Collection of Aerial Photographs of Hillel Berger 1947-1948

Hillel Berger was a civil engineer who specialized in topography in the 1930's. He was appointed Chief Topographer of the Hagannah. During the Arab uprising, the pogroms of 1936-1939, he taught a course on topography and scouting to various Hagannah units. He was one of the founders of the theoretical and practical intelligence of collecting information on Arab villages from the field. In 1940, while serving as the Head of the Department of Maps in the Hagannah, he was one of the authors of the Yishuv documentation of the Arab villages, printed in the pamphlet, "Trips and Journey's" published by the Office of the Guides of the Hagannah. The photographs from this collection were part of the army intelligence files that were compiled by the Hagannah as part of their preparation for possible confrontations with the Arabs and the British.

During the '40's and '50's Hillel Berger published a number of manuals, in several editions, on the topography of Israel. In 1947, shortly before the outbreak of the War of Independence, Hillel Berger headed a group of scouts who mapped the first touring path marked in Israel. It was to Rosh Tzukim (Rosh Fashcha). Photographs from this civil exercise can be found at the end of the collection

In the early '40's, while WWI was still raging, the army intelligence, with the help of specially trained scouts, started to collect information on the Arab villages. This was due to the lessons learned from the hostile behaviors of Arab villages during the period of the Arab uprisings. A considerable amount of information, in various different areas, was collected: the history of the place, geography and topography, demography, the social makeup and the clan and family affiliations. Information regarding the heads of the villages, their political affiliations and power struggles was gathered. There was even information regarding who collaborated with the British or the Hagannah. The public institutions in the villages were reported. Information regarding the economic status of the village and sources of income were collected. Much emphasis was placed on the actions and activities of the villages during the Arab uprising. The scouts prepared reports based on the information gathered, on each and every village, according to a set outline. Today these reports are saved in the Hagannah archives.

In 1944 it was decided to translate the information gathered in the reports to an operational level. Based on experience from the Arab uprisings, it was assumed that Arab villages might act in a hostile way in an attempt to cut off the roads to the

Jewish cities and settlements. Therefore many files were connected to the villages, thus given the whole collection the name 'Village Files'. However in addition to the "Village Files' many other files were compiled for other sites that were of military or civil importance. Some of the files contained additional information, such as maps and aerial photographs.

The task of photographing was given to the 'Aviron" Company which was owned by the Worker's Union and the Jewish Agency. The company was recognized by the British as a civil organization for transporting people, however clandestinely it also was connected to the Hagannah. At a later date, after the formation of the aerial department of the Palmach, the task of photographing was given to its pilots. The pictures were taken with a Leica personal, portable camera. Some of the pictures were developed on British photography paper. It is not known how or where it was obtained. Despite the minimalistic means at their disposal, the quality of the pictures is relatively high and points to the professionalism of the photographers. As the time passed and the tensions rose, and more specifically from 1947 when it became obvious that the British would soon leave, and violent actions between Jews and Arabs already started, more and more places and sites where added to the list of places to be photographed for gathering intelligence.

Most of the photographs in this collection were taken between1947-1948, during the period of the civil war (gang war) that took place after the Partition Plan and a few months after the Declaration of Independence. In addition to photographs of villages located in proximity to Jewish centers in the center of the country and the Judean Hills which managed to threaten and even block the main roads, other major Arab cities were photographed, such as, Ramle, Jaffa and Nazareth. Emphasis was placed on the main entrances to the cities. In addition series of pictures were taken of major transportation routes: roads, train tracks and bridges. The Tel-Aviv-Jerusalem road was the focus of many photographs. A few of the flights for photographing sites were attempts to keep track of the confrontation line on the Jaffa Holon border in the neighborhood of 'Tel Giborim'. Haifa, where then as today there are a number of vital civil infrastructure factories as well as important compounds of the British army, was also the destination of several of the photographic flights. British army facilities, from Gaza to the airport in Bezet, at the foot of Rosh Hanikra, were photographed and documented. In the Sharon, possible sites for a landing strip were pinpointed. In the end the airport was situated in Kfar Shemaryahu. As the invasion of the Arab countries into Eretz Yisrael approached, fortified settlement, mostly on the Egyptian front, were photographed presumably to check the readiness for the war.

The collection donated by Hillel Berger to the Shoshana and Asher Photography Archives in Yad Ben-Zvi includes close to 700 photographs. Other photographs from the collection were distributed to various public institutions including the Hebrew University and the Hagannah Archives. It is assumed that many photographs were destroyed along with the files of the villages. A set of pictures at the end of the collection shows the first marked scouts trail in Israel to Rosh Zukim. For the first time this collection exposes the public to pictures from the Hagganah collection of aerial photographs. Most of the pictures have explanations providing much information. Sources of additional information can be found in the collection. For orientation in space an arrow pointing to the North is marked on many of the pictures.

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We would be happy to receive any additional information, updates or corrections.

For additional information: Shimri Solomon, The Hagannah: Research Notebooks, Tel Aviv, 2010.