

THE 'JEWISH PILOT' WHO BOMBED BE'ER-SHEVA

The tragedy of the aerial bombing of the Be'er-Sheva railway station on 14-15 January 1917
its aftermath and the airmen involved

by Elimor Makevet

THE EPISODE THAT LAUNCHED the historical research summarized in this article had been related by way of oral narrative by a witness nearly 50 years after events took place. This account sparked the author's interest because it linked a tragic event in the annals of the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine in World War One with a startling sequel, again from the viewpoint of the Jewish residents of Palestine at that time. Despite its scant detail, the witness's account reiterated the essence of the story which circulated within the Yishuv in the wake of actual events, and lent firsthand credibility to an attendant riddle of identification that remained unsolved. Re-examining these events with the aid of sources and databases currently available to the modern researcher has allowed the story to be retold in terms of historical facts and a solution to be proposed for the enigma that it perpetuated in collective memory. The subsequent course of the lives of those airmen involved, directly and indirectly, is also charted herein as part of the historical investigation, thus rendering this new record more complete in detail and perspective.

Shamai Altschuler's Story



*Shamai Altschuler in his youth.
:Yitzhak Mizel*

In 1917 Shamai Altschuler, a 28-year old agriculturist and foreman from the Jewish colony of Rehovot, was working for the Turkish army as a civilian employee running supply columns to southern Palestine. As an Ottoman subject Shamai had duly enlisted in the army in 1912 and having completed his duration of service, was now assigned this relatively safe position, but was not assured of being able to retain it. Married with a child, he was also hard pressed to cope with the harsh conditions

suffered by the general civilian population of Palestine during the war, especially the acute shortage of food.¹

By early 1917 the British had driven the Turks out of the Sinai Peninsula, and in order to defend southern Palestine against further British advance the Turks, aided by German and Austro-Hungarian expeditionary units, consolidated a frontline stretching between Gaza and Beersheba. Some time before the First Battle of Gaza (which opened on 26 March 1917) Shamai was fortuitously appointed manager of the wagon transport for the 'Austrian regiment' as per his memoirs – the details he provided point specifically to the Austro-Hungarian mountain artillery division (*Gebirgshaubitzzdivision*) equipped with 100mm Howitzers,² a unit destined to play a decisive role in the First Battle when its guns were employed with devastating effect to repel British forces at Gaza.³ This new responsibility saw Shamai rewarded with a plentiful allotment of food supplies from the Austro-Hungarians, keeping his family well catered for.

Aside from his vivid recollections of transporting ammunition from Beersheba by mule-drawn wagons for the



An Austro-Hungarian M10 (100mm) Howitzer in action among the cactus hedges of Gaza. :Lib of Congress 'WWI in Palestine and the Sinai'

Howitzers at the height of the First Battle of Gaza, Shamai also reminisced about two interrelated events occurring in that period as follows:

And so it happened, on Passover eve, that fifteen Jewish workers were to go north to their homes by train from Beersheba. They were craftsmen. They waited for the train. Since a wagon stood off to the side, on a siding, and Beersheba is cold at night, they all went into this wagon and warmed up together. An English aeroplane came over and got a bomb 'right inside' this wagon, and everyone was killed. Not a month had gone by, and not far from my column an aeroplane was shot down near the border. We ran and got the pilot. He was none other than Lord Sashin (sic)⁴, a Jew. There was rejoicing in the town. Among other things, he asked: 'what damage have I done two weeks ago when I bombed the railway?' He had assumed that if a wagon was on the siding, surely it must be carrying ammunition. We told him: 'some fine damage, you have killed fifteen Jews'. It was a terrible tragedy.⁵

This episode, recounted by Shamai as a witness and as an active participant, revolves around an encounter with a captured British pilot which led to a dreadful discovery. Naturally it gives rise to a host of questions. Was it indeed a Jewish pilot who had inadvertently caused the death of the Jewish workers occupying the railway wagon? Who was the captured British pilot who had been informed of the tragedy when being held at Beersheba? Had he bombed the Beersheba railway station that night? These questions and others aim in such cases to discern and ascertain the 'facts' independently of the ensuing 'narrative', which over time tends to prevail and preclude a re-evaluation of its origins. Acknowledging that the meeting with the captured pilot had taken place as Altschuler reported lays the basis for revisiting the pertinent historical events in an attempt to study the facts of the case and to reconcile them, where necessary, with the story that evolved in their wake.

Historical Background

The city of Be'er-Sheva, as its Biblical name is spelled in transliteration from Hebrew, is known in present-day Israel as the capital of the Negev, which is the desert region