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The Makings of History / Beyond the grave

By **Tom Segev**
Salomon lost

The Israel Defense Forces' missing persons unit is searching for the remains of Alexander Rubowitz, a teenage member of the pre-state Lehi underground militia who was murdered in 1947, and has even enlisted the help of a private investigations firm in New York. Two unit members attended a press conference on the matter this week at the Menachem Begin Heritage Center in Jerusalem. An American detective, Steve Rambam, claimed there is a chance that Rubowitz's remains will be found in Wadi Kelt east of Jerusalem, in the West Bank.

It was an interesting event. Although nothing historically new was revealed, at a time when Likud is preparing to form a government, it once again illustrated the centrality of history in Israeli political discourse.

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approximately 16 years old, Rubowitz was arrested. It was the evening of May 6, 1947 and he was in the process of distributing Lehi flyers in Jerusalem's Rehavia neighborhood. The members of the British counter-terror unit who arrested him drove him toward Jericho. One of them, Roy Farran, beat Rubowitz to death with a rock, and his body was never discovered.

The case kicked up a storm. Farran was court-martialed, acquitted, and returned to England. Lehi members sent him a letter bomb, which killed his brother. Farran emigrated to Canada where he entered politics; late in life he served as solicitor general of the state of Alberta. He died about three years ago. Farran always denied killing Rubowitz, but official British documents that were unsealed five years ago strengthen the suspicions against him.

Initially, Rubowitz was only included in the heroic pantheon of the right-wing terrorist groups Etzel and Lehi. But over time, Israeli cultural memory grew to include individuals who did not operate under the auspices of the Labor Movement, at which point Rubowitz's name went up on a memorial plaque, next to the site of his arrest. There is also a street in Jerusalem named after him.

The Rubowitz affair is quite well known; the unsealing of the British papers documenting the case was covered in a Haaretz article by a new book on Rubowitz's murder has just come out ("Major Farran's Hat"), written by the well-known British historian David Cesarani, and Canadian Television CBC is making a film about the case. The main element keeping Rubowitz's case alive is the question mark that continues to hover over it: Where is the body? As long as it isn't found, Rubowitz is officially considered missing.

Several months ago, a veteran of the Revisionist Movement who lives in the United States contacted Pallorium Inc., the investigative services firm owned by Steve Rambam, a former member of the Betar youth movement, and asked him to investigate Rubowitz's murder. The man has since run out of money, but several Betar loyalists in Israel agreed to bankroll the continued investigation. Rambam says he makes do with covering his expenses.

At a press conference he convened in Jerusalem this week, Rambam claimed to have a lead on the body's burial site. He said he is working together with the IDF, but refused to go into details.

This story resembles the search for the body of Avshalom Feinberg, of the Nili underground organization working with the British against the Turks in World War II, which was found after the Six-Day War with the help of a few elderly Bedouin in Sinai. As with the Feinberg case, the Rubowitz case also has a political aspect to it. According to Rambam, he has managed to track down several of Farran's associates, and the law allows for trying them as war criminals. Some of his Israeli associates think such a move could "balance out," or even thwart, the attempts made in Britain, among other places, to try Israeli officers for suspected war crimes, including torture of Palestinian terrorists.

Historical comparisons are a dangerous business. Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir fought their entire lives against the equation of the terror sowed by their organizations with Palestinian terrorism. Farran's career naturally recalls that of former Likud MK Ehud Yatom, of the Bus 300 affair: Just like the Canadian politician, he, too, killed his terrorist with a rock.

In the mid-1980s, the ultra-Orthodox rabbi Baruch Shimon Salomon used to demonstrate outside the Tchelet movie theater in Petah Tikva on Friday nights, to protest the screening of films on Sabbath eve. Salomon, the city's chief rabbi, was highly knowledgeable and was among the sticklers. He obeyed the rulings of Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, leader of the non-Hasidic Lithuanian stream of ultra-Orthodoxy. His protest became a phenomenon; his persistence aroused my curiosity. As the first anniversary of his weekly protest approached, I offered to accompany him, to write an article in the weekly publication Koteret Rashtit. Salomon said he could not allow it, because I would be coming there in my work capacity, which would desecrate the Sabbath. Alternatively, he proposed that I spend Shabbat at his home, so that I would be able to go with him to the demonstration. The things I do for my paper, I thought to myself, and bought a bouquet of flowers for the rabbi's wife. I wound up having a great time; I learned a lot. The rabbi and his family treated me the way the boy Eliot and his parents treated E.T. the extra-terrestrial being, and similarly

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know that his parents treated him like a child, not a young man, and simply went out of their way to make my stay in their home pleasant. Salomon lost: Tchelet Cinema went on showing movies on Friday nights. Two weeks ago marked the 25th anniversary of his first demonstration. He passed away this week.

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