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When Israel won independence, Denver's Rafael Klebe helped make it happen

By CHRIS LEPPEK *IJN Assistant Editor*

In 1948, someone took a picture of a small group of men and women gathered around a table at Kibbutz Be'erot Yitzchak, a religious kibbutz slightly over three kilometers from Gaza.

On Jan. 21, 2008, in preparation for Israel's 60th anniversary, the Israeli daily **Yediot Achronot** reprinted the photograph and invited anyone who knew the identities of the subjects to contact the paper.

"A *chaver* (friend and comrade) sent me the photo," says Rafael Klebe, 87, looking at a reproduced image in his Heather Gardens apartment. "I saw myself immediately.

"I didn't know they were taking a picture at the time," he adds, pointing to the tall dark-haired young man at the far left side of the table.

"Yes, that's me."

When the UN declared Israel's statehood on May 14, 1948, Be'erot Yitzchak was instantly bombarded with Egyptian firepower.

"I heard about the UN vote in the ditches, digging fortifications around the bunkers," says Mr. Klebe, who was 27 at the time. "We were working, working, working, day and night."

The bombings continued for four weeks. Ten days after a shaky truce was established, the Egyptians resumed their bombardment with even fiercer intensity.

"Believe me, I'm not giving you a story to make something big out of Be'erot Yitzchak," says Mr. Klebe, his voice a river of Hebrew, English and his native German. "Still, I think the Egyptian Army was hell bent on destroying our kibbutz."

But the story runs ahead of itself.

Using a motorized wheelchair to artfully maneuver, Mr. Klebe asks whether his guests would like coffee, iced tea or water.

A plate of cookies appears on the table.

"Please," he gestures with his slim fingers, "take as many as you'd like."

Mr. Klebe often refers to a blue notebook filled with photos, clippings and telegrams, not to support his vivid recollections but to touch their significance.

Throughout the three-hour interview, Mr. Klebe's yarmulke remains neatly in place.

Eyes that have witnessed great and agonizing moments in Jewish history never tire.

“I have so much to tell you,” says Mr. Klebe, who has lived in Denver since 1954.

And there is much to learn.

Rafael Fritz Klebe was born in 1921 in Rhina, Germany. He and his seven siblings were raised in an observant household. Rhina, which he describes as “the most religious neighborhood in Germany,” was half Jewish and half Gentile

Rhina had a synagogue, a cemetery that was at least 100 years old, and a large Jewish school.

During the 1920s the town’s economy slowly declined. Jews who used horse carts to sell goods to Christians faced competition from cars, trains and motorcycles.

Rhina’s Jewish population gradually moved away.

“Many Jews left,” says Mr. Klebe, “but my family stayed. We had our house. We were eight children. To leave a place wasn’t easy.

“But even if Hitler hadn’t come to power in 1933, we would eventually have been forced to leave due to the economic situation.”

Mr. Klebe’s father developed heart disease and could no longer work. Some of his sisters were sent to live with relatives.

“Before Hitler, Jews got along with their Gentile neighbors in Rhina,” he emphasizes. “Oh, there were always anti-Semites, but only a few.”

In 1935, at age 14, Mr. Klebe’s education abruptly ended because Nazi law did not permit Jews to attend high school.

“So I went to Frankfurt Am Main to learn a trade,” he says, “but it was very hard to find a position.”

He worked as a shoemaker’s apprentice until a Christian man bought the firm and was forced to fire his Jewish employee. Then he found employment with a Jewish carpenter.

By 1938, the Gestapo routinely deported out-of-work Jews — like Mr. Klebe’s brother — to Buchenwald.

“When he came out of the camp, my brother looked left and right,” he says, imitating the strange motion, “but his eyes were abnormal. He was not the same person.”

In November of 1938, Mr. Klebe lived in a home for boys because he too was jobless.

Early on November 10, he heard commotion as he was riding his bicycle past the Boerneplatz Synagogue in Frankfurt.

“The Nazis were trying to burn the stone walls of the synagogue,” Mr. Klebe says with a suppressed sob of disbelief. “But you can’t burn stone. So they piled the wooden benches together and set them on fire. And they burned that shul.

“The synagogue burned from 11 in the morning until sundown. I watched for hours. Gentiles

watched. The firemen watched.

“This shul had a very beautiful dome,” Mr. Klebe describes with his fingers. “It burned and burned but did not come down. Then at 6 p.m., it just collapsed.

“When that dome fell, it was like” — his hands grab at the air — “it took something out of me. It was the loss of hope.”

It was Kristallnacht.

When Mr. Klebe rode his bicycle back to the boys home, the concierge accosted him. “She yelled at me: ‘Where were you? The SS was here looking for you!’” he says. “She was so angry at me, and I don’t know why.

“So I took my suitcase — I was very poor, I didn’t have much — and left.” He soon found a job at a nursing home.

After Kristallnacht, Jews began lining the streets of Frankfurt desperately trying to obtain visas from the various consulates.

“People were trapped,” Mr. Klebe says. “I knew how bad it was. But I also felt I couldn’t do anything about it.”

Almost as an aside, he mentions that he possessed a US visa because one of his sisters offered to sponsor him in America.

“I didn’t use it,” he says simply.

He explains that by 1939, he had joined a religiously aligned youth organization connecting Jewish kids throughout Europe to Zionism and the dream of Palestine.

In 1938, the SS put Adolf Eichmann in charge of the Office for Jewish Emigration, the sole Nazi agency authorized to issue travel permits to Jews from Austria, Czechoslovakia and, finally, Germany.

For Eichmann, Palestine seemed like an ideal destination for the Jews of Europe. The Jews would pay the Nazis enormous sums of money to reach their promised land, and the British who controlled Palestine would turn them away in droves.

Despite the odds, young Jewish men and women were willing take their chances.

Zionist training homes and farms called Hachshara (Hebrew for preparation) existed from Germany to Italy.

Mr. Klebe was assigned to a Hachshara for German religious Zionists located in Hessen, not far from his birthplace.

“Jews were organizing throughout Germany,” he says. “We were going to enter Palestine illegally.”

He takes a sip of iced tea.

“Some of the groups made it. Some didn’t.”

At his Hachshara, Mr. Klebe and his fellow Zionists subsisted on special “Jewish rations” that allotted one-fourth loaf of bread and a handful of marmalade per week to each member. The group basically subsisted on their farm-produced eggs and milk and homegrown potatoes.

Mr. Klebe was put in charge of 90 *halutzim*, or pioneers. Eventually, the Nazis allowed 4,000 German Jews to leave for Palestine.

In 1940, Mr. Klebe’s group received permission to travel to Vienna, the first leg on what would be an arduous four-month journey to Palestine.

Although they initially stayed in fine Austrian hotels, the SS ordered them to find other accommodations.

“We lived at a kind of Jewish community center,” he says. “We slept on the floor in sleeping bags, crammed like sardines. We went to the mikveh every Friday. And we waited to get the go ahead from Berlin so we could go to Palestine.”

Finally, the permission they longed for arrived.

Four thousand Jewish young men and women were assigned to four riverboats that floated down the Danube toward the Black Sea. Despite the crowded conditions, Mr. Klebe says the two-week trek down the Danube “was the most beautiful trip of my life.

“I was out of Germany!” he says with an awed and amazed smile.

The riverboats arrived in the Romanian city of Tulcia, a port city on the Danube.

“Again, we waited. It was war, and we couldn’t get a ship that could handle the Black Sea, which was a very stormy sea.”

Mr. Klebe celebrated Rosh Hashanah in Tulcia and Yom Kippur in Warna, Bulgaria.

“Then they finally found us a small boat, a really dilapidated freighter that was not meant for people. It had no ballast, no balance.”

In September of 1940, the four dismal conveyances set forth for Haifa.

“We went to Greece, and then Crete,” Mr. Klebe says. “We celebrated Sukkot in Crete, which was the only place where we were really welcomed. We stayed for a week, and the people were really friendly.”

A Greek captain assumed command of Mr. Klebe’s freighter.

“We didn’t think he could get us to Haifa,” he says. “We just didn’t believe he could do it, or really wanted to.”

The Palestine-bound entourage celebrated Simchat Torah at sea, on the deck of the ship

“All of us were dancing and singing,” Mr. Klebe says. “But because we had no ballast, we kept slipping from side to side. I saw the waters coming up to me; I kept going back and forth.

“That Greek captain screamed, ‘Sit down!’ But he said it in Greek, which we didn’t understand. So he made a motion for people to sit down — and the ship stopped floundering.

“We cried, we laughed. And we knew our captain was the right man to get us to Palestine.”

Mr. Klebe abruptly stops talking.

“Come early Friday morning,” he resumes quietly, “at 9 a.m., I heard a shout.”

He stretches his hand toward a horizon visible only to him.

“Haifa!” he whispers. “After months on the road, here is Haifa!”

Overcome with emotion, he bows his head and cries.

It’s as if the memory of the synagogue dome that collapsed on that November day in 1938 rises untouched from the flames.

When Mr. Klebe lifts his face, he is overjoyed.

For him, Haifa is far more than a moving memory.

It is the very moment his hope returned.

As soon as the German Zionists entered the port of Haifa, the British intercepted their boats, ordered all of them to disembark and quickly board the Patria, a French ship in British control.

The British planned to transport the passengers to Mauritius, where they would be interned.

Haganah activists decided to place a small charge on the Patria that would wreck its motors and detain the ship in Haifa Bay.

“Yes, I was on the Patria,” Mr. Klebe says quietly. “I was one of the 4,000. One day we were told to go to the top of the ship the next morning. I knew something was going to happen.”

Mr. Klebe was afraid.

“I couldn’t swim,” he says. “I couldn’t swim then and I can’t swim now.”

On the morning of November 25, a huge explosion ripped through the Patria.

Mr. Klebe was thrown into the water.

“I said to myself, ‘I cannot die in the water after all the trouble it took to get here!’”

When he was a boy, he read a book about maritime disasters in WW I and how people died because they stayed too close to the sinking vessel.

“That book was on my mind. So I yelled at everyone to get as far from the ship as possible.”

Mr. Klebe thrashed about in the water until “from somewhere came this big plank about two inches thick and 12 feet long. I reached out and held on to it until I was finally rescued.”

Over 250 Jewish passengers were killed in the explosion.

Having survived Nazi Germany, the dangerous journey to Palestine and the Patria tragedy, Mr.

Klebe was interned with his fellow illegal immigrants at the Atlit detainee camp near Haifa.

Released in 1941, he joined Kibbutz Ramat Shomron.

Mr. Klebe pulls out a piece of paper from his blue notebook. "This is very important," he says, smoothing out the wrinkles.

Dated 1940 and delivered via the Red Cross to Shomron, the telegram contains a brief message from Mr. Klebe's mother, Lena, in faded German.

She wishes her son well, and hopes that they will soon meet again.

"I never heard from my mother after this," he says.

In 1941, Mr. Klebe's mother and four of his siblings — Freida, Mirjam, Senta and Herbert — were deported from Germany to Minsk by the Nazis, and executed.

In March of 1943, Mr. Klebe and *chaverim* "arrived on empty land" that would become Kibbutz Be'erot Yitzchak.

The kibbutz was named after Rabbi Isaac Nissenbaum, an ardent Zionist who led the Mizrachi movement. Rabbi Nissenbaum was murdered in 1942 in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Be'erot Yitzchak gradually evolved into a tight community furnished by bare physical necessities and abundant courage.

"At first there was nothing there," Mr. Klebe describes its evolution. "We put up tents. Furniture came in large crates that we assembled into a room. We ate in there, *davened* in there, and slept in our tents."

In the spring of 1948, as Israeli statehood inched closer to reality, the surrounding Arab nations planned their attack.

On May 14, Ben Gurion's declaration of Israel's independence filtered over the wireless at Be'erot Yitzchak — but no one had time to listen.

"We did not go out to fight the Egyptians," Mr. Klebe says. "They came to us.

"It was *erev* Shabbos, the biggest day in kibbutz life. Women were looking for their children to help with the Shabbos meal. It was an anthill of activity.

"At 4 p.m., the first shells exploded. When they fell, everyone fled. The place was suddenly empty."

The shelling continued into the night and following day.

"We were in contact with the Haganah. It was decided that the women and children would be taken to Tel Aviv. They left after Shabbos."

Mr. Klebe and his fellow *chaverim* stayed on the kibbutz fortifying bunkers and digging ditches.

The Egyptian firepower that ceaselessly pounded Kibbutz Be'erot Yitzchak echoes in Mr. Klebe's ears.

"The shelling increased every day and every night," he says, his expression flinching. "We were out

in the open, so close to Gaza.

“One person stood guard all the time. He would see the shells when they started falling. ‘Aish!’ he would scream, ‘fire, fire!’ And the shells kept coming.”

After a brief truce, the Egyptians attacked Be’erot Yitzchak with unrivaled fury.

“They dropped all kinds of shells,” Mr. Klebe says, “from Spitfires and from ships. Some weighed as much as 100 pounds.

“I estimated that 455 shells fell in a one-hour period,” he says. “One night I came into the shelter and told the commander how many shells I counted. He got so mad at me! ‘What are you trying to do,’ he said, ‘undermine the moral of our people?’”

After 10 days, the Egyptians silenced their weapons.

Although they never took Kibbutz Be’erot Yitzchak, they left precious little in their furious wake.

A photo from 1948 shows Mr. Klebe leaning against the rubble of the kibbutz — a lone dark-haired figure surrounded by destruction.

But beyond the photographer’s lens, the state of Israel stood unbowed, proud, triumphant.

Mr. Klebe’s passion for kibbutz life slowly dissipated. “I lived in the kibbutz, I put too much into the kibbutz, I was too involved,” he says.

Lacking the emotional strength to rebuild Kibbutz Be’erot Yitzchak (now situated up the coast from Tel Aviv), he went to Jerusalem and obtained work as a foreman.

“People from the kibbutz came to visit me all the time,” he says. “And I would return to the kibbutz. I was a hard worker. No one gave more to the kibbutz than me.”

Still, he felt it was time to leave.

In 1954, 15 years after preferring the dream of Palestine over a tangible US visa, Mr. Klebe joined one of his two surviving sisters in Denver.

He married Lottie — “L-o-t-t-i-e,” he spells endearingly — in 1963. They did not have children. Lottie died a year-and-a-half ago.

Six decades have come and gone since Mr. Klebe fought for Israel’s freedom.

Time passes in the blink of an eye.

Or does it?

“The biggest part of my life *is* Israel,” Mr. Klebe says.

“There is nothing else for me other than Israel — and that is 100 percent true.”

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