

# **AN ABRIDGED HISTORY OF ISRAELI HAND TO HAND COMBAT FROM 1880 THROUGH 1929 (Part 1 of 3 covering 1880 to 1914)**

**By Noah Gross**

In this article I will attempt to present an abridged timeline of historical facts and events that are central to the development of Israeli hand to hand combat. The period covered spans from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1964. The reason for the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as the starting point is due to that being the period in which European Jews began immigrating to the land of Israel in what they saw as a return to their homeland. The end point is in 1964 when Imi Lichtenfeld retired from the IDF and started teaching Krav Maga in the civilian arena.

This long time frame spanning from the 1880's to 1964 is a period during which the hand to hand combat disciplines being developed, taught and practiced were for the most part oriented towards the training of men and women who would be or were members of security organizations, be they legal or illegal, local, nationwide or state organized such as in the military.

The following will be a condensed description noting the influential events, organizations, individuals and processes through 1929. The remaining years will be covered at a later date as this is a work in progress.

## 1880's to 1904

The first wave of immigration to Ottoman Palestine was characterized by the goal of its members; to become farmers working the land. The land was governed by a corrupt system; lawlessness and strength of arm were often the norm and the law de facto. The local population comprised of mostly Muslim Arab villagers, Nomadic Bedouin tribes, and a small number of city dwellers. The cultural gap between the settlers and the local population contributed greatly to friction, between the Muslim and Jewish communities, which revolved mostly around land and water rights.

The Jewish communities security drew on Ottoman law and it's inconsistent and biased enforcement. Safety was entrusted not to any kind of policing force, but rather using hired Arab guards. The service of hired Arab guards was more like accepting the protection of your local crime family, you're damned if you do and your damned if you don't. Communities crops, livestock, equipment, and personal safety were at the mercy of these guards who very often breached the trust and were in fact assailants themselves. The violence between the communities is well documented in many of the memoires of the settlers and their community chronicles. It was for the most part characterized by the use of blunt objects such as clubs and sticks and rocks, occasionally knives and swords and rarely the use of firearms until the 1930's when the nature of the violence escalated, culminating in civil war and then full blown war in 1948 (the war of independence) .

In the early days of resettlement this violence was very often met by the Jewish settlers spontaneously, yet did spur a few rare attempts at organizing trained security forces. One such force was organized in Zichron-Yaakov, using the newly established fire brigade to also provide security for the community. It was called "Macabim Notrei Menucha" ( "מכבים נוטרי מנוחה") literally meaning Macabi guards of rest/peace. It was active from 1887 to 1900 when it was disbanded due to a lack of fires. Nothing is known of their training. Another instance was the formation of "Agudat Hasarot" (association of the tens)(אגודת העשרות) in Rehovot. The association seems to have been active between the years 1891 -1895.

Members of the association swore an oath to engage in physical training and what was termed "war tricks" (תכסיסי מלחמה) i.e. hand to hand combat techniques.

We do not know what type of hand to hand combat training they engaged in save for the focus on stick fighting which was chosen in order to avoid fatal outcomes which would likely arise from the use of fire arms. In the evening after their meal in the communal mess hall, scores of workers would congregate by the bell, to train in stick fighting. One name is worth mentioning in this context and that is Michael Halprin, who was among the founders of this organization and an activist for the formation of security organizations until his death in 1919.



"Macabim Notrei Menucha" 1897, Zichron-Yaakov



Michael Halprin with guards 1909-1919

### 1904 to 1914

Social unrest in Russia expressed in the form of pogroms against the Jewish population sparks a self-defense movement in the Jewish communities in Russia and an exodus of Jews from Russia. Most immigrated to the United States, some to Europe and a small portion to Ottoman Palestine. This wave of immigration was termed the "Second Aliya" and the young men and women who comprised it effected great change in the small Jewish community in Palestine.

During this period leading up to WWI, a handful of activists, many of who were active in the self-defense movement in Russia, formed a secret order named Bar-Giora, in 1907. One of the central goals of the secret order, was to serve as a provider of security for Jewish agricultural communities. Its founding members a small cadre of men, took action and were instrumental in establishing the practice of Jews guarding their communities. Bar-Giora transformed into "Hashomer" ([Hebrew](#): השומר, "The Watchman") in 1909, which was a legal organization dedicated to Security and settlement.



This period of the second aliya also saw the formation of the first political party in Palestine, "Poale-Zion", in 1905, and the formation of sports clubs, Macabi in 1906 and the very short lived Shimshon (1909 – 1911). Part of Bar-Gioras' founding members were founding members of "Poale-Zion", as well as active in founding sports clubs and supporting their activity. This connection between political parties, sports clubs and security organizations will continue to be a recognizable pattern, growing in scope, breadth and verity until the formation of the state of Israel in 1948. These were times of early beginnings when it comes to activity centered on hand to hand combat within the security organizations.

A review of the scant documentation from the period regarding "Bar-Giora", "Hashomer" and its members shows that members engaged in physical and self-defense training. Wrestling, boxing and Jiu-jitsu are mentioned and there is talk of training programs for different organizations and local town security forces. There is no documented evidence that these programs came to fruition.

The use of Sticks knives and swords were also in evidence, but not as weapons trained on systematically. Documentation from sports clubs, evidence Boxing and Fencing and self-defense techniques as well as the use of sticks.

Figures worth mentioning are Michael Halprin, Alexander Zaid, Yechezkel Hankin, Zvi Nishri, and the Lempert Brothers.



Bund Self-Defense company – Pinsk, 1905



"Hashomer" 1909



"Macabi" Petach-Tikva 1908