

Main Street, Israel

By Jack Goldfarb

Teeming, tumultuous Tel-Aviv is the throbbing heart of Israel, but the pulsating artery of this mushrooming metropolis is the two mile stretch of main street called Allenby Road.

This tree-lined throughfare, the hub of Israeli commercial and social life, bears the name of Viscount Edmund Henry Allenby, the celebrated British general who ended the six hundred year Turkish rule over Palestine in 1917.

Beginning at the blue Mediterranean shore, the street winds its heavily trafficked way up a gradual incline passing the old Knesset or Parliament Building, through the main Second of November Square, past the great white-domed synagogue until it finally reaches its explosive climax at a bustling, five-cornered intersection that scatters the animated activity and motley movement of the street into diverse directions. Along

its colorful route, Allenby Road bisects a score of streets whose blue signs proclaim in three languages—Hebrew, Arabic, and English—the names of heroic figures in Jewish history . . . Bialik, Rothschild, Montefiore, Lord Samuel, Ben Yehudah.

Only a leisurely, browsing stroller can catch all the multiple elements that make up this heterogeneous little country and its energetic people who move along Allenby from daybreak until midnight. But the one rarity, except on Sabbath days, is just such a leisurely, browsing pedestrian. Everyone seems keenly intent on a serious mission, and even the tourists are swept along in the turbulent stream. In Israel a tourist seldom remains apart as a mere onlooker. With the easy friendliness that prevails, he soon finds himself getting deeply interested in the problems of Israel's struggle, and he discovers that he shares in the spirit of hope and

patience and determination.

Tel-Aviv, founded less than fifty years ago as a suburb of ancient Jaffa, has sprouted from infancy to manhood with such amazing rapidity that the widening of its principal thoroughfares became an impossible task. The city suffers, as a result, from chronic traffic congestion and poor vehicular circulation.

Mid-day traffic on Allenby can consist of any means of transport from a baby donkey to a 1954 luxury bus. Bicycles, cars, motorcycles, silver buses, trucks and taxis of every European and American manufacture are strung out in an endless procession causing insomnia or nightmares to the city's whitesleeved traffic police. Only recently have traffic signal lights relieved the situation at some busy intersections.

Allenby has a conglomerate mixture of European, American, and Middle Eastern atmosphere. In the tradition of European cities from Amsterdam to Athens, are dozens of outdoor "sitzung" cafes. Here businessmen, tradesmen, and "luftmenschen" (commission merchants without an office) gather. While they negotiate and transact in confidential conclave, other less commercially minded individuals casually pore over well-thumbed magazines and sip glasses of tea for hours on end.

Musicians, artists, and actors congregate at their own special cafes at definite hours to exchange professional news, cultural views, and the more mundane subject of where to find work.

The restaurants on Allenby are as varied as the national origins of the passersby. There are strictly kosher, as well as non-kosher places. More exotic establishments specialize in shashlik, shish-kebab, and the whole gamut of Oriental and Arabic cuisine. Snack bars for a quick beer and a sandwich are everywhere . . . and then there are "faloffel" stands.

"Faloffel" is by far the most popular between meal "nosh". Not only because of its relishing taste, but this food fills up the spare stomach spaces, and costs very little in a land where food is still rationed and prices are high. "Faloffel" is a round, envelope-shaped bread (called "pitah") in which are placed a couple of tasty balls of ground beans cooked in oil. Some chopped vegetables—cabbage, tomatoes, pickles, or peppers—are added, and a dash of hot sauce gives it a zesty send-off. This modern manna is washed down with a "gazoz"—a national drink concocted of fruit syrup and seltzer.

The American influence on Allenby is unmistakable. First of all, one sees American films playing to packed houses. However, the overflowing audiences are not necessarily a glowing tribute to Hollywood. The truth is there are not enough theatres in Tel-Aviv to meet the public's craving for entertainment, so that tickets often have to be purchased days in advance.

The popularity of ice-cream parlors and soda fountains is reminiscent of Main Street, U. S. A. Familiar names like "American Ice Cream Parlor" and "Brooklyn Ice Cream" hang in front of places where you can drool over Broadway variety sundaes, milk-shakes, and ice-cream sodas.

The bookshops on Allenby carry abundant stacks of all the familiar American magazines. The European editions of the *New York Times* and *New York Herald Tribune* are available a day or two after publication in Paris. Even Yiddish language newspapers printed in New York are on sale. Bookstore windows display copies of U. S. best-sellers, of alluringly covered pocket size reprints, and Hebrew translations of American classics.

The Middle Eastern influence is, of course, the most dominant. Despite the coolness of the older brothers in the Middle Eastern family of nations, Israel, like biblical Joseph, remains a vital though alienated member. Although Israel is eventually expected to exert a stimulating influence in this area, changes in this part of the world have previously come less frequently than centuries. But the essential Middle Eastern character of Israel is everywhere in evidence on Allenby Road.

Bronzed, white-bearded Jews in toga-like dress sit ceaselessly intoning prayers on synagogue steps . . . bootblacks tattoo rhythms with shoe brushes on ornately decorated shoeshine boxes . . . tall, swarthy Arabs in white "kaffiyeh" headdress toy with strings of black beads . . . women wearing richly embroidered blouses and tinkling filigree earrings bargain briskly with sidewalk vendors . . . musicians, plaintive singers, and invalids beg alms in an Oriental Bazaar atmosphere. All of these sights are the familiar cityscape in the lands between the Nile and the Euphrates.

Saturday brings the greater part of Tel-Aviv's populace to Allenby Road for their customary promenade to the seafront. Hundreds of fiercely-mustached servicemen on week-end leave brush shoulders with fresh-faced boys and girls from the kibbutzim who have come to visit their city kin. Pale, aesthetic, religious students stroll in long, black kaftans, their wide-brimmed hats perched over curled ringlets.

If you happen to be a student of ethnology, you can have a field day watching the throngs on the Sabbath. There are honey-colored girls from Iraq . . . tall, black-curly haired men from Persia and Bokhara . . . rusty brown youths from the Casablanca Ghetto . . . blonde, freckle-faces from Northern Europe . . . tiny-featured Yemenites of fragile frame . . . refined, sun-baked visages from Bombay and Calcutta . . . and native born "sabras" who have seen no other land but Israel. The sabras walk proudly, with an air of "big-brother" toward the more recently returned children of Abraham.

As the hour of one o'clock approaches on Saturday afternoon, the crowds begin to thin out and the folk head homeward for the big meal of the week. The traditional siesta nap follows. Only then does Allenby Road take on a strangely quiet air.

The sun blazes at its zenith. Except for a few restaurants and cafes, all the businesses are bolted shut. Street traffic is down to an occasional car or taxi. The six-day toilers with a land to build are resting indoors, and "Shabbat Shalom"—Saturday peace—has come to Israel.