



Operation Mercy According to Hugh R. A. Jones

- Described in Two Letters from Jerusalem,
June 4 and 5, 1948

Introduction

by Kai Kjær-Hansen

We have chosen to allow Rev. Hugh R. A. Jones, then Head of Church Missions to Jews (CMJ) in Israel, to speak in this first article. And we do it without explanatory footnotes so that the readers may form their own impression of how a person who played no insignificant part in Operation Mercy feels and thinks a few weeks after the operation has been carried out. He is filled with gratitude to God that it was possible to save lives.

So what we have is a subjective account from an eyewitness. Whether Jones' assessment is objectively correct and provides an adequate picture of the situation – did he, for example, exaggerate the danger for Hebrew Christians in Palestine/Israel in the spring of 1948? – is a different but nevertheless important question. Jones actually dealt with that issue in April 1949, in a letter to the Archbishop of York, which Gershon Nerel includes in his article and on which I also comment in "The Organizers behind Operation Mercy" in this issue of *Mishkan*.

The individuals mentioned in these two letters by Jones appear in other articles and will be identified there. Roger Allison was in charge of CMJ's work in Jaffa. (As to the Hebrew Christians Weinstock and Oko, see my article on Weinstock.)

Miss Hannah Hurnard played a major role in Jerusalem in the first stage of Operation Mercy. She was in CMJ's employ and remained in Jerusalem in 1948 together with other Protestant missionaries. She has provided an eyewitness account about the time before and after May 15, 1948, which we shall return to in the next article. There we shall also meet some people who, to put it mildly, had quite a different view of Operation Mercy than Jones had.

In the reproduction of Jones' letters, the headings and indentation are mine; a few obvious misprints have been corrected and a few explanatory words have been inserted in brackets

The letter concludes with eighteen hand-written lines, in which Jones mentions that the Bishop in Jerusalem has asked if Allison could be transferred to Haifa for some time, as Reverend Moxon wishes to return home.

I.Z.L. stands for Irgun Zvai Leumi = National Military Organization, usually referred to as the Irgun.

Letter of June 4, 1948¹

by **Hugh R.A. Jones**

Rev. C.H. Gill, M.A.,
16, Lincoln's Inn Fields,
London, W.C.2.

Christ Church,
Jerusalem,
June 4th, 1948

Dear Mr. Gill,

I would like to try and give you some idea of the position of the Hebrew Christian as it has been crystalising in Palestine during the last six months. First let me quote from a recent Evangelical Christian Magazine, an American publication, which I think states the position pretty accurately:

The lot of the Hebrew Christian in Palestine today is deplorable. It will be more so tomorrow; and when the British depart is likely to be unbearable. Zionism is not a religious movement basically, but a political one. It is only religious in the sense that most of its leaders and its adherents hate like poison those Jews who have embraced Christianity . . . It is confirmed by a writer in the current issue of "World Dominion" who says in an article on "A Christian View of Palestine": 'There are Hebrew Christians whose fate is pitiable; they hardly dare to be mentioned, such is the hatred of their Zionist brethren. A Christian Jew may not be admitted to Palestine on a Jewish immigration quota: Jews who are atheists or communists, or who reject the fundamentals of Judaism, are freely admitted as Jews. The Jewish Agency has ruled that Judaism is a purely racial concept, with one exception – no Christian, whatever his ancestry, may belong to the Jewish race.'

We have made the prediction that Christian work amongst Jews in Palestine will largely cease when the British depart, and the fate of those who love the Lord Jesus Christ and are left behind may yet shock the moral conscience of the world . . . The Jew of Palestine knows no tolerance for the Christian of his own race, however much he may talk about religious freedom and liberty of conscience in New York or Toronto.

Hebrew Christians Subjected to Thorough Cross-examination

I think the experience of a number of our own converts which I have described to you during the past few months adequately bear out this point of view.

¹ Hugh R. A. Jones to CMJ's General Secretary G. H. Gill in London, June 4, 1948, The Jerusalem and the East Mission Archives 18/5, Middle East Centre, Oxford. Hereafter abbreviated as MEC J&EM.



The Hebrew Christian who escaped wounded into Christ Church compound from an Arab mob in December; the Okos who were bottled up in Christ Church for several months; the experiences of Mr. J. at the hands of Stern Gang, all go to show that the lot of the Hebrew Christian in Palestine, at any rate for the present, is an extremely difficult one. More recently I have heard from Roger Allison that Weinstock has not been allowed to live in his flat on the Jaffo Tel Aviv border and spent seven days wandering the streets of T.A. with his family before he could find a temporary abode.

Of the twenty or so Hebrew Christian members of our congregation who were living in the Hospital compound, several were taken on a number of occasions and subjected to a pretty thorough cross-examination, either by the Haganah or the I.Z.L. It became clear that three at least of them were in very real danger from the I.Z.L. and in the end we managed to move them from the Jewish area and to put them in a neutral area – Zone B. – where we had to keep them for about three weeks, incidentally costing us LP [Palestinian Pounds] 80 for hotel bill, until we could get them moved to St. George's on May 1st. As time went on it became clear that the most satisfactory thing to do was to try and evacuate the bulk of the remaining Hebrew Christian members of our congregation, totalling about thirty. The bulk of them were living in the Jewish area and had no prospects of work after the end of the Mandate.

Problems Getting Enough Visas

Together with other Missionary Societies we brought the fate of these people to the notice of our Home Committees and eventually the Home Office granted fourteen visas for Hebrew Christians in Palestine considered to be in difficulty or danger. I managed to obtain five of these visas for members of our Hebrew Christian staff and one for a member of the congregation. Fourteen visas, however, were wholly inadequate to meet the problem and a meeting was held on April 12th in the Secretariat in the office of the Chief Secretary, who was present with his Under-Secretary, together with the Bishop, Canon Witton-Davies, Rev. Clark Kerr of the Church of Scotland and myself. The Bishop explained to the Chief Secretary that many more than fourteen visas were needed and said that at least fifty, probably more, Hebrew Christians throughout Palestine were in need of being evacuated. As the Government had received from the Foreign Office no permission to grant an unlimited number of visas, the C.S. [Chief Secretary] agreed to wire the Home Office and explain the situation.

About a fortnight later we were informed that any Hebrew Christian considered to be in danger could be granted a temporary visa for the United Kingdom. We felt that the majority of the Hebrew Christians of our congregation should be granted visas and as time was getting very short it meant that we had to get moving pretty quickly; however, with the invaluable help of Ronald Adeney, we gradually got all their papers straightened out and necessary *laisser-passers*, etcetera, issued and visa-ed.

Problems Getting People Transported from Jerusalem to Haifa

The main problem, however, was to get them to Haifa. The Army and the Police having taken up a neutral attitude, said that they could not begin escorting such parties through "enemy territory." An effort we made through the Red Cross to see if they could take such a convoy under their wing, but they felt that this risk was too great. After negotiations and plans had been going on for about a week and got no-where we were beginning to despair.

If it had not been for the trouble taken by the Under-Secretary, we should never have got these people away. He eventually devised a plan whereby, if we could assemble all the Hebrew Christians at St. George's, he could arrange for them to be taken to Kalandia aerodrome, ten kilometres north of Jerusalem, and flown to Haifa port. The Police would be prepared to escort the party from St. George's to Kalandia aerodrome as in this stretch there were no Arab road checks. There was still, however, one snag, namely getting them to St. George's from the various parts of Jerusalem, especially past Arab road checks in the neighbourhood of the Damascus Gate and through the no-man's-land which stretched between Zone B. down Julian's Way, up St. Louis' Way and past Barclay's Bank. The Police were not prepared to escort the party through this area. However, God had His own plan, which was brought about by quite an amazing train of events.

April 29 – An Anonymous Phone Call

On Thursday, April 29th, I had an anonymous phone call from someone who said that he was anxious about the safety of one of our Hebrew Christians whom we had evacuated from the Jewish area into a hotel in Zone B. He said that he had been speaking to this person a day or two ago and told me that he thought it would be a good thing for him if he could be got to St. George's, and seemed to be under the impression that he was at present in Christ Church. I was rather suspicious and rang up the hotel and reported this conversation to the Hebrew Christian in question who thought that it might be someone who was trying to find out where he was and knew of only one person with whom he has been in contact a few days previously who had expressed himself interested in his safety.

It happened that this person was a Britisher of considerable influence who had taken S., the Hebrew Christian in question, to repair a wireless set a week previously and had at the time asked him how it was with him. S. said that things were very sticky so the Britisher replied; "If things get worse, ring me up and use the expression, 'It is the person who invites you to a cup of coffee,' and I shall know it is you who are in difficulties." After my telephone conversation with S. he immediately rang this individual and said, "This is the person who invites you to a cup of coffee." A., the individual in question, came immediately to the hotel and S. told him of this new turn of events, so A. rang me and asked what I thought had better be done. I said that there were nearly thirty others more or less in the same



situation as S. and that we were anxious to get them all to St. George's from where Government had plans to take them to Haifa. A. rang off, saying that he would see what he could do. He got in touch with an army officer and they put their heads together and devised the following plans: If we could assemble all the Hebrew Christians in Zone B. they would convey them in a covered three-tonner to St. George's, explaining to the Arab road checks at the Damascus Gate what was the nature of their journey and cargo. Saturday, May 1st at 3 p.m. was the time fixed for one of the vital stages of what we now call "Operation Mercy."

May 1 – The First Stage of Operation Mercy

During the morning Miss Hurnard, with her Morris 8 van, collected ten Hebrew Christians from our Hospital compound and deposited them at one of the two assembly points on Zone B. Normally there would have been difficulty in taking people out of the Jewish area past the Haganah road check, as no-one was allowed to enter or leave the Jewish area without official Jewish sanction. It happened that the man in charge of the road check on this morning had his mother, a Hebrew Christian, amongst the party of the ten evacuees so he winked an eye at all that was going on!

Miss Hurnard completed her good work by conveying, the three Hebrew Christians from the hotel in Zone B., which was in rather an exposed situation, to the same rendez-vous where the others had been assembled from the Jewish area. Altogether seventeen persons, twelve of them of our own congregation, were collected at this spot. The second group were assembled in a hotel in Talbia ("Stag" Zone); a total of nine were picked up at this point. At about half-past three a three-tonner appeared, coming from the German Colony, where the first Hebrew Christian, a Roman Catholic, had been collected. The first group was then loaded and I followed behind in the station wagon with A. and the Gentile wife of one Hebrew Christian with an infant-in-arms.

We then proceeded through Zone B to assembly point number 2, where the rest were put in the army vehicle apart from one mother and small son who were taken into my station wagon. We then proceeded to the exit of Zone B in Julian's Way where we linked up with the army officer who preceded us in another station wagon; then we proceeded down Julian's Way, past the Mamilla crossroads and up St. Louis' Way, past Barclay's Bank, a station wagon before and behind the three-tonner. Words of amazement came from the two mothers in my station wagon who had not been through this desolate part of Jerusalem since the beginning of the trouble in December. All went past Barclay's Bank and down the hill past Notre Dame towards the Damascus Gate. We were waved past the road checks and so to St. George's without incident. Here we met one snag; the three-tonner was too big to drive in through the narrow entrance into the courtyard, and so, after much manoeuvring, the lorry was backed into the entrance and the Hebrew Christians hustled out as quickly as possible, as we did not wish this operation to be viewed by any stray Arabs in the vicinity. While this operation was going on, Miss Hurnard turned up with one

of the Hebrew Christian women who, in the flurry of loading at one of the assembly points, had got left behind in a room upstairs!

This operation was completed by Canon Witton-Davies and myself signing a receipt for the safe delivery of twenty-seven Hebrew Christians at St. George's on route for England. This receipt was delivered by the army officer to the Arab Higher Committee, who wished to have a Gate guarantee that they had got safely past the road checks at the Damascus Gate and that nothing untoward had happened to them during their short but pregnant journey.

The same evening that the Hebrew Christians were taken to St. George's a house curfew was placed on the whole of the Jewish area and a search was made to check up on those who had not registered for national service! There are no mistakes in God's time table.

May 7 – The Second Stage of Operation Mercy

The party was kept at St. George's until the following Friday when they were escorted by police armoured cars in two pick-ups to Kalandia aerodrome. Again nothing untoward happened on the way, though a group of Arabs had assembled at one point of the journey where the road runs through a small Arab village. They seemed to have got wind that something unusual was going to pass through that morning, but they took no more than a quizzical notice of the convoy. We did have to wait long on the air-field before a couple of Dakotas came down. The party, which now totalled forty – thirty-five Hebrew Christians and five English nuns – were taken on board and were soon speeding on their way to Haifa, marking the end of stage 1 of Operation Mercy, through all of which, I think, the good Hand of our God had been evident, undertaking and guiding in a very wonderful way.

I am afraid this evacuation has meant a lot of extra work for you and I realise that the planning for the future of these people will be no easy business. We feel that this has been for us a kind of spiritual Dunkirk. Since the beginning of the troubles last December, no fewer than forty-three Hebrew Christians, including eight children, belonging to Christ Church congregation, have left the country. Temporarily, at any rate, it marks a considerable retreat in our work, but it has been quite clear to us that there was no alternative course, though I realise that we cannot sit down and accept this as a permanent defeat. God must have a plan and a purpose for the future of work amongst Jews in this country, though, until this present chaos sorts itself out it may not be clear to us just what are the next steps to be taken. We can only wait patiently in prayer and expectancy for His guidance and leading.

Classification of the Evacuees

I have classified below, the various denominations to which the Hebrew Christians evacuated on the "Georgic" belong.



Church of Scotland:	2
Plymouth Brethren	4
Roman Catholic	1
Pentecostal (American)	4
Church of England	20 adults, 4 children and 1 infant (2 adults from St. George's congregation and the rest from Christ Church).

Letter of June 5, 1948²

Rev. C.H. Gill, M.A.,
16, Lincoln's Inn Fields,
London, W.C.2.

Christ Church,
Jerusalem,
5th June, 1948

Dear Mr. Gill,

Thank you very much for your letter dated 11/6/48.

In giving you the account of "Operation Mercy" I omitted the following, which reveals a further wonderful over-ruling of God in connection with this operation. On the day before we brought the refugees to St. George's there had been a tremendous amount of widespread shooting all over Jerusalem throughout the day. Hannah and I had to run the gauntlet in her van in making a double journey between Christ Church and the English Mission Hospital; passing along Mamilla Road and through Zone B. was particularly hazardous, with bullets whistling in all directions. The cause of this widespread shooting turned out to be the result of a coup by the Haganah who were driving the Arabs out of Katamon. With the situation threatening to deteriorate rapidly, the Army authorities became alarmed and rushed considerable reinforcements of troops and armoured vehicles to Jerusalem, which had the effect of checking the Jewish advance through Katamon and generally quietening the situation. From this time on until the end of the Mandate the military authorities took strong measures to hold the situation in check in Jerusalem until their forces were evacuated. The result was that the following day was the quietest we had had in Jerusalem for many weeks, with hardly the sound of a shot being fired.

Without the cessation of the shooting it is difficult to see how the first stage of Operation Mercy could have been carried out, as Miss Hurnard had to make about ten journeys to and from the Jewish area conveying the refugees and luggage to Zone B. over a very exposed stretch of road and the route taken by the refugees in the afternoon from the Zone to St. George's ran through an area which was always dangerous when widespread shooting developed.

Another point I should have mentioned in the description of this operation was the peculiarly difficult position in which Hebrew Christians were finding themselves in the Jewish area. Everyone under forty was required

² Jones to Gill, June 5, 1948, MEC J&EM 18/5.

to register for national service and those who had registered were given cards to this effect. Anyone found in the street without such registration card was liable to "arrest" and was forbidden to feed in cafes or restaurants. Hebrew Christians who offered for national service were turned down and therefore possessed no registration card and so their position was made intolerable.

