

Jews with Guns

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On the evening of January 24, Muhammad and Mahmoud Sbarna dressed in security guard uniforms, armed themselves with daggers and a toy gun and set out on their mission.

From their home in Beit Omer, a village near Hebron, the two made their way to Kibbutz Kfar Etzion.

Just over a week before, the Sbarnas, Hamas activists in their 20s, had been released from the Ketziot high security prison in the western Negev. During their stint at Ketziot, where soft-core activists are brought together with some of the most violent Palestinian terrorists, the Sbarnas strengthened their ties and identification with the goals of Hamas.

They served a two-year sentence for stealing several M-16 rifles from the IDF. Now the Sbarnas, distant relatives, hoped to repeat the trick, but this time without getting caught. At about 9 p.m. they cut through the security fence that surrounds the kibbutz without setting off the detection mechanism and made their way to the Mekor Haim high-school yeshiva.

"Good evening," Shmueli Greenberg said as the two walked into a classroom where seven counselors and students were holding a meeting.

Greenberg and the others quickly realized that something was wrong. The two men, speaking Hebrew with a slight Arabic accent, ordered everyone in the room to stand against the wall with their hands up.

They approached Greenberg and Rafael Singer, another member of the group. Singer drew his pistol and shot but it jammed and Mahmoud jumped on him, stabbing him in the back.

Meanwhile, Muhammad pounced on Greenberg.

But the two were outmatched: Elyakim Kovatch, who was also armed, took aim and picked off the two terrorists as they struggled with Greenberg and Singer.

Kovatch, Singer and Greenberg had received counterterrorism training from Mishmeret Yesha. Founded in 1988 by Israel "Izzy" Danziger, a 55-year-old immigrant from Brooklyn, and two other men who are no longer with the organization, Mishmeret Yesha is a grassroots non-profit organization that helps more than 100 settlements throughout Judea and Samaria train and equip their own "rapid response teams" to meet the security challenges of living in the midst of a hostile Palestinian population. These teams receive M-16s and ammunition from the IDF, and bullet-proof vests, communications equipment, various military-grade paraphernalia and extensive counterterrorist training from Mishmeret Yesha.

"Mishmeret Yesha's training gave us the confidence we needed to draw our guns in time to stop those terrorists," says Singer, who was slightly wounded. "I don't know what would have happened if not for the training we received from it."



A rapid response team in the West Bank.
Photo: Ariel Jerozolimski

Mishmeret Yesha's concept was to empower settlement Jews with the means and wherewithal to protect themselves as part of a bid to maintain a strong Jewish presence in Judea, Samaria and Gaza. Ideologically motivated settlers from Shavei Shomron and Kfar Tapuah in the north to Bat Ayin, Pnei Kedem and Yeshivat Shavei Hebron in the south are taught how to quickly neutralize terrorist infiltrators.

Residents of several smaller outposts, such as Esh Kodesh, near Shiloh, and Sde Boaz, near Hebron, which is slated to be dismantled, have also received training from Mishmeret Yesha, as has a group of young men who set up a yeshiva in caves near Homesh, one of several settlements in Samaria that were dismantled as part of the Gaza disengagement plan.

Technically, Homesh is no longer under IDF protection. The settlers who come there in the hope of eventually reestablishing Homesh are breaking military law. So are the settlers who live on Esh Kodesh and Sde Boaz. But Mishmeret Yesha's ideology is to help Jews protect themselves wherever they may be.

THE IDEA that a cadre of settlers adhering to a heady ideology that combines religious faith with fervent nationalism is roaming the hilltops of Judea and Samaria armed with M-16s and trained in counterterrorism might be a disturbing thought for Israelis who would prefer to fold up the 40-year-plus settlement enterprise.

Danziger is well aware of the initial impression Mishmeret Yesha makes on some people. "People think we are talking about a bunch of crazy messianic vigilantes with guns or a breakaway militia. But what we are doing saves lives. And it is all in cooperation with the IDF." (See official IDF response.)

Military experts say that Mishmeret Yesha's teams of crack troops fill a vacuum left by the IDF.

"It takes at least 10 minutes for the IDF to respond when an infiltration incident occurs. An armed terrorist can kill a whole lot of people in 10 minutes," says Rabbi Moshe Hager-Lau, a reserve colonel who serves as assistant division commander for reserve forces in Judea and Samaria. He is also head of the Yatir pre-military yeshiva in the southern Hebron Hills, and goes everywhere with an M-16 slung over his shoulder.

"Besides the time factor a local rapid response team also has the advantage of being able to quickly identify who belongs and who doesn't, which reduces the number of casualties. It does not take a lot of skill to throw a grenade at an infiltrator. The idea is to be able to pick him off once he's embedded himself in the settlement population."

Marc Prowisor, head of the Shiloh-bloc Security Council and a private security consultant, concurs. "The IDF began supporting rapid response teams in 1992 or 1993," he says. "But they became indispensable as

Arabs began infiltrating settlements after the second intifada started."

According to Prowisor, settlers suddenly found themselves alone in the face of a major threat. "But the IDF could not provide the training necessary to prepare the teams to react to real life scenarios. That's where Danziger and Mishmeret Yesha come in."

ISRAEL DANZIGER, a short, stocky man with prominent blue eyes and an equally prominent nose, pushes aside two buckets full of 5.56 mm. M-16 shells, remnants of a recent training session, and a pile of bulletproof vests to make room for me in his pickup. Danziger, director of operations for Mishmeret Yesha, is taking me to a shooting range outside Efrat where Mishmeret Yesha is training a group from Yitzhar, one of the most ideologically hard-line settlements in Samaria.

On our way to the range we pass through an unfinished building site: In the late 1990s, before the Oslo Accords turned out to be a complete failure and hopes were high, there were plans to create a major commercial center here. Today the huge area is shared by the Efrat Local Council and a school for martial arts.

"Yeshiva University planned to build a campus here," said Danziger wryly. "So did a plastics producer and few other industries."

He shows me the leveled, empty plots hewn out of the hills, the concrete electricity boxes, the water lines and building foundation pylons, all signs that large sums had been invested to prepare the area for a major building project. "But everything was canceled when the Arabs started the second intifada."

To tag along with Danziger is to enter a parallel reality where hopes have been crushed, opportunities missed and projects

discontinued. Danziger sees Mishmeret Yesha as a hedge on the future, a modest attempt to reverse the worrisome trends of what he sees as Israel's gradual capitulation to Palestinian terrorism.

In addition to training rapid response teams, Mishmeret Yesha also has established a factory in Beit El that designs and produces bullet-proof vests. The factory, which employs six full-time workers, provides vests to reserve soldiers free of charge. During the Second Lebanon War the extent of the dearth in basic military equipment, especially for reservists, became clear and Mishmeret Yesha increased production to try to meet demand.

Mishmeret Yesha is also involved in various "agricultural projects" designed to maintain a Jewish presence in Judea and Samaria. The largest is in the Shiloh bloc. All around settlements such as Shvut Rahel and Adei Ad, Mishmeret Yesha has cleared large swaths of land and planted thousands of dunams of grapes. It also has fields around the Hebron and Itamar areas and has invested in flocks of sheep.

Danziger, the driving force behind Mishmeret Yesha, immigrated in 1972 at 19 from Williamsburg, Brooklyn, a neighborhood with a predominantly Black and Puerto Rican community. The Danzigers were the only white family who lived on Rush Street. The brownstone from which young Israel could see the Manhattan skyline across the East River has been replaced by the Roberto Clemente Housing Project.

"As early as I can remember I felt strange, out of place, in Williamsburg," he recalls. "Everything about those people was weird, the way they reacted to things. I did not know why I had that feeling."

Danziger relates an incident from the summer of 1969 which set in motion the process that eventually brought him here. He was

working during school vacation conducting interviews for the census bureau. One day he was standing on a stoop in a predominately black neighborhood interviewing a family. Suddenly, he saw a little girl run into the street. At the same moment, a truck sped by, hitting the girl and killing her instantly. Out of the car jumped a hassid who began running in the direction of the Satmar synagogue. A group of black men ran after him.

The incident sparked a series of attacks on Jewish stores, homes and synagogues. It was a volatile summer. The Black Panthers were in their heyday. The United Federation of Teachers was on strike, in what later became known as the Oceanside Brownsville Strike. The civil rights movement was in full swing. There were sit-ins on college campuses.

"Gangs of young men from the Puerto Rican and black neighborhoods took advantage of the general atmosphere of anarchy to attack Jewish neighborhoods," says Danziger. "The UFT pushed to throw out all the Jewish teachers from the public schools, claiming they were teaching white propaganda. It was summer, so most families had left Brooklyn for the Catskills. No one was around to protect the neighborhood."

A WEEK AFTER the hit-and-run incident, Danziger was invited to the Hewe Street shul to hear a rabbi who would change the trajectory of his life. "I had quite frankly never heard a rabbi speak that way before," he says. "He was interesting and unique. Usually, rabbis that I had heard speak did not have anything to say that I could take seriously. Nothing they said had to do with anything that was relevant to my life. But he was different."

Danziger learned from the rabbi that Jews could fight back. They could protect themselves, their

families, their livelihoods. They could use force.

The rabbi was Meir Kahane.

He was impressed by the way Kahane's Jewish Defense League stood up to the gangs and did not shy away from physical confrontations.

Eventually, Danziger made aliya. He served in a paratroop unit. Afterward he settled in Kiryat Arba and setup a woodwork and construction company. Due to a decision by the Kiryat Arba Local Council which he called "a betrayal," his business was left outside the security fence that was built around its industrial zone. He says he was subject to daily stone throwing. He strapped metal grates to his car windows to prevent them from being broken. He was forced to keep the door to his shop locked during business hours to prevent Molotov cocktail attacks. Eventually, he says, he lost his entire inventory when his factory was ransacked one night, and he was forced to close.

"I realized that I had to do something," said Danziger. "I had lived in Kiryat Arba for nearly two decades just minding my own business. But I came to the realization that the situation was deteriorating, that things were breaking down and that if I didn't do something there was not going to be a place for my grandchildren here."

IT WAS 10:30 a.m. by the time Danziger and I reached the firing range. The guys from Yitzhar, which is about a two-hour drive from Efrat, had already completed a two-kilometer run, a 400-meter sprint and had paired off for some hand-to-hand combat.

An instructor, a graduate of an elite IDF unit and an assistant battalion commander, was running the Yitzhar residents up and down the firing range, teaching them how to stop, aim and shoot after a sprint, which is an important skill to have if you

are a rapid response team member.

The instructor, who preferred to remain anonymous, stood among the settlers barking out orders. "Charge. Drop to the ground. Fire. Faster, faster."

In conversations with the people from Mishmeret Yesha certain assumptions are made. One is expected to know the Hebrew acronym ravshatz (head of day-to-day settlement security in conjunction with the army) or shachpatz (flak jacket) or hazlash (return to normal after a terrorist attack) or amral (night-vision equipment); how much a bullet costs (NIS 1.90) and how to shoot a gun.

It costs Mishmeret Yesha about \$18,000 a year to train a 12-man rapid response team. Mishmeret Yesha is currently training 30 teams. Each receives 12 training days a year. Danziger travels to the US four times a year to raise money.

Rapid response teams that do not belong to Mishmeret Yesha receive eight hours of rifle training a year on an IDF base in Beit Guvrin near Kiryat Gat. Teams that want Mishmeret Yesha's help have to meet the strict demands set by Danziger and others in the organization. At least 12 men must commit themselves to one full day of training a month, which means losing a day of work. The same 12 men must show up on time each month. If Danziger gets the impression the team is not taking the training seriously, he discontinues support.

But Mishmeret Yesha also makes a major policy demand of the settlement in which the rapid response team operates: No entry permits for Arabs. That's the reason Danziger refuses to train a team in his hometown, Efrat, and other settlements that allow Arabs in.

Danziger points to the recent terrorist attack at Yeshivat Mercav Harav as a case in point. The terrorist who killed eight yeshiva students, Ala Abu Dhaim, a driver, had been employed by the yeshiva, according to Abu Dhaim's family.

"My neighbors regularly hire Arabs to do construction work, to clean their houses and to do all sorts of other chores," he says. "I've stopped speaking with them. Anyone who is willing to endanger me and my family to save a few bucks is no friend of mine.

"It is a complete waste of time to train a rapid response team that operates in an institution or a settlement if Arabs are allowed free entry. Either the Arabs that are coming and going will commit the terror attack or they will pass on information to somebody else who will do it."

ONE AFTER another the men of Yitzhar sprint down the long firing range holding an M-16, with sidelocks flapping and big knitted yarmulkes bobbing. About 30 meters from the target, they stop short, fire a round, change clips, get down on one knee and fire another round. The instructor holds a stopwatch and notes the men's speed, accuracy and aggressiveness.

"These guys are better trained for small-scale urban warfare than your average Golani soldier," the instructor told me in a telephone interview after the training session. "But it makes me angry that some of them do not do army service. And I tell them so."

Unlike more mainstream religious Zionists, who tend to cooperate with their secular Zionist counterparts in the running of the state, the settlers of Yitzhar and other outposts scattered across the hills of Judea and Samaria are outwardly anti-establishment. Many avoid IDF service because they believe it is tainted by what they see as the ideological bankruptcy of the secular Zionist

leadership. The most recent secular Zionist insult was the use of the IDF to implement the Disengagement Plan. For settlers in Yitzhar and elsewhere, using the IDF, created to protect the country from its enemies, to expel patriotic Jews from their homes was the ultimate act of treachery.

Benny Gal, 27, one of the young men from Yitzhar, says that the very fact that there is such a need for rapid response is proof the IDF is not doing its job.

"Instead of destroying the enemy when necessary to defend citizens of the state, the IDF is constantly trying to avoid confrontations," he says. "Instead of fighting like proud Jews in their rightful homeland, the IDF has been inundated with the Christian morality of turning the other cheek. Look at what is happening in Sderot.

"It's not that we want to fight with anyone. We just want to live our lives. But if we are forced to fight we need to make them understand that the blood of a Jew is redder than the blood of an Arab."

Gal says that the IDF regularly confiscates M-16s used by members of Yitzhar's rapid response team "for no reason."

"The state does not go out of its way to help people living on the frontlines," he says. "Normative people who have no criminal backgrounds suddenly receive a laconic letter, 'Please deposit your rifle at the Civil Administration office immediately. If you fail to do so, you will be subject to severe legal measures.'"

The IDF's sporadic confiscation of rifles used by members of Yitzhar's rapid response team makes it difficult to keep the team ready for combat, says Danziger.

As Danziger is talking about the importance of regular training and strict discipline, he is interrupted by a young man from Yitzhar who approaches him with a complaint. "The gun holster on

my vest is positioned in a way that makes it uncomfortable to draw. Is it possible to move it over here?" he asks pointing to a place closer to his hip.

Danziger gives him a long hard look, fingers his vest and says, "We are aware of the problem. We'll see what we can do," and goes back to explaining to me what Mishmeret Yesha does.

After the young man goes back to training, Danziger turns to me and says, "These guys are spoiled. They think Mishmeret Yesha is their own custom tailor or something."

A father of eight in his mid-50s, Danziger has been exempt from reserve duty for well over a decade. Nevertheless, he continues to volunteer, serving faithfully in his unit in the Alexandroni Brigade on a regular basis. He devotes many hours a week to Mishmeret Yesha, allowing his custom-made furniture and construction business to languish.

"I am up at around 5 a.m. and I normally don't get to sleep until well after midnight," he says. "I do what I can to ensure that there will be a place here not just for my children but for the future generations. But I can't do it alone."

For more information
please contact:

Mishmeret Yesha

**25 King George Blvd.
Jerusalem 94261 Israel**

Tel: 02-625-1548

Fax: 02-624-6885

guards24@zahav.net.il