

Independence Hall

The State of Israel *Is Born*

By June Glazer

The date was Friday, May 14, 1948, one day before the British Mandate was to expire. The place was the main hall at the Tel Aviv Art Museum on Rothschild Boulevard. The dignitaries' table and podium were at center stage. Behind it, two national flags adorned a panel of light-blue fabric. Between the flags hung an imposing portrait of Zionist visionary Theodor Herzl, and works of Jewish art lined the walls.

Outside, a celebratory crowd had gathered in eager anticipation despite efforts to keep the proceedings a secret. Invitations had been sent out by messenger that morning instructing the invited guests to arrive at 3:30 p.m., but word had leaked out and the street began to swell with people. With the arrival of David Ben-Gurion, a hush fell over Rothschild Boulevard as everyone waited to hear the live broadcast by Israel Radio—its first ever—of the dramatic and historical ceremony that was about to take place inside.

At exactly 4 p.m. Ben-Gurion, who at the time was executive head of the World Zionist Organization and chairman of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, banged the gavel and told the audience, "I shall now read to you the scroll of the Establishment of the State, which has passed its first reading by the National Council." He then read aloud the declaration and ended with the words, "Let us accept the Foundation Scroll of the Jewish State by rising." He called upon Rabbi Yehuda Fishman-Maimon to recite the Shehecheyanu, a Jewish blessing of thanksgiving, and then members of the Council and Executive signed the scroll. The proceedings concluded with the singing of Hatikvah. In all, the meeting took 32 minutes and was over in time for Shabbat.

"With that ceremony, Ben-Gurion put an end to the exile of 2,000 years," said Felicita Jakoel, senior tour guide at Independence Hall, the former site of the Tel

Aviv Art Museum. The room in which Israel's future first Prime Minister conducted the ceremony has been left intact and is open to the public. "He created a Jewish home by opening the gates for all the Jews in the world. We should never forget that this happened three years after the end of the Holocaust."

Ben-Gurion's grandson Dr. Moshe Ben Eliezer, a baby in 1948, says his grandfather understood that the opportunity to create a state might never come again, and despite the threat of impending war, the fears of many of his comrades, and pressure from the Americans not to declare, Ben-Gurion acted. "He marked his target, and the rest followed. It was his way of thinking, which to me is the quality of a great and unique leader," Ben Eliezer said.

In fact, the decision to establish a state was not Ben-Gurion's alone. In a meeting on May 12 at the Jewish National Fund offices in Tel Aviv, the Jewish National Council took the decision to declare by a vote of six to five. Says Ben Eliezer: "Yes, there were others. But Ben-Gurion was the leader. And in reality he founded the state before it was recognized by the United Nations. He built the entire substructure and foundation for its future."

The house that eventually became Independence Hall was constructed as the home of Meir Dizengoff and his wife, Zina, who were one of 66 families to begin a new neighborhood outside Jaffa in 1909. JNF gave the guarantee for a bank loan taken out by these families to build their new neighborhood, which soon grew into a thriving city with Dizengoff as its first mayor. After his wife's death, Dizengoff donated the house to the city and in 1936 it became the art museum. In 1978 it was rededicated as Independence Hall.

"To me, it has a certain reverence, and I can picture my grandfather standing there in front of the microphone,"

said Ben Eliezer, who heads the executive board at Ben Gurion House in Tel Aviv, the Prime Minister's former residence and now also a museum. "But Independence Hall is not only the place where the State of Israel was declared. It is also where the scroll was signed. That scroll is the democratic foundation upon which the State was laid and to which it must remain committed." ■



Dr. Moshe Ben Eliezer, now and with his grandfather David Ben Gurion