## The Signatories of the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel

The British Mandate over Palestine was due to end on May 15, 1948, some six months after the United Nations had voted to partition Palestine into two states: one for the Jews, the other for the Arabs. While the Jews celebrated the United Nations resolution, feeling that a truncated state was better than none, the Arab countries rejected the plan, and irregular attacks of local Arabs on the Jewish population of the country began immediately after the resolution. In the United Nations, the US and other countries tried to prevent or postpone the establishment of a state, suggesting trusteeship, among other proposals. But by the time the British Mandate was due to end, the United Nations had not yet approved any alternate plan; officially, the partition plan was still "on the books."

A dilemma faced the leaders of the yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine. Should they declare the country's independence upon the withdrawal of the British mandatory administration, despite the threat of an impending attack by Arab states? Or should they wait, perhaps only a month or two, until conditions were more favorable?

Under the leadership of David Ben-Gurion, who was to become the first Prime Minister of Israel, theVa'ad Leumi - the representative body of the yishuv under the British mandate - decided to seize the opportunity. At 4:00 PM on Friday, May 14, the national council, which had directed the Jewish community's affairs under the British Mandate, met in the Tel Aviv Museum on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv. As Jerusalem was under siege, those members who resided in Jerusalem could not be present, although they kept in constant contact by telephone. The proceedings were not widely publicized before they took place, for fear that the Declaration would be stopped by the British; still, those present included representatives of the Jewish Agency, the Zionist Organization, the Va'ad Leumi, leaders of political parties, cultural personalities, the chief rabbis, the chief of staff of the Haganah and his colleagues and more. Thousands waited outside the hall to hear the Declaration on huge loudspeakers and thousands more listened to the Kol Israel radio station to hear the news in the station's first direct broadcast.

David Ben-Gurion read the Declaration of the Establishment of the State to those assembled. As he concluded the reading, he said "Let us accept the Foundation Scroll of the Jewish State by rising," and the entire audience arose. Rabbi Fishman read the traditional blessing "Blessed art thou, O Lord, King of the Universe, Who has kept us alive and preserved us and enabled us to reach this season." The signers put their names to the Declaration. A 13-member Provisional Government and a Provisional Council of 37 members were established; upon the departure of the British Mandatory forces, they would become the provisional government and legislature, respectively, of the state.

The historic occasion, marked by joy, took place under the long shadow of upcoming war with the Arab states. The State of Israel was established, but at a terrible price: over 6,000 lives lost.

The Declaration is made up of four parts: one discusses the history of the Jewish people, its struggle to renew its national life in its land and the international recognition of its right to do so; the second proclaims independence; the third names the principles of freedom, justice, peace and equality of social and political rights, which are to guide the new state; and the last section calls upon the Arabs of Eretz Israel to preserve peace, extends an offer of peace and good neighborliness to all neighboring states and their peoples, and appeals to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz Israel.

The 37 signers of the Declaration were the members of the Provisional Council of State. They were the leaders of the state-in-the-making, representatives of the different communities that made up the new state. The oldest was 82; the youngest, not yet 30. Three signers went on to become prime ministers of Israel; one became president; and fourteen became cabinet ministers. Two of the signatories are still alive today.

David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973) - secretary-general of the Histadrut (1921-35), chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive (1935-48) and first Prime Minister of Israel (1948-63, with a short break). He headed the yishuv in the pre-state years; laid the foundations for the workings of the government and the IDF; and led the country in its formative years.

 Daniel Auster (1893-1962) - lawyer and mayor of Jerusalem, 1948-51. He had been active in Jerusalem municipal affairs since 1934, under the British Mandatory administration, and represented the Jewish case against the internationalization of Jerusalem before the United Nations in 1947.

Mordekhai Bentov (1900-1985) - Hashomer Hatzair leader, Mapam leader, and a member of the political committee representing the yishuv in the United Nations (1947-48). He was Minister of Labor and Reconstruction in the provisional government (1948), Knesset member (1949-65), Minister of Development (1955-61) and Minister of Housing (1966-69).

Yitzhak Ben-Zvi (1884-1963) - yishuv leader, Knesset member (1949-52) and second President of Israel (1952-63). He was a founder and leader of the Zionist socialist movement, of the pioneering Zionist labor movement and of Jewish self-defense, and made important contributions to the historiography of Eretz Israel and of ancient and remote Jewish communities.

Eliyahu Meir Berligne (1866-1959) - yishuv leader, a member of the General Zionists, and a founder of Tel Aviv, serving on its first administrative committee. He was the treasurer of the Va'ad Leumi (1920-48).

Perez (Fritz) Bernstein (1890-1971) - General Zionist leader. He was chairman of the Union of General Zionists, member of the Jewish Agency Executive (1946-48), Minister of Commerce and Industry in the provisional government, member of Knesset (1949-65), Minister of Commerce and Industry (1952-55) and president of the Liberal Party (1961-1964).

Rachel Cohen (1888-1982) - WIZO activist and Knesset member (1949-51). She was one of the founders of the Federation of Hebrew Women, head of the Va'ad Leumi's Social Welfare Department, chairman of the Israel Federation of WIZO and vice chairman of the World WIZO Executive.

Eliyahu Dobkin (1898-1976) - labor Zionist leader. He headed the Jewish Agency's Immigration Department during World War II, dealing with the rescue of Jews from Europe and illegal immigration, was a member of the Jewish Agency Executive (1946-48), head of the Jewish Agency's Youth and Hehalutz Department (1951-68), and chairman of Keren Hayesod (1951-62).

Rabbi Wolf Gold (1889-1956) - rabbi and religious Zionist leader. He engaged in educational and communal activities in many Jewish communities in the US and, in various positions of authority in the Jewish Agency, he did much for the establishment of educational institutions in the Diaspora.

Meir Grabovsky (Argov) (1905-1963) - labor Zionist leader and Knesset member (1949-63). He was secretary-general of the World Zionist Labor Movement and chairman of the Tel Aviv Labor Exchange.

Abraham Granott (Granovsky) (1890-1962) - economist and co-founder and chairman of the Progressive Party. He served as the managing director, chairman of the board and president of the JNF, and a Knesset member (1949-51). His plan for a joint land authority of the JNF and the State of Israel served as the basis for land legislation passed by the Knesset in 1960.

Yitzhak Gruenbaum (1879-1970) - leader of a faction of General Zionism and a member of the Polish parliament between the two world wars. He was Minister of the Interior in the Provisional Government, and the first elections to the Knesset were organized under his guidance.

Rabbi Kalman Kahana (1910-1991) - a leader of the Po'alei Agudat Israel movement. He was a founding member of Kibbutz Hafetz Haim, a member of Knesset (1949-81), and Deputy Minister of Education (1962-69).

 Eliezer Kaplan (1891-1952) - labor leader. He was a member of the Hapoel Hatzair and Mapai central committees, a secretary of the Histadrut Executive, a member of the Jewish Agency Executive and its treasurer. He directed the financial affairs of the Provisional Government and was Israel's first Minister of Finance (1949-52). He laid the foundations for Israel's economic policy and shaped its first budgets and its taxation structure.

Sa'adia Kobashi - member of the Provisional Council of State, leader of the Yemenite community.

Moshe Kol (Kolodny) (1911-89) - Zionist leader. He was a member of the Jewish Agency Executive, head of the Youth Aliya Department (1948-64), and, in 1948, a founder and leader of the Progressive Party, which joined the Liberal Party. Later he became leader of the Liberal Party. He was a Knesset member (1951-55, 59-73), Minister of Tourism and Development (1966-69) and Minister of Tourism (1969-77).

Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Levin (1894-1971) - a leader of the Agudat Israel movement. He was active in rescue operations from Europe during the war and led Agudat Israel in Palestine from 1947. He was a member of Knesset (1949-71) and Minister of Social Welfare (1949-52). Meir David Loewenstein (1904-1995) - rabbi and leader of the Agudat Israel movement. He was a member of the Provisional Council of State and member of Knesset (1949-51).

Zvi Lurie (1906-1968) - Mapam labor leader. He was secretary of the world leadership of Hashomer Hatzair (1935-37), member of the Va'ad Leumi (1941-48) and member of the Va'ad Leumi Executive as Information Department Director. After the establishment of the state, he filled various Jewish Agency positions.

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Maimon (Fishman) (1875-1962) - rabbi and leader of religious Zionism. Together with Rabbi Kook, he established the chief rabbinate of Palestine, and he formulated the rabbinate's constitution. He was a member of Knesset (1949-51), Minister of Religious Affairs and Minister in charge of war casualties in the Provisional Government and Minister of Religious Affairs (1949-51).

Golda Meir (Myerson) (1898-1978) - Prime Minister and labor leader. She served as acting head and later head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency. She was a Knesset member (1949-74), ambassador to Moscow (1948-49), Minister of Labor (1949-56), Minister of Foreign Affairs (1956-65), secretary-general of Mapai (instrumental in uniting various labor parties to form the New Labor Party) and Prime Minister (1969-74).

Avraham Nissan (Katznelson) (1888-1956) - labor politician and diplomat. He served as director of the Health Department of the Zionist Executive and a member of the Va'ad Leumi (1931-48), as well as a member of the central committee of Hashomer Hatzair and Mapai.

Nahum Nir-Rafalkes (1884-1968) - lawyer, labor leader and second speaker of the Knesset. He led Poalei Zion Left and represented it in the Histadrut and the Va'ad Leumi, and became a member of Mapam when the groups merged. He was deputy chairman of the Provisional Council of State, member of Knesset (1949-1965), deputy speaker and speaker (1959) of the Knesset.

David Zvi Pinkas (1895-1952) - Mizrahi leader and politician. He was Mizrahi representative to the Asefat Hanivharim and the Va'ad Leumi, serving as treasurer and director of its Department of Religious Communities and the Rabbinate, a member of Knesset (1949-52) and Minister of Transport (1951-52).

Moshe David Remez (1886-1951) - labor leader. He was a leader in Ahdut Ha'avoda and Mapai, headed the Public Works Office of the Histadrut (1921-27) and serving as its secretary-general (1935-45), chairman of the Va'ad Leumi (1944-48), Minister of Transport in the Provisional Government, member of Knesset (1949-51) and Minister of Education (1950-51).

Berl Repetur (1902-1989) - labor leader and member of Knesset (1949-51). He was a member of the Histadrut Executive and the Mapam Central Committee and secretary of the labor exchange of the General Federation of Jewish Labor.

Pinhas Rosen (Felix Rosenblueth) (1887-1978)- lawyer, Zionist leader. He was a member of the Asefat Hanivharim and a cofounder of the Progressive Party in 1948, a member of Knesset (1949-68) and Minister of Justice (1949-50, 1952-61). He was instrumental in organizing the judicial and legal system of Israel.

Zvi Segal (1901-1965) - Revisionist activist and industrialist. He was vice president of the Revisionist movement in Palestine (1940-48) and a member of the finance committee of the Provisional Council of State.

 Moshe (Hayyim) Shapira (1902-1970) - politician and leader of the National Religious Party. He was a member of the Jewish Agency Executive, as head of the Immigration Department, and played an important role in preventing conflicts between the Haganah and Etzel. He was a member of the provisional government, a member of Knesset (1949-1970), Minister of Immigration (1949-50), Health (1949), the Interior (1949-52 and 1959-70), Religious Affairs (1952-58) and Social Welfare (1952-55).

Mordechai Shattner - industrialist and member of the Provisional Council of State.

Moshe Sharett (Shertok) (1894-1965) - statesman and Zionist leader. He was head of the political department of the Jewish Agency (1933-48), member of the provisional government, member of Knesset (1949-56), first Minister of Foreign Affairs (1949-56) and Prime Minister (1954-55). He developed the methods and the machinery of Israel's diplomacy, forming the nucleus of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' staff. He built a worldwide system of international ties for Israel and was the first to foresee that Israel could play a role among the developing nations.

Behor Shalom Shitrit (1895-1967) - Sephardi leader and Minister of Police. He was commander of the police in lower Galilee and magistrate in various towns under the British mandatory administration. He served as a member of Knesset (1949-67), as Minister of Police and Minorities in the provisional government and Minister of Police (1949-66), in this capacity organizing and developing the Israel Police.

Ben-Zion Sternberg (1894-1962) - member of the Provisional Council of State and director of the Investment Center at the Ministry of Industry and Trade. Herzl Vardi (Rosenblum) (1903-1991) - journalist and Revisionist activist. He was a delegate to various Zionist congresses, a member of the board of Haboker and editor of the Yediot Achronot daily newspaper (1949-86).

Meir Vilner-Kovner (1918-2003) - Communist Party activist and member of Knesset (1949-81). He was a member of the Provisional Council of State and secretary of the Israel Communist Party.

Zerah Warhaftig (1906-2002) - lawyer and leader of the National Religious Party. He was a member of the Va'ad Leumi and a member of the Provisional Council of State, a member of Knesset (1949-81) and Minister of Religious Affairs (1961-70).

Aharon Zisling (1901-1964) - labor leader. He was among the founders of Youth Aliya and as a member of the Haganah command, participated in the founding of the Palmach. He was a delegate to the Asefat Hanivharim, a co-founder of the Kofer Hayishuv, Minister of Agriculture of the Provisional Government (1948-49) and member of the first Knesset (1949-1951).

## Interviews with Signatories of the Declaration

**Meir Vilner**

**by Dan Izenberg**

Meir Vilner, who represented the Communist Party on the fateful day of May 14, 1948, says that "the word 'historic,' which I don't usually like to use, is appropriate to describe the signing. I was moved by the event," he adds. "It fulfilled the aims of the Communist Party by eliminating the British colony and establishing one of the two independent states which were meant to replace it."

Not that he regarded the Declaration as sacrosanct, then or now. "No one agreed with every sentence of the preamble," he maintains. "For example, most of us didn't particularly want to include the term 'Rock of Israel.' Had I drafted the document, it would have read differently. But the bottom line was the end of the Mandate, the removal of the British army and the establishment of two independent states. That's what I signed." Vilner saw the document for the first time a few days before the signing, when it was presented to the Provisional Council of State at a secret meeting in Tel Aviv.

Vilner, at 29, was the youngest person to sign the Declaration. And even though he represented the party of the proletariat, he wore a tie. Indeed, the only male signers who did not wear ties were the three representatives of the kibbutz movement.

After Ben-Gurion had affixed his signature to the Declaration, the other signers were summoned to the podium in alphabetical order. Six of them - including Zerah Warhaftig, the other surviving signer - could not get to Tel Aviv from blockaded Jerusalem. "Between the name of the person who signed the Declaration before me and mine, there is a space," remarks Vilner. "There has been a lot of political speculation over the years about the reason for that space. The truth is that it had been reserved for Warhaftig. In the end, Warhaftig signed at the top of the next column."

Then, as today, Vilner did not share the Zionist view that the State of Israel was the solution to the problem of anti-Semitism in the post-Enlightenment era. "We did not see the gathering of the exiles in Palestine, the Land of Israel, as a solution. Had the Nazis reached Palestine, they would have destroyed everything. We saw the only basic solution in the establishment of Socialist regimes which

would prevent anti-Semitism in every country." As far as Vilner is concerned, there is no Jewish nation. "There are Jewish national minorities in each country, and the struggle for equality must be waged in each one of these countries," he says.

Vilner's opinions had undergone a drastic change before reaching this point. During his early high school years, he was a Zionist. Vilner, whose original name was Ber Kovner, was born in Vilna in October 1918. His father sent the boy to a Hebrew-speaking school only because a neighbor's child had enrolled there and walked him to class. That twist of fate determined his life.

Vilner became proficient in Hebrew. He also joined the left-wing Zionist Hashomer Hatza'ir movement together with two classmates. During the mid-30s, the three classmates led the Hashomer Hatza'ir movement in Vilna and the surrounding areas and were in charge of about 600 members. But two events changed Vilner's political orientation. First was the movement's decision not to fight for workers' rights in the Diaspora on the grounds that every member of the movement would immigrate to Palestine within a few years. Second was the movement's refusal to work to protect Jews together with the Communist movement, which was banned in Poland.

"The decisions shocked me," recalls Vilner. "I couldn't understand how a Socialist organization would not help its own working members or why the movement would reject the help offered by a legitimate organization to fight anti-Semitism. After a few weeks, I decided to leave Hashomer Hatza'ir and, at the same time, leave Zionism altogether. For the next two years I read everything I could get my hands on. I wanted to know what was right. I spent two years searching for the truth."

In 1938, when Vilner left Vilna after an anti-Semitic incident, he chose Palestine as his destination, although he had a large family in the United States. "I wavered a lot," explains Vilner. "What made up my mind was the fact that I knew Hebrew but didn't know English." And then, in his only hint at an emotional connection, Vilner adds, "furthermore, despite all that had happened, I wanted to see what life was like in Palestine, after having heard so much about it."

Vilner arrived in 1938 and immediately enrolled at the Hebrew University. Two years later, he joined the Communist Party and was elected to Israel's first Kneset as a member of the Israel Communist Party. He headed the party for most of the period between 1965 and 1990, when he retired.

Over the years, the Israel Communist Party had its ups and downs. Its initiatives in the Knesset plenum were often opposed on principle, although, Vilner reveals, many members of Knesset, including some from the right, informally consulted with him and wanted to hear his opinions. The party's influence expanded significantly between 1992 and 1996, when the Democratic List for Peace and Equality - not a coalition member - contributed to the Labor-led government's blocking majority in the Knesset.

Today, Vilner says that after being a "voice in the wilderness" for so many years, he is pleased to know that Israel has accepted the Communist position by recognizing the PLO. "I am certain," declares Vilner, "that just as the people of Israel recognized the justness of that position, they will one day acknowledge that there is only one solution which will lead to a true and just peace and an

end to bloodshed. At the heart of this solution is the establishment of an independent Palestinian state... and peace with Syria and Lebanon..."


**Dr. Zerah Warhaftig**

**by Wendy Elliman**

"With a muttered prayer of thanks, I struggled out of the ropes that had tied me into the small open plane, and climbed down on to firm ground. A car was waiting for me on the airstrip. We drove fast, directly from the plane into Tel Aviv, and then negotiated our way through crowded streets to the Prime Minister's office. "Ben Gurion greeted me at the door. A pen in one hand and the Scroll in the other, he wasted no time on greetings, not even offering a 'shalom.' His first word to me was nothing more than a growl: 'Sign!'"

It was June 1948, almost three weeks since Israel had proclaimed itself an independent state, and the new country was fighting for its life. Dr. Zerach Warhaftig, his stomach still churning from the nerve-racking plane ride, took the pen from Ben Gurion. With Israel's first Prime Minister standing over him, he added his signature to the others scrawled under the text of the Scroll. "Despite the lack of ceremony, a flood of feelings washed through me," recalls Dr. Warhaftig. "Even though I had helped draw up the declaration of independence and knew its every word, even though I was signing it weeks after the event, nothing could take away the sense of history that engulfed me, the overwhelming knowledge that the Jewish people had returned to their homeland after 2,000 bitter years of exile."

Zerach Warhaftig was then 42 years old. Born in Poland, he had survived the Holocaust and managed to reach the United States. Well-known in both North America and Europe as a Zionist thinker and writer, he had been elected to the Zionist National Council (Va'ad Leumi) early in 1947, even though he was then still living in the US. "We waited until my wife gave birth to our second child, and then moved to Palestine," he says. "That was in August 1947. I settled my family in Jerusalem, where we had relatives, but my work was in Tel Aviv. I'd been appointed to the National Council's legal staff. Our work was nothing less than designing the legislative and executive framework for a Jewish State that we knew was no longer far off. We worked long days and sometimes nights, preparing a constitution for the new State, deciding on the State's provisional government, drawing up a declaration of independence. We worked, each one of us, with an exhilarating sense of history that energized us through those long and pressured weeks."

The week of Pesach (Passover) 1948, however, Dr. Warhaftig decided to spend with his family. "Jerusalem had been under siege for over a month by then," he remembers, "and it was a hard and risky journey up to the city. I traveled in a long armored convoy. We came under fierce attack as we neared the city, and, as I remember, about 20 vehicles were destroyed on that journey. I was lucky enough to make it safely to my wife and children."And that was where he stayed. The stranglehold of siege tightened around Jerusalem. Pesach came and went, but no one entered the city or left it.

April gave way to May. On that fateful May 14, 1948, when the British pulled out of Palestine, when David Ben Gurion declared an independent State of Israel, and when the new State's leaders solemnly signed their newborn nation's Declaration of Establishment - Dr. Warhaftig remained trapped in Jerusalem, until Ben Gurion sent the small plane to get him out and back to work.

"I'd helped draw up Israel's basic laws and helped design the relationship between state and religion," recounts Dr. Warhaftig. "For the next 26 years I served my country - first as a Member of Knesset for the National Religious Party, then as a deputy minister and during the last decade as a full minister, for the most part of Religious Affairs. I wouldn't say I shaped the State, but I influenced it in some ways. I was instrumental in some of what happened, especially in the area of legislation. "More and more, however, the State took on a life of its own. "Our country achieved things I'd never anticipated," says Dr. Warhaftig. "Although I'd come out of the European and North American Diasporas, I never predicted so vast an aliya to Israel. We grew from 600,000 people to over 5,000,000 in just 50 years. Nor did I expect the small embattled nation of 1948 to become the greatest military force in the Middle East. Another thing I never dreamed was that we would become an industrial nation, producing billions of dollars worth of exports every year. And I certainly never foresaw we would grow into an agrotechnological superpower, with people coming from all over the world to learn from us."

But there were also hopes and dreams that 50 years of statehood have not - or not yet - fulfilled, he continues. "I hoped so desperately for peace," he says. "And I hoped, too, that we would be a moral and ethical people par excellence, truly a Chosen People. If I had the power to change the past, I would make the greatest changes in the educational system we built in Israel. Most of us who designed the way we taught and still teach children in Israel came out of the Diaspora, where education was of different kind. For our new State, for Israel, we needed something novel, something special."

And for the future? Ninety-one-year old Dr. Warhaftig is optimistic. "Optimism is part of my nature," he says. "Any religious man, any believer, is surely an optimist. People like us not only hope, we also believe that things will go on getting better."