

## Prof. Hillel Daleski: The Early Years

The lives of Israel's first generation of academics were anything but boring. As both physical and intellectual pioneers, they created the foundations of the new nation's world-class reputation in the Sciences and Humanities. Several of their personal sagas are presented in this new series of pioneer profiles.

Hillel ("Bill") Daleski was born in Johannesburg in 1926 to an active secular Zionist family. Although he received no formal Jewish education, from the age of eight he was a member of the *Habonim* youth group. He also attended an afternoon school to learn Hebrew – with indifferent success. Bill joined the Sixth South African Armored Division to fight in World War II and saw action in 1945 in Italy.

In 1947 Bill responded to a call for former South African soldiers to go to Israel to fight for the emerging Jewish State. At the time, his father was Chairman of the South African Jewish State Party, and his cousin, Arie Pincus, who later became Director of El Al and Chairman of the Jewish Agency, was Chairman of the Zionist Socialist Party. Not receiving

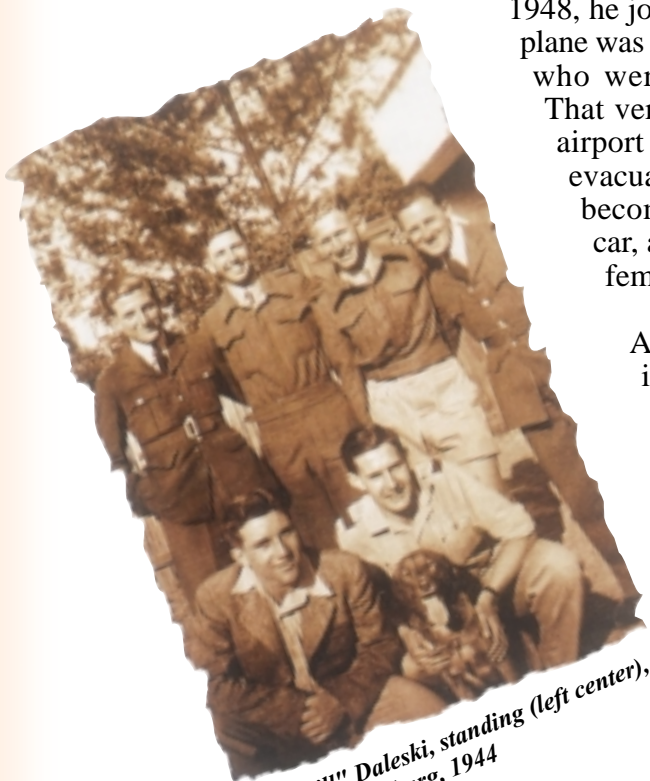
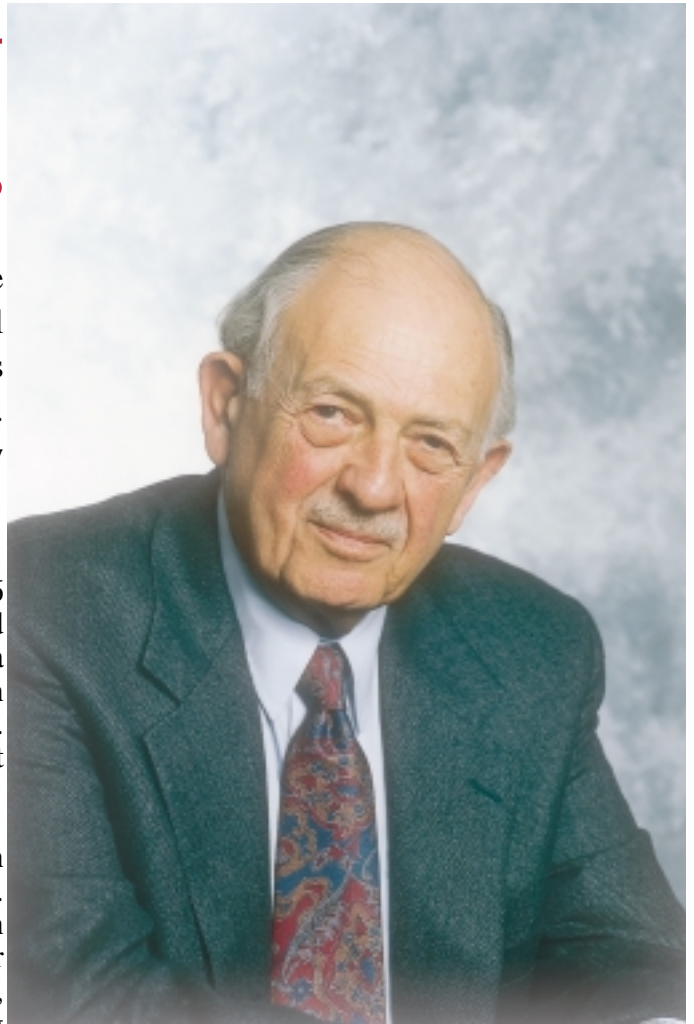
any reply, Bill began studying law at the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg) in March 1948. When his summons from the Zionist Federation finally came, in April 1948, he joined the first clandestine group of seven volunteers to head for Israel. Their plane was met at Lod Airport by a detachment of British soldiers, lined up on the tarmac, who were not fooled by their cover as "students" at the Hebrew University. That very day, the British Mandatory Authorities were scheduled to turn over the airport to the Arab military. Fortunately, the Haganah had sent an armored car to evacuate four Jewish employees at the airport, just hours before they would have become Arab prisoners. The South Africans were piled into the same crowded car, and Bill rode into Tel Aviv with a hand grenade in one hand and an attractive female airport attendant on his lap!

A bottle of whisky, handed over at a British checkpoint, bribed the truck's way into Tel Aviv, where the South Africans were unceremoniously abandoned on a street corner. A stranger bought the disoriented volunteers vodka at a local cafe, while one of their group, a pilot, phoned Ezer Weizmann, for whom he had regards. Weizmann came at once and settled them all at the Yarkon Hotel, at the Army's expense, until the Army could absorb them.

On May 15 the Egyptian Army invaded Israel and bombarded Tel Aviv. All ex-members of the (British) Jewish Brigade became officers in the new Israeli army; but Bill's lack of Hebrew made him leave the officer's training course after the first day. Instead, he was sent to serve as the commander of a gun crew, if and when Israel got some guns!

Miraculously, overnight, some ancient, undersized artillery pieces arrived. His unit rushed southward, to near where Ashkelon is today, where, guarded by troops, they shelled the advancing Egyptian tanks. Although the shells were totally incapable of penetrating the tanks' armor; they were sufficiently dramatic and noisy to convince the tanks to retreat.

The Egyptian-occupied Iraq-Suweidan police fortress dominated the area near Kibbutz Negba, blocking the passage of Israeli troops to the Negev. Under the cover of darkness, Daleski's group dodged the Egyptian searchlights, got



"Bill" Daleski, standing (left center), Johannesburg, 1944

through and, once in place, aimed their puny artillery at the fort. Their salvos had about the effect as throwing tennis balls at a brick wall!

Only towards the end of the year did effective 75mm German artillery pieces arrive. Each came with only four armor-piercing shells. The big offensive to liberate the Negev, due to begin in October, required first conquering the Iraq-Suweidan fort. All the 75mm anti-tank shells in the entire country were collected so that one gun could fire at the fort. Daleski's gun was chosen for this task. At night the crew moved into Negba and filled sacks with sand to build a fortified position. Covering the gun with a camouflage net, they waited. The army sent a jeep to draw enemy fire two kilometers away, and this violation of the cease-fire served as a justification for the offensive. Daleski's gun opened fire at close range on the police station. The anti-tank shells successfully penetrated the walls of the fortress and, after a half-hour bombardment, Israeli tanks took the fort without resistance.

Daleski was discharged from the Army at the year's end. He was only 22. The new State needed academics and thus, after only eight short but eventful months in Israel, he returned home in January 1949, in time for the next South African school year. There he earned his B.A. (Honors) and M.A. degrees in English Literature – he had decided that Israel didn't need more lawyers!

In those years, Daleski was also active in opposing local "Nationalist" forces which had supported Hitler during the war and still sought to intimidate opponents. After his marriage, he took a teaching job in a public school. When he asked his former high school principal why his application to teach there had been turned down, he was finally told, "because you Jews don't know your place." By 1950 he was learning Hebrew with a private tutor in earnest.

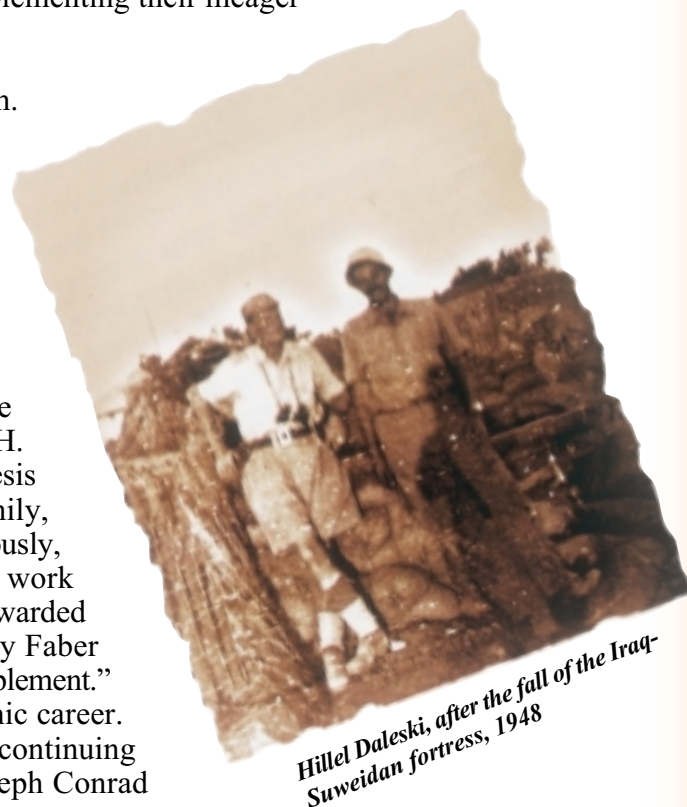
Hearing of an opening at the Agricultural High School in Pardes Hannah, he applied for the position. Braving the ongoing housing shortage and austerity regime in Israel, and the ire of the high school in Johannesburg that he left abruptly, he and his wife and infant daughter left for Israel in 1952. Upon arrival, he found out that the powerful Histadrut Labor Federation refused to let him teach for "confidential" reasons. Daleski's polite but ineffective British predecessor had been unable to control the rough *sabra* farmers' sons and troublesome Tel Avivians that were sent to board under his tutelage. The school wanted to replace him with Daleski, but the Histadrut defended the incumbent's tenure. Daleski refused the Histadrut's counteroffer of a job in Netanya. In the end, the two men ended up sharing the position, supplementing their meager half-salaries with private lessons, ordered by the school.

At the end of the year, Daleski left for a post at the Herzlia Gymnasium. Three months later he received a postcard from a friend, Ruth Nevo, advising him to apply for a position at the Hebrew University. The University, which was growing rapidly and required every B.A. candidate to take four hours of English Language and Literature a week, told him he had the job. However, when Daleski moved to Jerusalem, he still had no written contract.

1957, after several years at the Hebrew University, Daleski was awarded a stipend to begin his Ph.D. research at Cambridge University, a doctorate being a prerequisite for full faculty status. His research topic was D. H. Lawrence. He completed his research, wrote the first chapter of his thesis and returned to Israel. Times were hard. To support his growing family, Daleski had to teach full-time at the Hebrew University and, simultaneously, half-time at other universities. Every summer vacation, he restarted work on his thesis, which took him six years to complete. The degree was awarded with distinction, and the dissertation was later published as a book by Faber and Faber and favorably reviewed in the prestigious "Times Literary Supplement." This book launched Prof. Daleski's subsequent distinguished academic career. His second book, a study of Charles Dickens, followed in 1970. His continuing research on the English novel has led to subsequent volumes on Joseph Conrad and Thomas Hardy, and to two collections of critical essays.

Professor Hillel Daleski was elected to the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities in 1993, and to the American Academy of Arts and Science, as a Foreign Honorary Member, in 1999. He was awarded the Israel Prize for General Literature in 2000.

*(Adapted from an interview conducted by Nathan Cohen and reported in Hebrew by the Israel Academy's Academic Secretary, Dr. Lea Tzivoni).*



Hillel Daleski, after the fall of the Iraq-Suweidan fortress, 1948