

Epic heroine of Jerusalem

Fourteen-year-old Esther Cailinggold, a Jewish girl from an observant family, was among the children evacuated from London at the outset of World War II.

By the end of the war, Esther herself helped care for Jewish children who had survived the Holocaust and were brought to England. She came to believe that the true haven for all Jews was the Jewish State, where they could protect themselves.

A brave, young Bnei Akiya Zionist craving adventure, Esther resolved to leave her family in London and join the effort to establish the state. The British Mandate made ordinary aliya virtually impossible, so Esther arranged for an invitation to teach English at the Evelina de Rothschild School for Girls in Jerusalem.

Once settled in Palestine, Esther became ever more disillusioned with British policies. Something of a feminist, Esther was more inclined to activism than teaching.

The story of Esther's gradual involvement in the Hagana underground and her significant role in the defense of Jerusalem's Jewish Quarter are revealed through a trove of letters she wrote to her family and friends from November 1946 to May 1948.

The letters were found by Esther's brother, Asher, in 1992, and it is these that provide the voice of an eloquent participant in the dramatic story that is told in this book.

The biography of Esther Cailinggold is deftly woven and embedded in two sagas: the history of her family in its move from Eastern Europe to London and eventually to Israel; and the history of the emergence of the



An Unlikely Heroine by Asher Cailinggold, London, Valentine Mitchell
192 pages. £14.95/NIS 153

State of Israel.

Asher Cailinggold, who for many years worked in the Jewish Agency, has reconstructed the story of his older sister by painting a rich background and then throwing the spotlight on Esther, whose own lines stand out, as they should, by their insight, their personal candor, and above all their elegant expression.

Esther was a gifted speaker. In the year of Israel's emergence, she worked in the Hagana's English Broadcasting Service.

In her writing, we hear her tell of how she and others like her were able to maintain their religious observance while attending a dance festival, on the one hand, and while training in riflery, on the other.

We hear her relishing a bouquet of flowers presented by a beau

and attending a concert conducted by Leonard Bernstein, while at the same time reporting on the restrictions and dangers of life in Jerusalem and lecturing her family in Zionist ideology.

"I had really no idea," she writes, "what it means to live in one's own land, among one's own people, to be and to feel at home, without having to apologize to somebody every minute for being an outsider."

An idealist whose courage may have owed no less to naivete than to heroism, Esther again posed as a teacher to smuggle herself into the Old City of Jerusalem to help protect the 1,700 Jews who were essentially trapped within.

She darted from rooftop to rooftop, "dodging the shells and bullets with no sign of fear," as a comrade observed, to see to the needs of the armed defenders.

As the tragic drama of the Jewish Quarter's fall rushes to its inevitable finale, Asher Cailinggold's narrative becomes more and more intense.

Esther died in the Jewish Quarter one month before her 23rd birthday from injuries sustained in a blast — after reaching in pain to light Shabbat candles and grasping a siddur to recite the evening prayers.

In her last letter, presciently written before she was fatally wounded but read only after her death, she wrote: "I shall be only one of many who fell [in] sacrifice ... but I did find the excitement I have always needed and have enjoyed it."

The reviewer is principal of the Evelina de Rothschild Junior High School in Jerusalem.

Available at Steimatzky