

Ellen Tulchinsky and Laura Tulchinsky

**Letters from a Young Zionist:
The Evolution of a Historian**

For as long as we can remember, our dad, Jerry, took every opportunity to reminisce about the year he spent in Israel as a nineteen-year-old in 1952–1953. He lit up when he reflected on his experiences. His stories, memories, and emotions from that time were woven into our lives as we grew up, playing a large role in connecting us and our brother Steve, ז"ל, to Israel from a very young age.

Our dad, born in 1933, grew up in the small, close-knit Jewish community of Brantford, Ontario. His parents were both deeply committed Zionists. His father had immigrated to Canada from Tiraspol, Russia via Romania, in the early 1920s, having originally intended to go to Palestine. His mother devoted many years of her life to volunteer work with Hadassah WIZO. Their love of Israel shaped the household in which he grew up. It was passed down to their four children, particularly to our dad and his younger brother, Ted.

Long before gap years between high school and university became common practice, our dad delayed university studies, and decided to attend the Machon Le'Madrichei Chutz L'Aretz (Machon), a year-long leadership institute in Jerusalem for young Jews from around the world. This decision grew naturally out of years of involvement in Canadian Young Judaea (YJ), a Zionist youth movement, as a camper, camp counselor, and then a *madrich* (leader). He was heavily involved in Brantford's YJ chapter and attended meetups across Ontario, too.

Over the course of that year, he and his fellow *machonniks*, including friends from YJ in Canada, lived and studied together. They traveled widely throughout Israel from north to south, and spent time living, working, and studying on kibbutzim, including Tel Yitzhak and HaSolelim. It is no exaggeration to say that the experience profoundly changed our dad's life, also shaping his academic future in the years that followed.

Our dad cherished being in Israel, a country barely four years old, where he interacted with Zionist peers from around the world, met extended family for the first time, studied Jewish history, and learned modern Hebrew. He may not yet have been a historian, but he was already instinctively a chronicler and a record keeper. He began keeping a diary from the moment he set sail from New York, later switching to letters when the Machon began, and explicitly asked his family to preserve them. "I would appreciate your keeping all my letters," he wrote in October 1952, "as I would appreciate reading them again when I come back. They will be valuable to me in future years."

We feel fortunate that our dad had the foresight not only to write so many poignant and insightful letters during his year abroad, but also to ask his mother to save them. They are his first personal archive. He also took beautiful black-and-white snapshots, which we have sprinkled throughout this essay. Together, the letters, snapshots, and a later interview we conducted with him form a treasure trove of primary

sources, offering a vivid window into his year in Israel and his path to becoming a historian. After retiring from the Department of History at Queen's University, he donated his papers, including all his Israel material, to Queen's University Archives, preserving them and making them accessible to future researchers.¹

The year 2027 will mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of our dad's participation in the Machon. In this post-October 7 world, where questions about Zionism, Jewish identity, and Israel's place in the world are especially urgent, we felt it was the right time to revisit these letters. His keen observations and the questions he raised are more relevant than ever. While this essay can capture only a small flavour of everything he expressed in his letters home, we believe it is important to share them.²

Our dad's decision to go to Israel in 1952 meant missing several important milestones and giving up a significant opportunity: his high school graduation at Brantford Collegiate, the honour of serving as class valedictorian, and a full scholarship to Queen's University. But he knew that going on the Machon was the right decision before he left and that postsecondary studies could wait. "I know that I'm glad I came," he wrote in his first letter home on September 18, 1952, "even though it meant giving up a lot. It was no mistake on my part."



It was an exciting journey. The local newspaper, the *Brantford Expositor* even featured a short article about our dad's adventure, along with a photo, as did the *Judaean*, the newspaper from Canadian Young Judea. He traveled from Canada to the US to meet the ship, the SS Nassau, setting sail from New York. The ship passed Gibraltar, Tangier, Algeria, Sicily, and Crete before finally docking at Haifa. The voyage took two weeks. "It was a wonderful trip," he wrote in September 1952, "with terrific food such as I have never eaten." When the Port of Haifa finally came into sight and he spotted Israeli naval vessels flying the Star of David, he observed with pride: "It made me feel pretty good to see a Jewish ship, with Jewish sailors and a Jewish flag flying over them."

Brantford Expositor, Saturday, August 30, 1952.

Source: Queen's University Archives, 5023.1, Box 6, File 25



Jerry, on the far right, with other machonniks aboard the SS Nassau



Arriving at the Port of Haifa



Jerry's first telegram home after arrival in Israel, September 17, 1952

While our dad was clearly excited to get to Israel after so much anticipation and such a long journey, the realities of life in the new country quickly came into focus upon his arrival. In an interview we recorded with him in 2016, he recounted: "We went with stars in our eyes, but pretty quickly got to see reality...." He went on to describe tough living conditions and difficult times at the end of the British Mandate, through the War of Independence, and into the early 1950s. There was a shortage of food, tremendous loss of life, and destruction of buildings and property. Veteran Israelis had been through tough times.

Soon after arriving in the country, our dad connected with some family for the first time, relatives who had fled Europe before the Holocaust. He visited often with an uncle and his wife and young daughter in Tel Aviv. Another relative, a cousin on his father's side, was sick with rheumatism, living in an immigrant camp, and struggling financially. Our dad made a note of who needed food parcels, and relayed that information back to his mother, who then shipped care packages from Canada. She sent clothing, too, for a cousin's young son.

Despite this difficult, eye-opening introduction to Israel and to some family struggles, our dad's earliest impressions of the country were favourable, as he wrote in September 1952: "Though I've been here only a week I think Israel's a wonderful country. When I ride by huge stretches of bleached sand and then suddenly see an orange grove surrounded with tall evergreens spring out of sand and see fields of vegetables I can appreciate the effort and money and hard labour that went into those fields."

Once he arrived in Jerusalem, he happily settled into the Machon's home base, noting in September 1952: "Our place in Jerusalem is beautiful. The machon building and one of the dormitory buildings are in one spot and the place where about half the kids, myself included, is in another place about five minutes away from the machon. This is the so-called Arab Mansion. It is very nice. We have lots of room and comfortable beds of straw mattresses. There are two other guys in my room which has two balconies." The building even had a music and reading room downstairs from the dorm, with magazines, newspapers, a radio, record player, and many classical records.



Jerusalem Hills

As far as his new urban surroundings were concerned, our dad was captivated by the beauty of Jerusalem, “a city that I think everyone must inevitably love or at least be fascinated by,” he wrote in late September 1952. “There is something ‘in the air’ here.... No one can really capture it and write it down on paper.” He enjoyed the outskirts of the city, too. In late October 1952, he observed, “the hills around Jerusalem are really fascinating. Though they aren’t beautiful from the standpoint of many trees, I think they’ve more beauty to them than anything else I’ve seen. Somebody said that the hills seem to skip around Jerusalem and that’s one way of describing them.”

The Tower of David,
Jerusalem



Jerry (far left), on *tiyul* with other *machonniks*

The Machon was designed to train a generation of diaspora youth leaders through immersive Hebrew study, lectures, and travel, and from everything our dad describes, the institute lived up to its promise. The coursework was intensive, starting out in September with eighteen hours of Hebrew instruction per week. The hard work paid off. By November 1952 he noted: “I find that the language is fairly easy though I must continually review to keep it at my fingertips. It has depth, preciseness and beauty and if spoken well it is a beautiful language to hear.”

Apart from studying Hebrew, the *machonniks*, hailing from Europe, North and South America, and South Africa, attended lectures on Jewish history and thought, studied the geography of Israel, and embarked on many *tiyulim* (field trips) that were meant to introduce them to the young state. It’s amazing how much of the country they covered in one year. They visited Kibbutz Yavne, just east of Ashdod, for Sukkot, hiked nine miles around Jerusalem past abandoned Arab villages toward Mount Herzl, and walked through the ruins of Ramat Rachel, the southern kibbutz that, he noted, had been destroyed and rebuilt four times since 1925.

Our dad excitedly described one of the upcoming *tiyulim* to his parents in early November 1952: “So as you see it’s a pretty extensive tour but by no means to be confused with a tour in the usual sense of the word. We travel on foot



Jerry on *tiyul*



Kibbutz Yad Mordechai

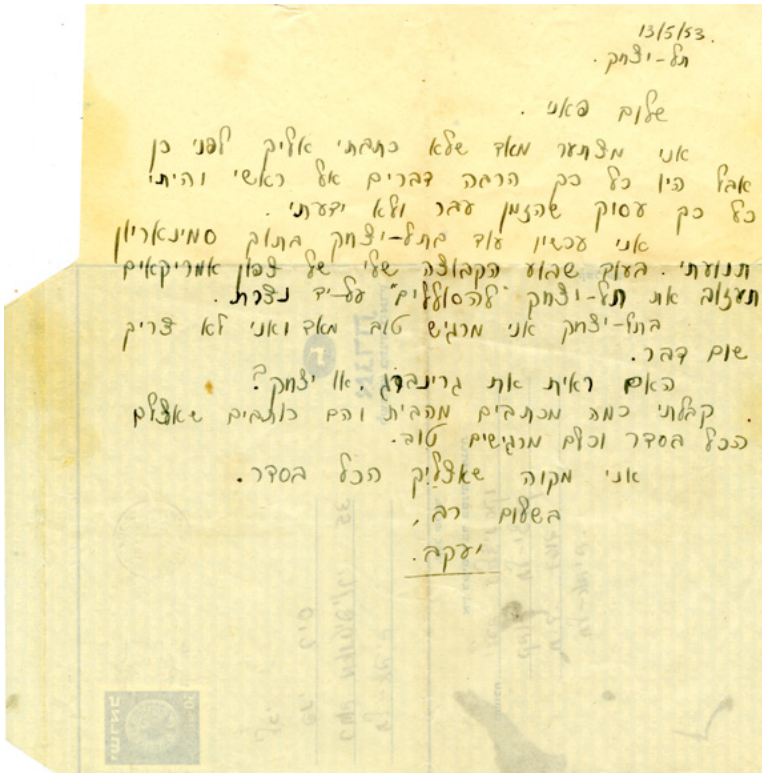
Kibbutz Yad Mordechai, named for Mordechai Anielewicz, the leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, its old water tower still riddled with shell holes.

Over the course of that year at the Machon, our dad changed and grew in fundamental ways, reflected in the personal, linguistic, and intellectual aspects of his letters. By late November 1952, he moved into a room with South American and Dutch students, writing home that they would have to converse in Hebrew, “the only common medium.” His Hebrew progressed steadily and he continued to gain confidence and take pride in his growing language skills. At a certain point in the year, he began putting his return address in Hebrew on the blue aerogrammes and referred to himself by his Hebrew name, Yaakov. He even penned letters to his father in “somewhat stilted Hebrew.”

and in trucks and will sleep in settlements. It should really be terrific and I am looking forward to it very much.” The four-day *tiyul* through the northern Negev, took them first from Ein Karem, “a picturesque little village set on the side of one of the terraced hills,” through the Judae-an hills, south to Be’er Sheva, and on to kibbutzim near the Egyptian border. Kibbutz Negba, where defenders had lived underground for weeks rather than surrender during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, and



One of Jerry's first letters in Hebrew



Letter from Jerry, May 13, 1953, in Hebrew

The *machonniks* spent quite a lot of time outside of their Jerusalem headquarters, including on kibbutzim where our dad worked all kinds of jobs. In the *refet* (cowshed) on Tel Yitzhak, where he helped to deliver a baby calf, he joked in April 1953: "After a few minutes he was standing up and breathing. Pretty soon I'll get my midwife's papers." He also worked in the fields gathering greens for the cows and had shifts serving meals in the dining hall.



Jerry at work on Kibbutz Tel Yitzhak



Kibbutz Tel Yitzhak



Jerry, at top right, on Kibbutz Tel Yitzhak

While the hands-on agricultural work on the kibbutz gave him a physical connection to the land, the Machon's library, concert nights, and political debates broadened his intellectual horizons. Our dad recounted reading *Ahad Ha'am* on Spiritual Zionism, attending lectures on the contemporary Israeli economy, and even getting a tour at the Jerusalem Post office.

In November 1952, he joined the national mourning after President Chaim Weizmann's death, noting: "The whole machon went to Rehovoth to pass in front of the coffin and, believe me, it was very impressive. Thousands of people from all over

the country were there." They observed and took part in significant historical moments in the young State of Israel. His feelings about these experiences come through vividly in his letters, opening a window into a world often described from a distance.



Funeral of Israel's first president, Chaim Weizmann

In late November 1952, he wrote a passage that now feels prophetic, given that he later became a historian of Canadian Jewry: "History has always been a fascinating subject for me but the Jewish History we are now studying

has no comparison, in what I have so far studied, in interest and power. I know that I never once in my life was ashamed that I was a Jew and now that I have read a little and heard these terrific lectures on Jewish History here at the machon, I am more than ever proud of my Jewishness."

In late spring 1953, our dad was preparing his return to Canada for later that summer. Originally, he planned to take a ship across the Atlantic but noted in a June 1953 letter that "this business of my coming home on the Queen Mary now is off. We cannot get passage because of the Coronation [Queen Elizabeth II] backlog in England."

By July 1953, our dad was wrapping up his time on the Machon with visits to family and a final *tiyul* to the Western Galil. He had also arranged an alternate route for his journey



Jerry in Israel, exact location unknown

home and set up a trip with friends through Europe on the way back to Canada, with stops including Rome, Florence, Paris, and Brussels. On the eve of his departure, August 8, 1953, he reflected: "Well it's pretty hard to put into words what I feel right now.... Up to the last minute I am seeing and learning new things here. Each time I move somewhere something else comes up that I didn't know before."

Our dad returned from Israel in September 1953 a changed person. Years later, after earning a PhD in history from the University of Toronto, and spending several years teaching Canadian economic history, he changed course and shifted to teaching and writing about Jewish history. Ultimately, he became one of the country's leading scholars of Canadian Jewry, publishing books and articles on Jewish life in Canada. In hindsight, that year at the Machon in Israel was the catalyst that set him on his academic path. He articulated it himself in December 1952: "I have a growing desire to learn more and more, not only about the Jewish people, but about everything else that I can about many other subjects. I have a thirst for knowledge and now I am sure that I want to attend university if it will teach me more about what I want to learn. I think this year in Israel, I can feel it even now, is giving me a deeper, solider view on life and on Jewish life and Zionism."

Aug. 8 / 53.
Eve of departure.

Dear Mom,

I received your last letter yesterday and it was good to hear from you again. This is my last day in Acre for some time because tomorrow morning at ten six of us are going to Italy.

Well it's pretty hard to put into words what I feel right now. You sensed a lot of it from my previous letters home. So there isn't much more to say now. I'll be able to tell you a lot when I go back to Canada.

Up to the last minute I am seeing and learning new things here. Each time I move somewhere something else comes up that I didn't know before.

People here are caught between the depressing feeling of an austerity-ridden country with half of the people new immigrants and hopes for a brighter future in Israel. When and how it will come no one ventures to say. Some people say that the solution is in raising agricultural production or in building up industry or a bigger bond drive etc.

Any one of them could be right, I don't know, but I know one thing: there must be people here to do the building of the country and those people must be

Jerry's last letter home
from Israel, August 8,
1953

Our dad's letters are also a testament to the archival instinct he began to feel in Israel at the age of nineteen and carried throughout his life. We have recounted how he started a diary and then switched to letters, which he asked his family to keep for him. He also sent packets of *The Jerusalem Post* home to Brantford so his brother, Ted, could read the daily news from Israel. That impulse to preserve the record would define his life's work.

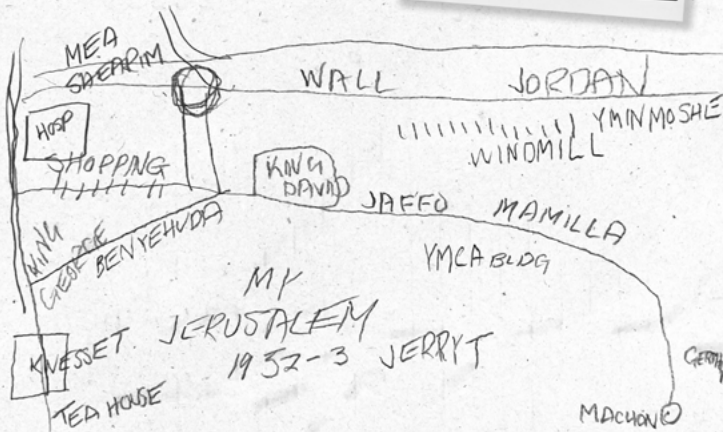
In a conversation we had with him about the Machon in 2017, the last year of his life, our dad took a pencil and paper and drew a simple map of the Jerusalem that still lived in his mind all those years later. He called it "My Jerusalem 1952-3, Jerry T." It included Jaffa Road, the King David Hotel, Ben Yehudah Street, the Montefiore Windmill, and the Machon building, all drawn from memory and love. Laura keeps a copy in her office on the wall right by her computer. She calls it "A Map of My Father's Heart."

Ellen Tulchinsky earned a BA in history from the University of Toronto and an MLIS from The University of Western Ontario. She is a research librarian based in Toronto, Ontario.

Laura Tulchinsky earned a BA in political science from Carleton University and a postgraduate certificate in Journalism from Langara College in Vancouver. She is a communications professional based in Kingston, Ontario.

Jerry's hand drawn map, titled "My Jerusalem," 2017

Jaffa Road, Jerusalem



King David Hotel, Jerusalem



YMCA building, Jerusalem

1

We are grateful to David S. Koffman and Joshua Tapper at *Canadian Jewish Studies* / *Études juives canadiennes* for bringing our dad's letters to light. And thank you to Heather Home, at the Queen's University Archives in Kingston, Ontario, for her thoughtful overview of our dad's collection housed there.

2

All letters referenced in this essay can be found in Queen's University Archives, 5023.1, Box 6, File 2. File title: Correspondence, dates: 1952–1953. All photos published in this essay were taken in 1952–1953; along with the hand-drawn map, "My Jerusalem," they are held in the Tulchinsky family's private collection.