

Obituaries

PHOTOS: SAAR YA'ACOV + ISRAEL GOVERNMENT PRESS OFFICE, ALAMY

NEGOTIATING WITH policemen, using disguises, creating false visas and organising groups of smugglers were a few of the many risks Shlomo Hillel took in order to help over 125,000 Iraqi Jews safely reach Israel's border.

Born in Baghdad, Iraq, Hillel, who has died aged 97, was the youngest of the 11 children of Aharon and Hanini Hillel. He spent the majority of his later life as a high-ranking Israeli diplomat and politician, elected a member of the Knesset in 1953. He came to Palestine, then under British Mandate, at the age of 11, where he attended high school.

His work began at the age of 23 when he was sent undercover to Iraq by the Haganah, a paramilitary organisation in Palestine, then under British Mandate. He was chosen by his Haganah comrades in 1946 to join the particular branch that would go to Iraq on a Zionist education mission.

Disguised as an Arab, he was sent to teach Hebrew and share Zionist values. He also began to help smuggle Jews to Israel in trucks which were travelling between Baghdad and Haifa, a Palestinian port.

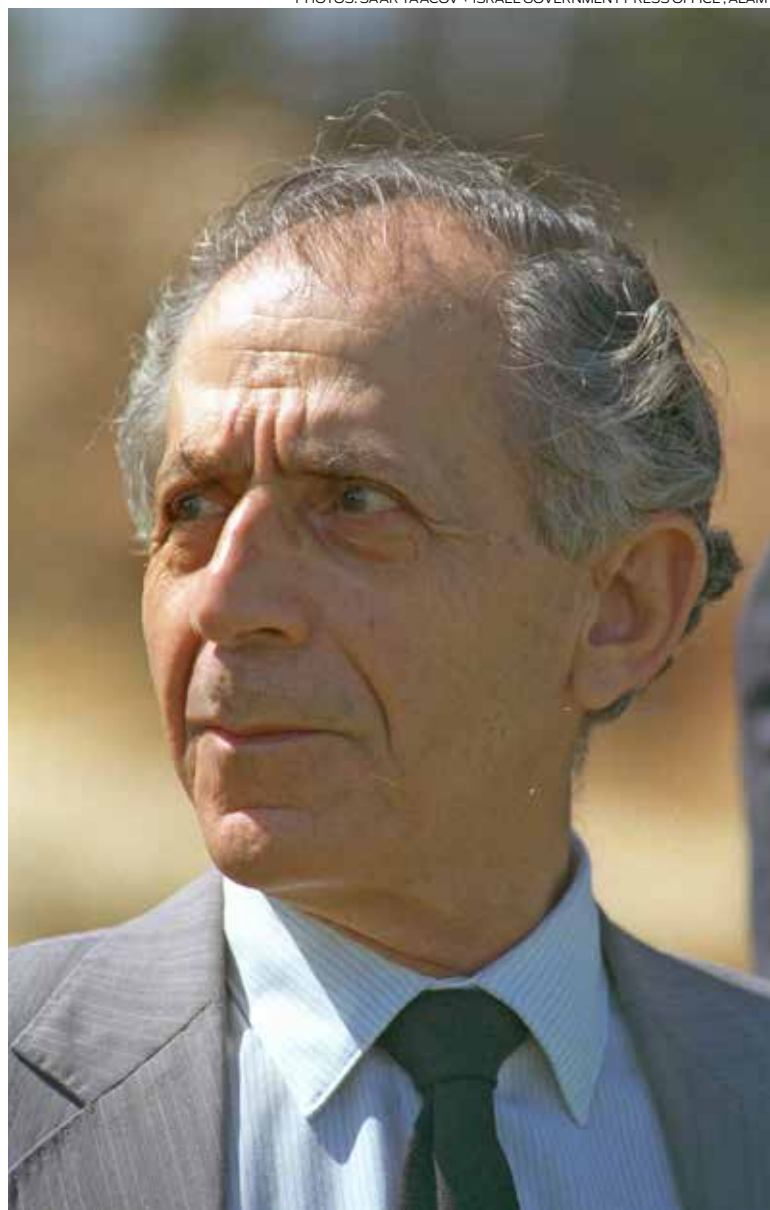
However, the British restricted the number of people who were able to move to Palestine, and Jews were forbidden to emigrate from Iraq. Hillel took it upon himself to act in secret, smuggling Jews to Israel on an American cargo plane which he secured with the help of the Haganah.

In the time that the plane rested on the runway before take-off, he helped Jews who were hiding by the runway to secretly make their way on-board without the Iraqi authorities knowing. He pretended to be a flight attendant to avoid suspicion. The plane landed 50 young Iraqis safely in a field near Yavne'el, a town on the Sea of Galilee. Following its success, Operation Michaelberg, as it became known, was repeated once more.

Iraq's Jewish community, one of the oldest in the world, lived harmoniously with their Arab neighbours for many years before Arab nationalism and antisemitism took shape. Most notable is perhaps the 1941 pogrom which resulted in the deaths of several hundred Iraqi Jews. The summer of 1947 likewise saw much hardship and suffering for Iraqi Jews as the situation became even more precarious at a time of war and conflict.

Hillel acted on this and made his way to Iran in June 1948, posing this time as a Frenchman. He encountered a Jewish-born priest on his way, Alexander Glasberg, who was acquainted with the French interior minister. The priest helped him organise visas for the Jews; meanwhile Hillel bribed the Iranian police to turn a blind eye. After crossing the border between Iraq and Iran, the first group flew to Paris, took a train to Marseilles and sailed to Israel. Subsequent groups were able to fly to Israel directly. Within just a few months, several thousand Jews safely settled in Israel.

In 1950 a new government in Iraq passed a law allowing Jews to migrate for one year, on the condition that they renounce their citizenship. By now an experienced smuggler, Hillel assisted thousands more Jews on their journey out of Iraq. He disguised himself as a Briton called Richard Armstrong, a representative of an American charter company called Near East Air Trans-



Shlomo Hillel

Master of disguise behind the exodus of 250,000 Iraqi Jews

port, through which he managed to arrange a meeting with the Prime Minister, Tawfiq al-Suwaidi. The head of the Baghdad Jewish community, who happened to be a cousin of Hillel, was present at the meeting but fortunately did not recognise him. He joined Hillel

by endorsing the plan to help the Jews out of Iraq.

Much to Hillel's surprise, almost 100,000 Jews registered to emigrate in the coming months. Each person was allowed to take one suitcase and a small amount of money. By 1952

about 125,000 Jews had migrated to Israel on 950 flights. A small operation was eventually transformed into the movement of 95 percent of Iraqi Jews to Israel. Today only a handful of Jews remain living in Iraq.

This covert network became the largest air-migration in history. It was named Operation Ezra and Nehemiah, after the prophets who led the Jews out of Babylon. In 1988 Hillel published his book, *Operation Babylon*, describing his crucial role in the exodus of the 250,000 Iraqi Jews. He also explains that a key reason he decided to be part of the cause was that his wife was a survivor of one of the immigrant boats that arrived in Palestine from Europe after 1945. This made him realise that a quiet job on the kibbutz wasn't for him and that he wanted to help Jews abroad and bring them to Palestine.

His son Ari points out that his father's use of fake identities and passports was —“a very dangerous activity” — and had he been caught he would probably have been executed.

In his later years Hillel served in the Knesset between 1952 and 1959, as minister of the police and as minister for the interior. He also studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1955. In accordance with his work prior to joining the Knesset, he oversaw aliyah, the right of foreign-born Jews to emigrate to Israel. Hillel then worked in diplomatic posts, including as ambassador to numerous African countries in the 1960s. He returned to the Knesset in 1969 and remained until 1992. He was elected speaker of the Knesset in 1984.

Hillel's enduring dedication to the Iraqi, Israeli and Jewish communities was reflected in his efforts to preserve some of the historic locations in the creation of Israel with The Society for the Preservation of Israel Heritage Sites. Another site he worked with was the Ayalon clandestine subterranean bullet factory. Here, from 1946 to 1948, Hillel was the leader of a young group who made the bullets Haganah needed to prepare for the attack of the Arab countries when Independence was declared.

Reuven Rivlin, President of Israel, told *The Jerusalem Post* that Hillel “came from a great generation, a generation that fought with its hands for Israel's Independence and its existence as a safe haven for the Jewish people.”

Many lucky enough to know him could not deny that among his admirable qualities was his modesty. The numerous Iraqi Jews grateful for Hillel's actions included his own son Ari, whose Ethiopian wife, as they later found out, had herself been saved, thanks to Hillel's work. It was he who decreed in 1977 that Ethiopian Jews would be permitted to make aliyah.

This beautiful story is one that exemplifies and epitomises the extraordinary efforts and the critical role that Shlomo Hillel played in changing the lives of so many Iraqi Jews. He is held closely by the community of Iraqi Jews around the world, who remember him fondly for his altruism, courage and hard work.

Shlomo Hillel is survived by Ari and his three granddaughters. His wife Temima, whom he married in 1952, pre-deceased him in 2011. His daughter Hagar also died in 2005.

NATASHA DANGOOR

Shlomo Hillel: born April 9, 1923. Died February 8, 2021



Above: former Israeli diplomat and minister Shlomo Hillel. Below: during an interview at home in Raanana, 2018



www.thejc.com
020 7415 1500
editorial@thejc.com

Editor

Stephen Pollard

Deputy editor

Jake Wallis Simons

Assistant editor

Orlando Radice

Associate editor

(community & news features)

Barry Toberman

Associate editor (features)

Keren David

Assistant editor (education)

Simon Rocker

Political editor

Lee Harpin

Literary editor

Gerald Jacobs

Food editor

Victoria Prever

Obituaries editor

Gloria Tessler

Supplements editor

Angela Kiverstein

Special correspondent

Anshel Pfeffer

Travel editor

Cathy Winston

Reporters

Mathilde Frot

Rachel Steinberg

Media production manager

Ben Grossman

Production assistant

Ben Castiel

Creative director

Gus Condeixa

Senior designers

Lisiane Dressler

Sheree Fadil

Contributing photographers

Marc Morris 07973 139540

Lawrence Purcell 0161 795 1115

John Rifkin 020 89581370

EDITORIAL

editorial@thejc.com

Letters for publication should be

sent to letters@thejc.com

Obituaries for publication should be

sent to gessler@thejc.com

Local news and photos for

Community should go to

community@thejc.com

CEO

Katharine Pottinger

MARKETING & CIRCULATION

marketing@thejc.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS

customerservices@thejc.com

Finance director

Anna Nemchinova

ACCOUNTS

accounts@thejc.com

Commercial director

Debbie Rose

ADVERTISING

advertising@thejc.com

SOCIAL & PERSONAL

AND CLASSIFIED

announcements@thejc.com

AD PRODUCTION

adproduction@thejc.com

Jewish Chronicle Privacy Policy

www.thejc.com/privacy-policy

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Direct Debit: £11 per month excluding delivery.

£13 per month including delivery.

Rest of World including delivery £199.

Jewish Chronicle Media Limited,

(issn-0021-633x)