



Jewish Legion Centenary

by Sara Beanlands



Editor's note: Sara Beanlands was the keynote speaker during a ceremony "Commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Jewish Legion" held at Fort Edward, Windsor, Nova Scotia, Sunday, 21 September 2018. At the ceremony, she received many acclamations for her tireless work in promoting the history of the Legion and for progressing work to establish a memorial to the Legion.

This is a special day. It is the first day in 100 years we gather on the historic slopes of Fort Edward in memory of the Jewish Legion. We have come from different places, with different experiences, and with different reasons. And in this way, we are not unlike those young Jewish men, who arrived in Windsor, Nova Scotia, in 1918. They were strangers – to each other and to the small rural town in which they found themselves. Some were older and politically astute, such as Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, who would go on to become the second President of the State of Israel, while others were merely boys, such as Philip Petrovsky of Montreal, who was only 16 years old when he became a soldier at Camp Fort Edward – but all were sent to fight a war with little military experience and without a nation to call their own.

Among them, a leader emerged. An idealistic young man with a profound vision and the kind of self-assurance necessary to change the course of history. His name was David Ben-Gurion. Becoming a soldier at Fort Edward was a defining moment in the life of a man who would, indeed, change the world. We've had the distinct pleasure to hear Robert Dimock recite the prose of the elderly, yet vibrant, Jewish statesman: "In Windsor, one of the great dreams of my life ... became a reality" – historic words that are commemorated on the new interpretive panel Parks Canada will put here at Fort Edward National Historic Site.

As Ben-Gurion, the soldier, moved from Private to Corporal, the Jewish recruits mobilized and banded together. And, by the time they sailed overseas, had united to become the 39th Battalion Royal Fusiliers – part of the celebrated Jewish Legion. Here, on the grassy hill behind me they created a national marching army; the sons of Israel and, lest we forget, the sons of Jewish communities all over North America. While they fought with courage, this is more than a military story. Jewish enclaves across the United States and Canada fused behind them, forever changing the North American experience, and

ultimately, the Jewish world. As Mr. Robert Levin, the grandson of Philip Petrovsky, recently wrote “It is always important for those of us born after the birth of Israel to remember that for 1900 years, the Jewish people were stateless and defenseless. These brave men, just 100 years ago, decided to change that equation forever. We are in their debt for their efforts.” There is an incredible photograph of his grandfather Philip, with his bicycle, captured on the new Parks Canada panel, which I hope you will all take a moment to view.

This is a special day. Today we remember the 39th Battalion and all those who served with the Jewish Legion, just as we remember the power and responsibility of extraordinary leadership. Today we remember the spirit and generosity of the Town of Windsor, and today we are grateful to be in the presence of Bernard Alter, whose father Sol trained with the 39th, and his sister Iska, of Jim Bremner, grandson of Major W.F.D. Bremner, Second in Command and who led the troops into the fires at Castle Frederick, of the Dimock brothers, sons of Mayor Dimock, to whom Ben-Gurion wrote his remarkable letter. They are all with us – here today – at Fort Edward. What a gift this is, and I hope you all have a chance to talk, share stories and get to know each other on this very special day. Like the Mi’kmaq, Acadian settlers, British and Canadian soldiers, and the generations of hardworking families of Windsor, the Jewish Legion is part of our collective past and the rich history of Fort Edward National Historic site. In this moment, we honour this past, and in this moment, we make history ourselves.

The Jewish Legion Centennial Society was formed in 2017 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Training of the Jewish Legion in Windsor and to establish a permanent memorial to mark the significance of this historic event at Fort Edward. Indeed, there is no place more fitting, in all North America, to commemorate the Jewish Legion. This ceremony represents the first of our dreams to become a reality – though not as grand as Ben-Gurion’s – we did work very hard to create a memorable experience. We are also working towards our second goal and have collaborated with the Town of Windsor, and the talented Talbot Sweetapple of MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects Ltd., to begin design work on the proposed memorial, that will transform the area of the existing swimming pool. While these designs may evolve over time, our objective is to create a meaningful space where people can reflect upon, honour and remember the past – a place of memory for the Jewish Legion and for all those who have sacrificed to make this world a better place in which to live. We are grateful to the Town of Windsor, the support of our partners and friends, like the Atlantic Jewish Council, the West Hants Historical Society, Parks Canada and others – and to all of you for coming here today. If you would like to support this project, in any way, please do let us know.

Thank you so very much.

Sara Beanlands is the Principal and Senior Archaeologist, Boreas Heritage Consulting. She was one of the originators and leaders of the project to establish a memorial at Windsor, NS, to the Jewish Legion. This work is the sole opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of the Canadian Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police or the Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia. The author may be contacted by email at: RUSINovaScotia@gmail.com.

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