with a circulation of 100,000.

formances of posthumous comedies, so they could retain some memory of their father's theatrical success. However, this actually proved to be unnecessary, since they heard about the plays—still very much alive in people's memories—wherever they went. Thus they not only guarded his memory with profound love, but were also enormously proud of him.

In early childhood George and Hannah heard little about religion and Jewishness. Although we considered ourselves good, steadfast Jews, we did not feel it important to observe the outer formalities of religion. My husband's creed, his guiding principle, was humanism, and he worshipped at its altar by deed, the written word, and in speech. Thus, it was at school that the children were versed in the foundations of religion and religious life. From the very beginning Hannah participated in all Jewish movements, but then she was in the vanguard of all school activities. Despite the great loss of an outstanding father—which undoubtedly affected her profoundly—Hannah's childhood was varied and happy. She completed the four elementary grades of school without the slightest effort, as she later completed the higher ones, and her teacher wrote a warm, friendly recommending letter attesting to her qualities and abilities, stressing her excellence in composition and poetry, which (they said) reminded one of her father's talents.

At that particular time the new quarters of an important Protestant girls' school was being completed in the immediate vicinity of our house, which, after a great many years of strict segregation, opened its doors to Catholic and Jewish pupils. There was, however, the stipulation that in this denominational school those of Christian faiths other than Protestant had to pay double the normal tuition fees, the Jewish students treble. Nonetheless, I decided to enrol Hannah.

At the end of the first year, when she brought home her usual outstanding report, richly annotated with the praise of her teachers, I felt the moral issue of discrimination—quite apart from the financial burden—to be intolerable. I called on the principal and said that whereas in any other school Hannah would have been awarded a scholarship, in this one I was paying a three-fold tuition fee. Because of this, regardless of how much I valued the high standards of the school, I said I felt compelled to enrol elsewhere—whereupon the teacher Hannah loved more

than any other of her 'favourite' teachers said, 'No, no, we won't allow her to leave. She is our finest student and sets an example to the entire school. There has never been a precedent, but please submit a written request stating your point of view, and we'll bring it up at our next meeting.'

Considering that, according to the rules formulated by the school's founders, only Protestant girls were permitted to pay the minimum fee, it was some satisfaction—though not very much—that thereafter Hannah's tuition fees were to be the same as those of the Catholic girls. But whenever the teachers were not restricted by constraining rules they demonstrated their recognition of her abilities by awarding her prizes for the various scholastic competitions.

At home she was completely involved, and obviously happy, interested in everything that concerned the family. She was considerate, gentle, conscientious, responsible. She managed her time amazingly well, making use of every moment. When she came home from school she spent the half-hour before lunch at her desk finishing the day's homework, and apart from that I rarely saw her study. Instead, she coached others. From the age of eleven on she always had pupils.

Was Hannah pretty? At first glance, no. But if one scrutinized her and knew her well, one discovered a winning appeal, and sensed great attraction. Her face was dominated by large, expressive eyes, which mirrored her intelligence; at times they were green, at times blue-green. Her wide forehead was framed by soft, wavy hair; her face was attractively oval, her smile charming, her figure excellent, her manner, behaviour, personality and character in general, appealing. When she spoke she was listened to attentively.

Until the age of seventeen Hannah enjoyed fully the delights, pleasures and amusements of youth, and then her diary speaks most eloquently of the radical change of direction in her life. She acquainted me only gradually, over a period of months, with her thoughts, and finally with her plans for future emigration to Palestine. At first I was strongly opposed to her decision, but her many intelligent and convincing arguments weakened my objections. Once she said that even if she had not happened to be born a Jew she would still be on the side of the Jews because one must help, by all possible means, a people who were

being treated so unjustly now, and who had been abused so miserably throughout history. On another occasion, when I asked what had become of her ambition to be a professional writer (considering one had but one mother tongue) she answered, 'That question is dwarfed by present burning problems.' Finally she tackled me with this statement, 'Mother, if you don't agree to my going, of course I won't go. But I want you to know I feel miserable in this environment, and don't wish to live in it.'

She became totally immersed in Zionism and the problem of emigration to Palestine. She wrote repeatedly to the Agricultural School at Nahalal in Palestine concerning admission, went often to the Maccabee Society, diligently studied Hebrew, and read a tremendous number of books—almost all concerning Zionist and Jewish matters. Though she was physically still with me, she was actually already living in another world. Outwardly she appeared controlled, as always, but anyone close to her could sense the excitement and stirrings within her. Among her circle of friends many were influenced by her and also joined the Zionist Movement.

Here I must mention a school incident that occurred in 1937 when she was in the 7th Form, and which undoubtedly precipitated matters. According to tradition, one of the offices in the school's Literary Society was generally held by a 7th-Form pupil. As expected, the 7th Form elected Hannah to the post. The 8th Form, however, under the influence of the existing political climate, considered only one factor of any real importance: a Jewish student could not hold office. Thus, at the very first meeting she attended, Hannah was greeted by the surprising fact that a new election was scheduled for the office to which she had been duly elected. Apparently calm and controlled, she sat through the meeting, and when one of her classmates was elected, and tearfully approached Hannah declaring she would not accept the appointment because she knew she was not deserving of it, Hannah said, 'Accept it calmly, and don't think for an instant that I begrudge it to you. Not at all. If you don't accept it, someone else will. After all, it has nothing to do with whether Hannah Senesh or Maria X is more capable of fulfilling the assignment, but whether the person is a Jew or a Gentile.'

Her form mistress vehemently condemned the behaviour of the 8th Form. But obviously she could do nothing about the decision of the self-governing student body. 'I hope, Hannah, you'll continue to participate in the activities of the Literary Society, despite what has happened,' she said. 'How can you imagine such a thing,' Hannah responded. 'Naturally I can't possibly work with the members of the 8th Form.'

When she told me of the incident I realized how deeply hurt she had been by the whole affair, though she never spoke of it again.

During the Easter holiday of 1939 we went to visit George, who was studying in France. Hannah was delighted to learn that he had also become a dedicated Zionist. I watched them indulgently as they discussed and planned the future with profound, youthful zeal, eyes sparkling. They decided Hannah would emigrate within a few months, and that George would follow when his studies were completed. Their great concern was for me to join them. Would we ever again sit together like this, I wondered, the three of us? Where . . . when . . . ?

After graduating *summa cum laude*, Hannah said goodbye to the school, and to all her teachers. By then her plans were general knowledge, but the teachers were reluctant to accept her decision to emigrate. Each in turn tried to prevail upon me to prevent her from taking this step, emphasizing that they would positively guarantee her acceptance by the university. (During those years the *numerus clausus*, which restricted the number of Jewish students permitted to enter university, was observed with increasing strictness.) When I later related all this to Hannah she said, 'Perhaps I ought to be impressed that in view of graduating *summa cum laude*, and with a plethora of recommendations from teachers and friends, I can get into the university, while a Gentile who just barely squeezed through the exams can sail in! Besides, are they really incapable of understanding that I don't want to be just a student, that I have plans, dreams, ambitions, and that the road to their fulfilment would only be barred to me here?'

When I brought up the most disputed question between us—that if she must go to Palestine, why to agricultural school, why