ELIAHU LANKIN

to win the Promised Land

STORY OF
A FREEDOM FIGHTER



TO WIN THE PROMISED LAND

Story of A Freedom Fighter

by Eliahu Lankin

This book begins with Lankin's early years in Eretz Israel when he risked his life protecting Jewish settlements against Arab attacks and guiding to safety Jewish immigrants from Europe as they waded ashore from clandestine ships.

Shortly after his appointment as member of the IZL High Command, he was betrayed by the Hagana to the British and interned in a detention camp in Africa. His subsequent escape and his harrowing journey as a hunted fugitive from the British is a fascinating part of the story.

In 1946, reaching Paris and safety, Lankin was appointed Commander of the Irgun in the Diaspora. In the book he describes Irgun's political contacts with the Rothschilds, the Catholic Church, the Basque underground and the Eastern Block countries.

At the book's dramatic climax, Lankin returns to the newly born State of Israel as Commander of Altalena, a landing craft loaded with armaments supplied by France for Israel's defense against invading Arab armies. In a startling turn of events, the Altalena was shelled and destroyed by the Israeli Army before the weapons could be unloaded.

Jacket: Harvey Klineman

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Translated from the Hebrew
by
Artziah Hershberg

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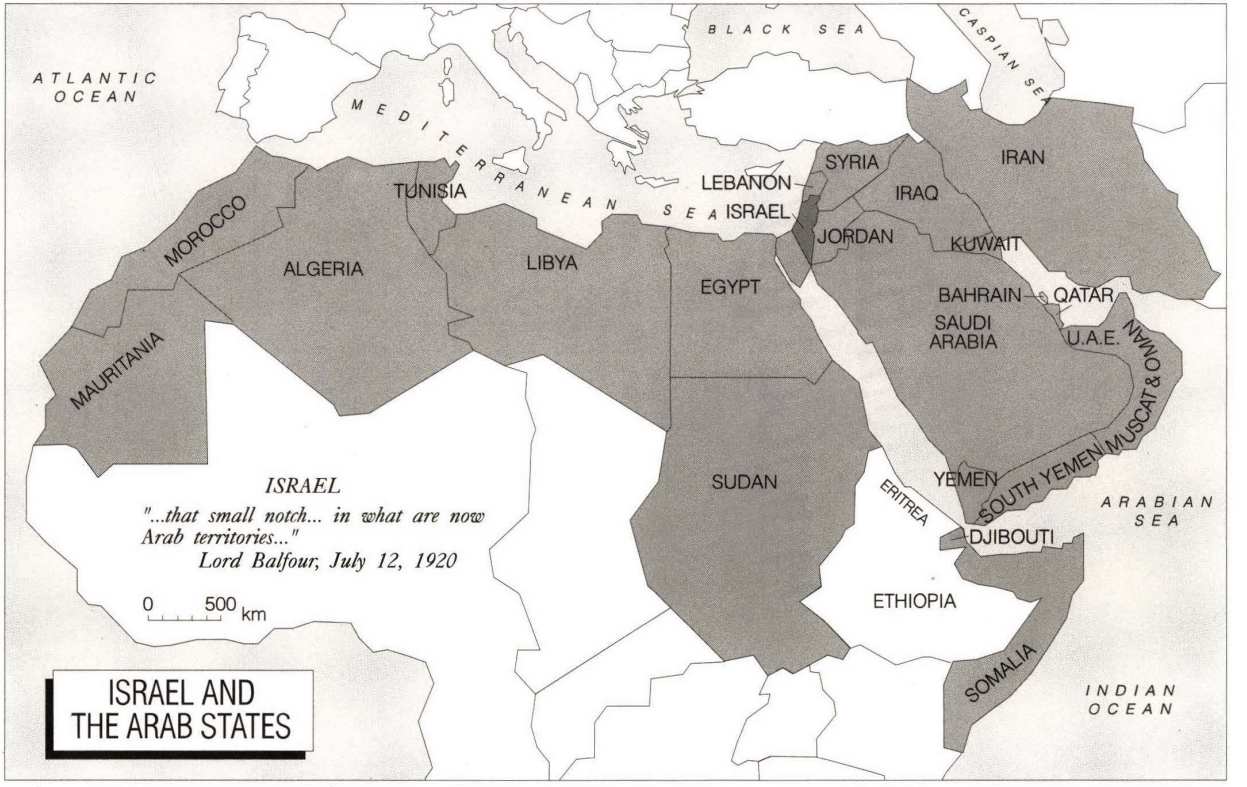
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ATLANTIC OCEAN
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
BLACK SEA
CASPIAN SEA
MOROCCO
ALGERIA
TUNISIA
LIBYA
EGYPT
MAURITANIA
LEBANON
SYRIA
ISRAEL
IRAQ
IRAN
JORDAN
KUWAIT
BAHRAIN
QATAR
SAUDI ARABIA
U.A.E.
OMAN
MUSCAT &
SUDAN
YEMEN
SOUTH YEMEN
ERITREA
DJIBOUTI
ETHIOPIA
SOMALIA
ARABIAN SEA
INDIAN OCEAN
ISRAEL
"...that small notch... in what are now Arab territories..."
Lord Balfour, July 12, 1920
0 500 km
ISRAEL AND THE ARAB STATES

In memory of
Altalena's fallen comrades
with love

and

the martyrs who died on the gallows
and the fallen in Israel's War of Independence
with reverence

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Introduction

by Michael Neiditch

In the crucible of circumstances and opportunities that existed in the Jewish community in Palestine, known as the *Yishuv*, there were three Zionist paramilitary organizations – the Haganah, the Irgun, and the LEHI. Each played a role in the creation of the State of Israel and their individual contribution to statehood cannot be calculated simply by recording the size of their forces and weaponry, the number of operations they undertook, or their relationship to the official Zionist institutions of the day. Each of these organizations had a following among the population of the *Yishuv*, and each had a following within the Jewish communities of the Diaspora. Their exploits, their leadership, and their ideology inspired or repelled different groups of Zionists. Though they often got in one another's way, and at times they worked at cross purposes, they were united by a shared belief in the justice of their demand that a Jewish state be created in the Land of Israel.

The conflicts among the Haganah, the Irgun and the LEHI carried over into the War of Independence, and helped shape the political landscape of the new State of Israel. The

overwhelming dominance of Mapai in the first twenty years of statehood had an unfortunate effect on the writing of the history of the creation of the State. Early histories focused almost exclusively on the role of the Haganah and its elite corps, the Palmach, to the exclusion or denigration of the contributions made by the Irgun, and of the much smaller LEHI, whose tactics aroused so much revulsion after the deaths of Lord Moyne and Count Bernadotte. Nonetheless, a full understanding of the circumstances which led to the creation of the State of Israel requires a fair assessment of the contributions of all three military organizations, their constituencies, and the impact of their successes on the course of events from 1945 to 1949.

Eliahu Lankin's memoir of his role in the Irgun from 1938 to 1948 helps to clarify the critical role which the Irgun Zvai Leumi (Etzel) played in the dissolution of the British Mandate for Palestine, and in the swift move towards creation of the State of Israel in the winter of 1947 – 1948.

Lankin is both a passionate and a modest chronicler. His commitment to the principles of the Irgun, and his role as a central figure and narrator do not lead him into overstatement. Even as one reads his compelling account of the voyage and destruction of the *Altalena*, one is struck by the sobriety of his judgments, and the reserved view of his own actions. Boastfulness is not one of Lankin's flaws.

Lankin's chronicle includes his record of the support which Poland's pre-war government gave to the Irgun in the form of professional military training for IZL leaders, who traveled for that purpose to Poland from Palestine in the early spring of 1939. Soon after the war began, he bore witness to the estrangement between the two key Irgun leaders, David Raziel and Avraham Stern.

Arrested by the British in December 1944, Lankin was interned at one of their detention camps in Eritrea. His imprisonment, escape and adventures as a fugitive comprise

a significant part of this volume.

The *Yishuv*'s struggle for dignity and independence took place on several continents with some of the most heroic episodes of that struggle less well-known than they ought to be. Lankin's saga is not confined to those moments when he or the work he was doing was at center stage.

After reaching Paris in 1946, Lankin was appointed Irgun's commander in Europe. He was Begin's man, and he was seemingly uninvolved in the tension which existed between the Irgun's forces in Israel and those in the United States and Europe. There is no reason to doubt the veracity of Lankin's uncomplicated understanding that Israel's War for Independence required more fighting men, more arms and more ammumition, and that the purpose of the *Altalena*'s voyage to Israel was to meet all three of those urgent needs. In the simplicity of his narrative there is a vigor and a passion which demands attention and reflection.

Accepting the logic of the premise that a sovereign state seeking *de jure* recognition from the community of nations must have a single military structure and an unbroken chain of command from the head of the government to the troops in the field, one can ask with some justice if Ben Gurion's brutal order to sink the *Altalena* was the prudent response to the unique circumstances of the moment. Ben Gurion's hatred of Menachem Begin is too well known to be denied, and it is equally well known that Ben Gurion had an enormous capacity to bear a grudge. The contemporary records expose his refusal to take the time necessary to defuse the situation. He ruled out any compromise with Begin and the Etzel leadership.

At the cabinet meeting where the decision to sink the *Altalena* was made, Ben Gurion brusquely rejected suggestions that negotiations be opened with the Etzel leadership. In rage he exclaimed, "This is an attempt to destroy the army, and this is an attempt to murder the state." In truth

it was nothing of the kind. Though Begin was certainly a hothead at that time, and his rhetoric often incendiary, he was too much the patriot to undermine the State's internal stability and its international quest for recognition. Ben Gurion had overreacted, putting politics ahead of the need for national unity. What was required was an attempt to find a solution to the arrival of the *Altalena* which did not result in Jews killing Jews, and the inflicting of deep wounds within Israeli society which would divide a population in need of a statecraft that bound them together.

One of the targets of Ben Gurion's swift and brutal attack on the *Altalena* was not just Begin and the Irgun, but the more formidable Mapam (United Workers' Party), Israel Galili, who had been the head of the Haganah (Ramah), and all those individuals who opposed Ben Gurion's efforts to create a national defense force subordinate to the state and free from the control of any political party. As Professor Yoav Gelber of Haifa University recently noted, "At the time, the exclusion of politics from the army (in Israel) was still an unknown and unaccepted concept."

From March to July, 1948, Ben Gurion had fought for this change in the relationship of the military to the state. In May he began a campaign to bring the Palmach under his control. On May 26th, the Provisional Government of Israel isued the "Israel Defense Forces Order" which established the legal basis for the army's existence as the sole armed force in Israel. In striking down the Irgun at Kfar Vitkin, he was also sending a message to those leaders in Mapam who opposed in principle his plan to make the army solely an institution of the state, and who proposed instead a 'workers army' and had floated a plan to create yet another military force which would be loyal to the Histadrut.

It may be true that asking for part of the weapons brought on the *Altalena* to arm the Irgun battalions, and only then to make the remainder available to the Israeli

army, Begin was violating the June 1, 1948, agreement he had signed with the Provisional Government of Israel requiring Irgun members to join the army in battalion units. However, there is no proof that he intended to undermine the authority of the national military command. Ben Gurion, as the leader of the infant state, needlessly aggravated the situation with his false claim that Begin was preparing to create a private army, an army within the army. At the conclusion of the affair, Ben Gurion's declaration on the radio, "Blessed be the cannon that shelled that ship" – was both provocative and inflammatory.

Every last member of the Irgun was a Jewish patriot, and a Zionist, who risked his life for the cause of Israel's independence. It was irresponsible and cruel for Ben Gurion to try and deny the Irgun a rightful place as a partner in the process that created the State of Israel. Ben Gurion used the *Altalena* as a weapon to marginalize the Irgun and the Herut party it gave rise to.

Much of the harshness and name calling that in 1992 continues to poison Israel's political discourse can be traced to Ben Gurion himself. He was among the first of Israel's political leadership to question the patriotism of his opponents and to accuse them of treason.

Eliahu Lankin's memoir is free of any anger directed at his fellow Israelis. He seeks only to set down his story and to inform his reader. Sorrow colors his account of those awful days at Kfar Vitkin. Those who are able to recollect these events firsthand will be impressed by the accuracy of his memory and the calm with which he has set those memories down.

Historians scholars and all those interested in the events which led to the establishment of the State of Israel will be in his debt for bringing light to an important part of history of the bitter struggle for independence that for too long has been hidden by shadows.

Tribute

By Menachem Begin

I would like to pay tribute to Eliahu Lankin, the author of this exceptional book which deals with Irgun's activities during the crucial years, 1938-1948. Highlighting the events that influenced the course of Irgun's history, the book is a fascinating story of an underground fighter, a story which takes its author from Eretz Israel to the British detention camps in Africa, then on to Europe and finally to the newly born State of Israel.

Eliahu was a soldier and a commander, a warrior and a comrade, a dreamer and a man of faith. This self-effacing modest man, deeply troubled by his people's distress, ready to do anything that would set his people free, is the archetype of the Hebrew freedom fighter. A follower of Zeev Jabotinsky's spiritual leadership, a graduate of Betar, and one of Irgun's soldiers and leaders, in this book he reveals himself as kind, resolute, and meticulously honest.

The words of Rudyard Kipling in his poem *IF* describe Eliahu and his conduct in life better than any prose his friends can muster.

Excerpt from the Preface to THE STORY OF THE COMMANDER OF ALTALENA (in Hebrew), 3rd Edition, published by Hadar, Tel Aviv, 1974.

IF *by Rudyard Kipling*, (1865-1936)

If you can keep your head when all about you
    Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
    But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
    or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
    And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream – and not make dreams your master;
    If you can think – and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
    And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
    Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
    And stoop and build'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
    And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
    And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
    To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
    Except the Will which says to them: `Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
    Or walk with Kings – nor lose the common touch
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
    If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
    With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
    And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son!

Preface

The Story of the Commander of Altalena was first published in Hebrew in 1950, and has gone through two additional editions in 1967 and in 1974. It was translated into English by Artziah Hershberg in the 1970s, but I did not pursue publication of the English version at that time. In 1988, the publisher of this book, who had heard of the existence of this translation from a mutual friend, asked to read the manuscript. He was enthusiastic about the story and urged me to publish it, particularly because the English speaking public knows so little about the events described in my memoir.

This book is a personal account of my years in the Irgun Zvai Leumi, an underground military organization which fought for the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz Israel. It is not a historian's account based on scholarly research, nor is it a political analysis based on documentary evidence. It is a story of personal experiences of one who participated in the stormy events which shaped the political climate of the young State of Israel, and which still influences the political attitudes of a significant segment of the Israeli public.

The events in this book are described as I saw them, with the focus not on my personal life, nor on my feelings and actions, but on the events in which I played a part. I

tried to avoid taking partisan political positions, but I did not hesitate to express my feelings or opinions when they were an important part of the story.

The dramatic conclusion of this book, when the newly born State of Israel turned on its own freedom fighters, deserved some comment which is provided in the Epilogue. The opinions expressed therein are my personal views. My interpretation of the events is that of a participant who was in the eye of the storm and not of one who had to form his views on the basis of second hand accounts and on *post factum* documents, which are not always reliable.

Numerous individuals helped in the preparation of this English translation for the press. First and foremost I want to thank Artziah Hershberg who volunteered to translate my book from Hebrew many years ago. My wife, Doris, helped to edit the English translation of the book and throughout the process of preparing this book for publication offered her support and wise counsel, for which I am deeply grateful.

To aid the reader who may not be familiar with the background of the events described in this book, an extensive glossary has been prepared and is included in the Appendix. In preparing this glossary every effort was made to relfect the context of the period during which the events described in this book took place.

The publisher's editors made many helpful suggestions and introduced explanatory text for the non-Israeli readers. To them and to many others whose technical assistance contributed to the production of this book, I am also grateful.

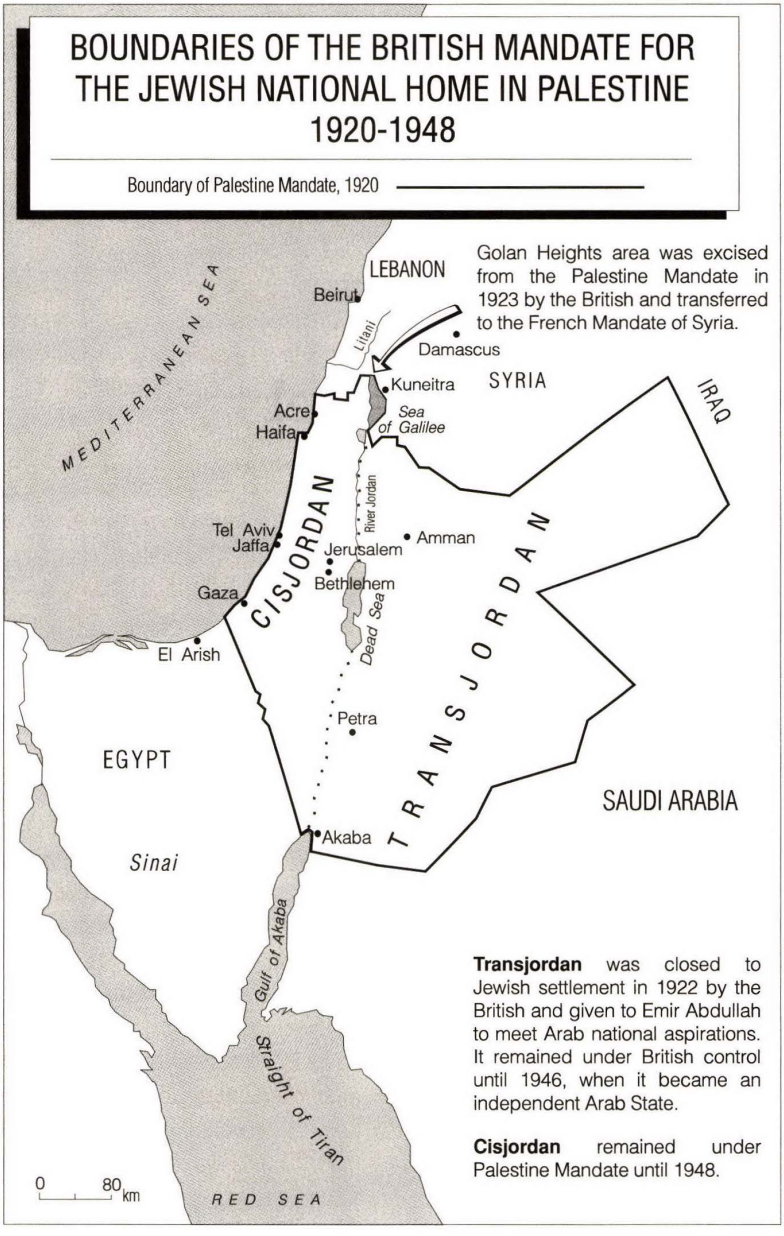
Finally, I want to thank my publisher and friend, Boris Bresler, for his undertaking the publication of this book and for his unflagging efforts in support of this undertaking.

Eliahu Lankin
Jerusalem
December, 1991


to win the
Promised Land

PART ONE

Eretz Israel


BOUNDARIES OF THE BRITISH MANDATE FOR THE JEWISH NATIONAL HOME IN PALESTINE 1920-1948
Boundary of Palestine Mandate, 1920
Golan Heights area was excised from the Palestine Mandate in 1923 by the British and transferred to the French Mandate of Syria.
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
LEBANON
Beirut
Litani
Damascus
SYRIA
Kuneitra
IRAQ
Acre
Haifa
Sea of Galilee
CISJORDAN
River Jordan
Tel Aviv Jaffa
Jerusalem
Amman
Gaza
Bethlehem
Dead Sea
TRANSJORDAN
El Arish
Petra
EGYPT
SAUDI ARABIA
Akaba
Sinai
Gulf of Akaba
Straight of Tiran
0 80 km
RED SEA
Transjordan was closed to Jewish settlement in 1922 by the British and given to Emir Abdullah to meet Arab national aspirations. It remained under British control until 1946, when it became an independent Arab State.
Cisjordan remained under Palestine Mandate until 1948.

1

On The Eve of Kol Nidrei - 1938

The only synagogue in Zichron Yaakov was full to capacity on the eve of Yom Kippur. All members of the village, young and old in holiday attire, were gathered inside to attend the holy service.

I stood alone in the empty, twilit street – khaki-clad, a knapsack strapped to my back. Stealing into the old section of Zichron, I knocked at the window of a house and called softly, "Yosef." Yosef Blum, one of the leading settlers in Zichron, was waiting for me.

"Is the mare ready?" I asked. He led me to the stable where the mare was already saddled. She left her stall reluctantly, snorting at the air, nostrils trembling, ears pricked up. She eyed me, it seemed, suspiciously. I stroked her neck, climbed into the saddle, and rode out of the yard. Yosef's voice followed me as he called, "Good luck!"

To circumvent the houses, I had to thread my way through fields and vineyards. In the distance, I heard the

cantor's voice chanting the first words of the opening prayer on the eve of the Day of Atonement, "Kol Nidrei..."

Finally, I reached the road descending to Binyamina, where I could no longer be seen by the British patrols on the main road. Opening my knapsack, I took out the revolver, loaded it, and shoved it into my belt. At the entrance to the Binyamina settlement, near a grove of cypress trees, a rider dressed as a Bedouin awaited me with a gun across his knees. He was Mordechai Paikovitch-Allon, head of the Binyamina watchmen.

"How did you manage with Egged this time?" asked Paikovitch as we left the cypress grove and rode toward the sea. Egged was the largest Jewish bus company in Eretz Israel.

"This time it was easier to convince them," I replied. "But they still haven't forgotten the run-around I gave them the last time." In 1937, the arrival of the first *Af-Al-Pi* ship was delayed several days beyond the appointed time. We were not notified about the delay, and Egged buses assembled each night only to be sent back empty in the morning.

Now, on the eve of Yom Kippur, another ship was due to land, this time bringing nearly 400 people – the largest group ever.

"We won't be able to transfer them to the buses immediately because of the holiday," said Paikovitch. "But I managed to get permission to use Zerkania." Zerkania, now an abandoned ruin, had originally been built by Baron Edmund de Rothschild for the first settlers of Binyamina. "The place will be at our disposal. It will be cleaned and stocked with food, too," he added. "They'll be hungry after their journey."

We reached a long, narrow road that stretched before us in the darkness. It was the main Tel Aviv highway. The riots of 1936-39 were at their peak and hostile Arabs roamed the area. The local British police and British army

patrols maintained a delicate balance between their war on Arab marauders and their efforts to prevent illegal Jewish immigration. The emergency regulations imposed on the country by the British Mandatory administration did not differentiate between the two. The death penalty awaited every bearer of illegal arms, whether he was an Arab marauder lurking in ambush or a watchman guarding a Jewish settlement. The nightly curfew imposed on travel between sunset and sunrise was "neutral," too. It applied no less to Jewish travelers than to Arabs who were out to mine roads or uproot orchards and burn crops. Army patrols were under orders to open fire on anyone seen near the road after dark and to ask questions later.

We examined the terrain. No lights of army reconnaissance vehicles were visible. Racing across the highway, we disappeared between sand dunes and bushes. In the stillness of the night, I could hear the pounding of the surf above the pounding of my own heart.

"Did you make sure there would be no misunderstanding this time?" Paikovitch asked me. "Did you describe the place exactly?"

I had done all I could. Our contact man had gone to Europe from Eretz Israel and was now aboard the ship. Before he left, I showed him the two small islands on the map and pointed out the mountain ridge that ends near the beach. No doubt from the sea, they would be able to discern the rim of the mountain range coming to an abrupt end on the horizon as though cut by a knife.

We had another half hour's wait at the seashore. Suddenly, I began to discern a black mass. Paikovitch, too, was staring intently out to sea. We climbed down from our horses.

"Shall I signal?" I asked him.

"Go ahead and try."

I signaled with my flashlight – dot dot dash, dot dot dash, dot dot dash – our prearranged signal. Another second. The mass came closer.

Again, dot dot dash, dot dot dash. Another pause. Suddenly a faint light blinked out of the darkness. Dot dot dash. They had arrived.

It took a long time before a smaller shape separated from the larger mass and approached the shore. It was the first boat.

It halted about 30 yards from where we stood. The first man jumped out of the life boat knee-deep into the water. After him came a second and a third. They waded toward the shore. The first one coming up to us stopped short. I had forgotten Mordechai's Bedouin disguise. "Come, come, it's OK!" I shouted, running toward him with my arms extended. He embraced me. It was the ship's commander, Shmuel (Shmulik) Tagansky.

The first of the passengers whispered, "I must kiss the ground," and stretched out on the wet sand.

One by one, they appeared out of the darkness. We directed them to a small sand dune and told them to sit silently. Two more life boats arrived. Tagansky returned to the ship to supervise the debarkation. Paikovitch and I met the newcomers on the shore. They were all young men and women, little children, too. One man carried a small baby.

The boats hustled their passengers ashore and returned for the others. There were only three boats, each able to hold only thirteen people at a time.

The new immigrants came from Eastern Europe. They rose from the water like spirits and ran to the cover of the dunes. Soaked to their waists, heavy knapsacks on their backs, they stumbled in single file. When they passed us they whispered, "Shalom, shalom!"

I was suddenly struck with an idea. If, instead of knapsacks, each of these new immigrants carried a gun and

ammunition. It would entail the same danger, the same effort. But instead of helpless refugees, there would be armed soldiers, entire battalions from many ships, landing simultaneously at various points along the coast of Eretz Israel. In one night, we could raise an army that could quickly free the country from British rule. With an uprising of the men of the underground that same night in all parts of Eretz Israel, could the British keep their stranglehold on the land?

The idea intoxicated me. I was absorbed in contemplation when suddenly Paikovitch called, "Come, Eliahu, they're all ashore!"

We took a hasty leave of Shmulik Tagansky, who muttered a promise of 1,000 people by the end of November.

Paikovitch and I lined up the immigrants in threes to count them. Then we set out in a long column with Paikovitch on his horse in the lead, while I brought up the rear, cradling a baby in my arms as I straddled the mare. I was thinking what a story this child's parents will have to tell her when she grows old enough to understand. What a noble way to begin one's life.

It was already after two. The trek – almost entirely through the dunes – would take a good two hours. The people were tired after their week-long journey. Many of them staggered as they reaccustomed themselves to walking on land. Their knapsacks, water-logged and heavy, added to their difficulties. Occasionally, a woman would fall, and I would let her ride behind me on the mare to rest her legs.

After the first hour, the pace of the exhausted refugees slowed down. The gaps in the line became wider. Many dragged their feet, their strength ebbing.

After an hour and a half, Paikovitch and I dismounted and ordered everyone to sit and rest for a moment. The last stretch of the road had to be covered quickly and without mishaps. We needed to cross the highway, and woe to us

if a British patrol appeared while we were crossing. We explained all of this to the new arrivals.

As we walked between the rows, we found that many of the weary travelers were giving in to their fatigue. "We told you to sit, not lie down!" we rebuked them – we were afraid that they would fall asleep and we would not be able to wake them.

We did not have much time. After ten minutes, we gave the order to move on.

When we reached the highway, we saw headlights approaching and ordered everyone to hit the ground.

The cars passed. Then as fast as water-logged, sleep-deprived people could manage, we raced across the highway. I galloped along the line, urging them on. One woman fell before she reached the highway – she could not move on. I told her to lie quietly and that I would come back to get her. When the immigrants reached the grove of Zerkania, their safe haven, they threw down their knapsacks and collapsed on the ground.

I galloped back to the exhausted woman who was left behind. She was somewhat revived and apologized. It had been a long time since she had eaten or slept. I lifted her onto my horse, and we returned to the courtyard at Zerkania.

We rested there all of Yom Kippur day and the following night. A group organized prayers for the Day of Atonement and continued fasting. Another group gratefully ended their fast and attacked the food that Paikovitch had prepared. We watched, supervised, and engaged these new immigrants in conversation.

The next day at five in the morning, the Egged buses, which had been scattered throughout the neighboring settlements during the night, appeared punctually one after another. The best drivers had been chosen. They knew every road in the country.

We loaded the people and their knapsacks onto the

buses, which then scattered in all directions to carry the people to Betar work units in all corners of the land.

By the time I returned to Zichron Yaakov, it was nine o'clock in the morning, exactly fifty hours since I had last slept.

My head felt heavy. My eyes were red and I could barely keep them open. But one idea kept repeating itself in my mind – instead of knapsacks, guns.

Before long, I learned that I was not the only one who was preoccupied with this fantasy. The High Command of the Irgun Zvai Leumi, National Military Organization, also known as Irgun, IZL or Etzel, was already engaged in developing plans and making preparations for a military uprising – and I would soon be hearing from them.

2

Running the British Blockade

There was blockade running before 1938. Persecuted Jews from Arab lands, Jews from Bukhara and Turkestan groaning under the tyranny of Soviet Moslem republics, Jews fleeing from anti-Semitism and the economic depression in Eastern Europe, all packed their belongings, abandoned their homes, stole across international borders, and wandered for long months, sustained by the hope of a life of freedom in Eretz Israel. But when they reached the Land of Israel, they found its gates barred.

Early in the 1920's, the British Mandatory Administration adopted an immigration policy that was actually a policy of exclusion. Back in 1917, the Balfour Declaration, which articulated the Jewish Zionist aspirations for Palestine, had been approved by the wartime cabinet of Prime Minister Lloyd George. In recognition of this policy, the League of Nations in 1920 awarded the Palestine Mandate to Great Britain, making it "responsible for placing the country under such political, administrative, and economic

conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish National Home ..." And yet Britain's policy seemed to be an attempt to ensure that the Jewish National Homeland would never become a reality.

Traditionally sympathetic to the Arabs, the British Government was doing its best to see that the Jews would never become a majority in Eretz Israel. Following the Arab riots of 1920-21, the first High Commissioner, Lord Herbert Samuel, who was himself a British Jew, instituted a quota system which effectively put an end to free immigration of Jews even before it had begun.

Much to the dismay of many Zionists, the Jewish Agency made its peace with the exclusionary immigration policy of the British. The Agency was established under the terms of the Mandate as a Jewish public body charged with the tasks of consulting and cooperating with the British Government in the development of the Jewish National Home and settlement of Jews in Eretz Israel. Centered in Jerusalem, the Agency was the administrative arm of the Zionist movement while at the same time it maintained formal ties to the British Mandatory Administration. Agency representatives did bargain with the British and demanded larger allocations of immigration certificates, but they accepted the policy in principle.

The masses who were not granted certificates did not give up easily. When Jews arrived at the gates of Eretz Israel and found them locked, they entered by stealth, bribing border guards or slipping across borders at night. Some arrived as tourists, for as long as the British Consulates in Europe issued tourist visas for Palestine to Jews, and then remained in the country illegally. Here and there these operations began to be organized. Hayim Zaichik, a Jewish engineer in Warsaw, had contacts with the French Embassy and set up tourist groups to Syria and Lebanon, whence these "tourists" crossed the border into Eretz Israel. But

the sum of all these efforts resulted in a mere trickle of immigrants.

Mainstream Zionists did not fare much better. The Hechalutz was an association of Jewish youth that was established in 1905 to train its members to settle on the land in Eretz Israel. Even with its tens of thousands of members, the Hehalutz received only 5,000 immigration certificates in a "good" year. In 1936, when the world economic depression gave the Mandatory authorities an excuse to cut down the immigration quota, Hehalutz received fewer than 3,000 certificates. Members of the movement abandoned their homes and spent long years in training camps, and yet they understood that their chances of reaching Eretz Israel were slim. Many people lost heart.

Even more desperate was the situation facing members of the Zionist Revisionist Movement. This was a movement founded in 1925 by Zeev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky which advocated a Jewish State within boundaries defined the original British mandate, on both sides of the Jordan. After the Revisionists left the World Zionist Organization they were cut off from even the limited distribution of immigration certificates. Already in 1932, prior to the withdrawal of the Revisionists from the World Zionist Organization, Zeev Jabotinsky wrote that Jewish youth in the Diaspora must foster illegal immigration to Israel as a "national sport".[1] In October of 1933, the headquarters of Betar published its "Order Number 60" obligating every member of Betar to immigrate to Eretz Israel, even if illegally.

The Jewish Agency responded angrily to this battle cry. Influenced by the Agency, the Jewish press throughout the world began to publish articles against illegal immigration insinuating that its organizers were scoundrels who promoted such schemes for financial gain. The head of the Department of Immigration of the Jewish Agency, Yitzhak Gruenbaum, announced at a Zionist meeting in Warsaw

that he "would fight the illegal tourism to Israel with every means at his disposal." On November 28, 1933, he published an article in *Davar*, the Hebrew daily newspaper of the Labor Movement in Israel, in which he wrote, "Common sense dictates that tourism of that well-known type should cease."

But it did not cease. On the contrary, the trickle of "tourism of that well-known type" turned within a few years into a steady stream of ships carrying Jewish settlers toward Israel's shores.

In 1934, the ill-fated ship *Velos*, organized by a group of Zionist organizations in Eastern Europe, had to return to Europe with its cargo of 380 hopeful immigrants. This failure to break through the British blockade so affected David Ben-Gurion, who was then the leader of the Labor Zionist Movement, that for a long time afterwards he refused to even listen to proposals for a second attempt at bringing in another clandestine shipload of immigrants.

Three full years passed before anyone dared to organize another immigrant ship. But this time, it was done without the knowledge of the Jewish Agency. Bracha Habas, author of the official biography of Ben-Gurion,[2] writes that when Danny (the late Zvi Fund, an organizer of the immigration movement of Hechalutz) arrived at Ben-Gurion's home and told him that a small ship named *Poseidon* was on its way with 50 immigrants, Ben-Gurion jumped out of his seat as if bitten by a snake.

During those three years when the extensive machinery of the clandestine immigration movement was immobilized, Betar's blockade-running movement called *Af-Al-Pi* was born. This was the name adopted for the organized immigration of Jews into Eretz Israel in defiance of the restrictions of the British Mandatory authorities.

In the Summer of 1936, there appeared in Paris a young Jew from Eretz Israel by the name of Moshe Krivoshein

(later known as Moshe Galili) with a proposal for organized blockade-running by sea. Galili contacted the Revisionist leadership and the commanders of Betar, who decided to test his plan before it was adopted on a large scale. With the support of Betar in Vienna, Galili leased a tiny 50-ton Greek ship, loaded it with 14 passengers, and sailed directly from Piraeus to Haifa where he requested "asylum from the storm." The ship's papers stated that it was headed for Beirut.

In Haifa, Galili went ashore, contacted the local branch of the Revisionist Party, and was referred to Johnny Kop (Yona Kop-Tamir), who was Jabotinsky's nephew. An engineer with the Palestine Electric Corporation, Kop-Tamir arranged an electrical breakdown on the following evening, and under the cover of darkness the immigrants were brought ashore. Assisting in their debarkation was a small group of Jewish dock workers headed by Abba Hushi, who was then Haganah commander at the dock and later elected as Mayor of Haifa.

The Haganah was the paramilitary arm of the Jewish Agency, founded in 1921 to protect Jewish settlements from attacks by Arabs. Hushi warned Galili, "This time we helped, but next time you may not be able to count on us." Members of the Haganah were basically sympathetic to the idea of clandestine immigration, but they were under the constraints of the Jewish Agency, which was loath to compromise its position vis-a-vis the British Mandatory administration. They feared that what legal immigration they had managed to have till then would be cut off or curtailed.

The next time, the Haifa dockworkers were not needed. The success of Galili's first voyage convinced Betar leaders that an independent effort could succeed, without the Haganah's cooperation. And so the *Af-Al-Pi* movement came into being. Betar branches in Eretz Israel and abroad

organized to put this project into action. A quiet beach was located for the debarkation of the immigrants, distant from British police vigilance as well as from that of the Haganah: the desolate coast off Binyamina, at the foot of the mountains of Zichron Yaakov. Mordechai Paikovitch-Allon was then head of the Binyamina watchmen. I was head of the Betar watchmen of Zichron Yaakov and the commander of the local Irgun unit. We were appointed to be the "welcoming committee" on the shore of Eretz Israel.

Our contact with the immigrants was made by the staff of the Irgun Zvai Leumi. Ideologically linked with Jabotinsky's Zionist Revisionist movement, the Irgun was established by members of the Haganah who rebelled against the conciliatory policies of the Jewish Agency, preferring more aggressive tactics in defending the Jewish settlements against Arab attacks and open rebellion against the British Mandatory Administration. Yosef Kremin (code name Navon), the Irgun's representative and one of the senior commanders, was with us on that night in 1937 when we were to meet the immigrants on the Binyamina coast.

When we were notified that the first *Af-Al-Pi* ship was due to arrive in August, we contacted the Egged bus company, which agreed to furnish a number of its vehicles to disperse the immigrants. Zero hour was 11 p.m. As usual, the buses were scattered throughout the neighboring settlements awaiting zero hour. But there was no ship. We waited in vain until morning.

We repeated our vigil on the following night. At midnight, we detected a ship's lights off the coast. Although we knew that our ship was supposed to be blacked out, we sent out several signals. The ship immediately turned in our direction, and we soon recognized it as a police patrol boat.

We dove for cover among the bushes behind the hill, praying now that our ship *would not* arrive.

On the third night – again, no ship.

We finally decided that there was no further reason to continue waiting. I went by bus to Tel Aviv to apologize to the managers of Egged for the mix-up. When I re turned home in the evening, I fell into bed fully clothed, exhausted.

The immigrants arrived on the fourth night. They came and they found no one on the shore.

While at sea, the ship had sustained some mechanical damage, and she was forced to remain in a Greek harbor for three days while undergoing repairs. When the immigrants finally approached the coast of Eretz Israel, they could not find the appointed place and saw no signals. They sailed along the coast, not knowing where they were. Finally, they stopped near Caesarea.

Moshe Galili, who organized the blockade-running operation, decided to go ashore himself to seek contact. Not knowing the area, he stumbled upon some Bedouin tents but succeeded in getting away. After some time, he heard the chugging of a water pump in the night and turned in that direction, hoping that he had found a Jewish settlement.

Near the groves of Binyamina, Galili was detained by Jewish watchmen who began to interrogate him. When they ordered him to identify himself, he pretended to be drunk. The watchmen took him to the Binyamina guard house. Galili decided to try his luck and began whistling a Betar song. The sergeant, who turned out to be a former member of Betar, understood immediately that the young man was not an ordinary drunkard. He remembered the mysterious outings of Paikovitch on the previous nights and suspected that there was a connection between these events. He decided to summon my colleague.

Behind closed doors, Galili revealed his identity to Paikovitch, who sent a messenger to summon me. I saddled

the mare and galloped to Binyamina. It was morning by the time I reached Paikovitch, and Galili had already returned to his ship. Paikovitch explained that they had agreed to bring the ship in to the appointed place on the following night.

That morning, I was able to speak with assurance to Egged; and although they sounded dubious, they said they were willing to take one more chance. That night, the first organized *Af-Al-Pi* group of 54 immigrants successfully ran the blockade to be followed by thousands of others.

3

Blood Libel

Arab riots in Eretz Israel, directed against the implementation of the Balfour Declaration and the League of Nations Mandate, began in 1920 and continued intermittently throughout the Mandatory period. The first outbreak lasted from April 4 to April 7, 1920 and was restricted to Jerusalem with no reported casualties among the Jews. In May 1921, riots broke out along the coastal plain and lasted five days. During this time, 47 Jews were killed, 146 were wounded, and extensive destruction of property took place. Rioting again erupted in 1929, where 133 Jews were killed and 339 were wounded during six days. In 1936, a series of riots broke out which lasted intermittently for three years. During this time, 520 Jews and 60 British were killed by the Arabs. An estimated 6,000 Arabs were killed – most of them in an internecine war among opposing Arab factions.

The Arab Riots of 1936-39 had two political objectives. First, the Arabs wanted to convince the British that they could only remain in Eretz Israel by sacrificing Zionist goals. The second objective of the riots was to block Jewish immigration, settlement, and land acquisitions in Eretz

Israel. This was to be achieved by murdering the Jewish inhabitants in isolated settlements, disrupting traffic on the roads with terrorist attacks on transport, and finding other ways to destroy the economic fabric of the country.

The Arabs intended to intimidate the Jewish population and convince Jews of other lands that the fate of 500,000 Jews in Eretz Israel was at the mercy of their Arab neighbors. They intended to create a situation in which the Jews, fearing for their own and their families' lives, would forego their desire to immigrate to Eretz Israel, while those Jews who were already in the country would relinquish their Zionist aspirations and resign themselves to being a national minority in a largely Arab country.

The Jewish Agency did not view these acts of violence as a serious threat to the movement toward a National Home for the Jews – the goal stipulated in the League of Nations Mandate. The country's Jewish leadership adopted a policy called *havlaga* (restraint). The Agency called on Jews to refrain from retaliatory actions against the Arabs and to adhere strictly to the principle of "moral use" of weapons – in other words, to use weapons for defensive purposes only.

Violent arguments erupted within the Jewish community about whether watchmen who set up ambushes for the gangs of Arab marauders were acting in self-defense or had embarked on a military offensive. The policy of *havlaga* ended up serving the Arab cause. It helped prove precisely what the Arabs were trying to prove; that they were the only ones with the strength to create an upheaval in the British colony, and that peace would be restored only when the British agreed to accommodate the Arabs.

Members of the Irgun Zvai Leumi were determined to defy the policy of *havlaga*, and to retaliate offensively against Arab attacks. The Irgun leadership was out to convince the British that the Jews were capable of defending their rights

and would have to be taken into account by the British in fulfilling their responsibility under the terms of the League of Nations Mandate. The Irgun's counterattacks were also conceived as a message to the Arabs (and to the Jews as well) that murder of Jews would not go unpunished. Little did we guess in 1936, before the nightmare revelation of Hitler's death camps, how important this message was – not only for the Jews of Eretz Israel but for Jews all over the world. As a result of our defiance, the Irgun was condemned by the Jewish Agency and by the Haganah.

The year was 1938, the place Zichron Yaakov, one of Eretz Israel's main producers of grapes and wine. The village (now a town) reclines on the back of a mountain in the Samarian range and is blessed with a breathtaking view. To the west, the sea; to the north and the east, the peaks of the mountain chains adjoining Mount Carmel; and to the south, the coastal plain stretching toward the Negev. The vineyards in Zichron Yaakov extend over acres of lush and verdant hills.

As a green pioneer in Israel, I spent my first five years in Zichron harvesting the grapes and tending the land. I spent those years in a daze of happiness, filled with love for my adopted land and full of all the natural ardor of my youth.

And yet, in 1938, the area of Zichron Yaakov was one of the most embattled in the land. The "Little Triangle" is a small area including several Arab villages on the western slopes of the Samarian foothills. Traditionally, it is the spawning ground of the most radical Arab nationalists and is now the stronghold of Islamic militants. The Arabs of the "Little Triangle" gave no respite to the neighboring Jewish settlements. Almost every night, trees were uprooted in orange groves and orchards, fields and granaries were burned, water pumps were damaged, mines exploded on

the roads, and ambushes were set. Every day, the list of Jewish dead grew longer.

In the Jewish settlements, units of watchmen were sworn in as *gaffirim*, an auxiliary police force established under British control in 1936. In this official capacity, the *gaffirim* were permitted to bear arms. They were placed under the supervision of British officers; at each locality a local sergeant, Jewish or British, was in charge.

In 1938, I was a mounted watchman in Zichron Yaakov, responsible for guarding the vineyards. As terrorist assaults increased, I felt myself increasingly vulnerable – an easy target on my horse for treacherous Arab guns. I decided to make my rounds on foot. The community council suggested that I be sworn in as a *gaffir*, and I agreed. I was given a gun and placed in charge of a reconnaissance unit whose task it was to patrol the area and ensure the safety of the villagers working in the fields.

On a November morning I set out at the head of my unit on a routine reconnaissance mission. We had to walk down the road descending from the village to the fields to inspect the foliage-covered hills at both sides of the road for possible ambushes. We preceded the workers in the vineyards and the groves, staying with them until the end of the day's work.

Before we reached the fields in the valley, we heard the sound of cart wheels coming up behind us. As the cart caught up with us, we recognized the driver as a farm hand for one of Zichron Yaakov's farmers. Two other young men were sitting in the cart. I signaled to the driver to halt until we had examined the entire road, but the boys in the cart laughed at us. They said that there was no point in waiting. We had nearly reached the fields and there was no cause for alarm. Just a few hundred meters more and the bush-

covered hills would be behind us – and the Arabs would not dare set an ambush in the open fields.

"Come up on the cart," one of them suggested, "and we'll ride the rest of the way."

And I confess – we yielded to temptation and climbed up into the cart. I seated myself on the left-hand side.

While I was still rationalizing what appeared to be a harmless decision, a volley of shots rained down upon us. The shots came from the left side of the road as though they were aimed particularly at me. To my amazement, I was not hit. I jumped from the cart and started climbing up the hill in the direction of the shots. All I could see at first was foliage; but then I made out what looked like a *keffiya*, the traditional Arab headgear, peeking out from the bushes. I shot a few rounds and ran forward. I found nothing, but in the distance I could see our attackers retreating. It looked as if one of them was wounded.

From the road behind me, I heard moaning. Someone called my name, and I ran back down the hill. Two of the boys in the cart had been wounded and were bleeding badly. The third was missing and the cart had disappeared. Apparently, the frightened horse had bolted. I saw traces of blood on the ground and followed the trail up the road. I could see a dark object in the distance. When I came closer, I could see that it was the missing third boy. By now, there was no sign of life in him; a bullet had pierced his heart.

There were police reports and investigations. Members of the village council complained to the high-ranking British police officers who arrived from Haifa. One of the officers answered bluntly, "We have no forces to guard each and every one of you, and I don't want to hear complaints. Defend yourselves. See to it that *they* complain ..."

A short time later after another incident, the police of Zichron Yaakov received a complaint from the neighboring

Arab village. Two of its residents claimed that they had been walking on a trail with a donkey loaded with merchandise. They had been detained by a group of five *gaffirim* who ordered them to climb the hill nearby and then shot them. One was killed and the other was badly wounded. The wounded man crawled through the bushes, reached the village, and reported the attack. He claimed that he knew one of his assailants by name and that all were residents of Zichron whom he could identify. The Arab named a Zichronite farmer's son, and he was arrested.

The police began an investigation. The farmer's son was a *gaffir*. On the day of the incident in question, he had participated in the patrol of the area where, according to the Arab, the attack had occurred. Our reconnaissance unit numbered five *gaffirim*, and I was its commander. Of course, I was immediately summoned to appear at the police station for interrogation. The detectives assigned to the case were Susa, an Armenian officer, and a Jewish officer, Kalman Cohen, both of the Haifa District Command.

Instead of replying to their questions, I referred them to my report of that date in the police journal. It stated that on the morning of the incident, I headed a patrol to comb the hills surrounding Zichron Yaakov and to secure the safety of the roads. When we reached a certain hill, we were fired upon from a distance of 200 to 300 meters. We took up defensive positions and returned fire. The attackers began to retreat. We pursued them and continued to fire until they disappeared among the mountains. From a distance, we could see that the retreating attackers were dragging along a wounded man. We gave up our pursuit after reaching the limits of our watch zone (these were our standing orders), and we had no way of knowing the results of our counterattack. During the pursuit, none of our men was hit.

The investigators were not satisfied with the report. They spread a map of the area in front of me and asked

me to point out to them the road we were patrolling, the point where we were attacked, the place from which we fired and in which direction, where we saw the Arabs with the wounded man, in which direction they retreated, and to what point we pursued them. Because of my familiarity with the area in question, I was able to answer all their questions, giving them estimated distances and explaining from which points on the map one could see various other points. The investigation lasted for hours and concentrated mainly on minute technical details. The investigators were obviously trying to uncover discrepancies in my testimony so that they could then charge my companions and me with murder.

At the end of the tedious interrogation, I heard Officer Susa tell the Jewish officer (in English, of course): "I don't believe this man is capable of committing such a crime; he speaks the truth." He then turned to the interpreter and asked him to say to me: "I thank you for your detailed testimony. I have been in police work for 20 years and have interrogated many witnesses, but, in all this time, I have never heard such accurate testimony as you have given us. Don't worry. Everything will be all right."

My interrogators submitted their report to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) recommending that the file be closed. However, highly influential Arabs intervened and insisted that the investigation be continued so that they might prove that this was a case of murder in cold blood with the use of official arms by men in an official capacity. The case went as far as the High Commissioner, who issued an order to the Haifa Police District to reopen the investigation.

Finally, we received an order to assemble all the *gaffirim* of the Zichron Yaakov sector and to bring them to Haifa for identification by the wounded man, who was lying in the government hospital at Bat Galim. About 25 of us were

rounded up and driven to Haifa. At the hospital, we found about 25 more *gaffirim* assembled in the city from various places.

Members of Zichron Yaakov's local council had become worried and contacted an attorney, who came to the hospital and supervised the identification for the defense. The attorney determined the order in which the *gaffirim* would stand in line. One young man who bore a physical resemblance to me was instructed to put on my glasses and stand ahead of me in the line-up. We entered the wounded man's room in this prearranged order.

When I approached his bed, the Arab called excitedly: "*Hadda hu, hadda Betari, ana 'arafu!*" (He's the one, he's a member of Betar, I know him!)

The defense attorney immediately demanded that it be noted on the report that the wounded man declared that he knew me and that he knew I was a member of Betar. I replied, "I know him, too, from Zichron Yaakov. This man cursed the Jews and their religion in my presence, and when I reacted to this, he swore he would `take care' of me." My words were also noted in the report. The wounded man pointed to the other four members of the patrol who, he claimed, were guilty of wounding him and murdering his companion. It was easy to identify us – we were the only patrol operating out of Zichron. Among those identified was the farmer's son whose name the Arab had already turned in.

The five of us were arrested immediately; and on the following day, the charges were read to us. We were accused of premeditated murder according to article 214(b) of the Criminal Code.

Anyone found guilty of this offense would be sentenced to be hanged by the neck until dead.

The investigation lasted for over two months. We were

brought to the mountains of Zichron Yaakov so that I could repeat my testimony at the actual location. Every point was inspected, distances between them measured, direction of the shots checked, and so on. Everything substantiated my initial report. Officer Susa was pleased. He suggested to me that I join the police force and assured me of a successful career.

All this time, the five of us languished behind bars, mostly in the Acre Prison. No one visited us, and we were not allowed to see our attorney; so we did not know how our case was progressing. Much later, we learned that our friends had not abandoned us. Zichron Yaakov's local council mobilized all its resources in an effort to aid us. The late Alexander Aaronson underwrote all the expenses involved in this effort. He was the son of one of the founders of Zichron and a brother of Aharon Aaronson, the leader of the secret intelligence operation (NILI) working for the British in Palestine during World War I, then under Turkish control. With his help, all contacts and avenues of influence were activated. In the end, our fate was decided far from where we had endured the hardships of prison life as accused criminals.

Prison memoirs are no novelty for my generation, and I will not describe my experiences in detail. But years after I was a prisoner in Acre, I visited the prisons of the State of Israel (as a member of a committee on behalf of the First Knesset, as well as in my capacity as an attorney for clients who were in prison); and I had the opportunity to compare the conditions in today's prisons with those of the British Administration.

Today's prisoners have beds. My fellow prisoners and I slept on a *bursh* – a thin mat made out of rags – on the floor, permeated by dust and filth and inhabited by bedbugs and lice who feasted on us nightly.

Today's prisoners are served food that is similar to

that served to the soldiers in the Israeli Defense Forces, except that the portions are smaller. Our "breakfast menu" consisted of pita in *za'atar* – a flat bread dipped in a powder of salt and coriander. But the greatest change, as observed by a veteran prisoner like myself, was the disappearance of the *cardal* – that large pail which stood by the door of every cell, overflowing with excrement. The new cells have flush toilets. I still remember the *cardal* as the most nauseating aspect of prison life. A fierce stench always emanated from it, dizzying the new prisoner until he got used to it (and it was always the new prisoner who was forced to sleep close to the *cardal*, since the area furthest from the bucket was occupied by prisoners with greater seniority).

As much as we tried to keep up our spirits and remain optimistic during our time in Acre, there were days when we were overcome with despair and it seemed as if we would never leave alive. We jokingly suggested tying towels around our necks to become accustomed to the noose! But despite our cavalier joking, inside we were consumed with anxiety.

On February 5, 1939, two months after we had been arrested, we heard our names called. We went out to the yard and the clerk spat out, "*Fraj!*" – free – and went away. We were handcuffed and brought to the court. The prosecution announced that the charges against us had been dropped due to lack of evidence; the judge ordered our release. When we returned to Zichron, there was great rejoicing and festivity. We were greeted as if we had been resurrected from the dead.

Three days later, I received an order to appear at the headquarters of the Irgun.

4

On Wings of Hope

Contrary to popular opinion, the Irgun was not merely a small sect of rebellious dissidents. By 1937, its supporters represented almost half of the Jewish population of Eretz Israel. Participating in its political leadership were the Mizrachi, the General Zionists, the Revisionist Zionists, and the "Citizens Bloc," a group that represented farmers from the agricultural villages as well as community leaders of Tel Aviv and the town of Petah Tikvah.

The greatest support for the Irgun's political rival, the Haganah, was to be found in the settlements of the Jewish National Fund, in *kibbutzim* and cooperative settlements, and in Haifa, the stronghold of Marxist labor unions. But in some areas of Eretz Israel, supporters of the Irgun Zvai Leumi actually outnumbered those of the Haganah.

During Arab terrorist attacks in 1936, when the leaders of the Jewish Agency and the Haganah called for *havlaga*, the Irgun leaders were hesitant at first about defying the establishment by giving the order to retaliate and withstood the pressure of the rank and file. At the same time, the Haganah invited Irgun members to rejoin them and

promised to appoint some representatives to the Haganah's High Command. Some of the Irgun commanders accepted the invitation; but most of the junior commanders and rank and file rejected the offer, dubious that Irgun leaders would have the slightest influence on the Haganah's official policy of restraint. The first commander of the Irgun was Avraham Tehomi (Gideon), a member of the General Zionist party. Tehomi accepted the Haganah's invitation to return to the fold as Haganah Commander in Jerusalem. He soon realized, though, that his position was bereft of any real power. The actual Haganah commander in Jerusalem was Yosef Rochel (later known as Brigadier General Yosef Avidar). Tehomi tried to use his new position to promote more aggressive policies, but his efforts were repeatedly thwarted. Finally, tired of the struggle, he resigned in despair and emigrated to America. I met him years later in Paris while I was in the middle of preparations for shipping arms and soldiers to Israel on the *Altalena*. Tehomi came to me to request an assignment, any assignment – this man who might have been the commander of the Irgun, if he had not been so naive in his trust of the Haganah.

For many of the Irgun members, joining the Haganah meant stifling our spirit in a way that could lead to the dissolution of the nationalist Jewish youth movement in Eretz Israel. We could not allow this to happen and renounced the decision of those commanders who advocated joining the Haganah. The scales were finally tipped when Zeev Jabotinsky sent instructions saying, "Do not merge!" This marked the separation of the two organizations and laid the foundations for the Irgun's independent political agenda. Among the young commanders who took over the leadership of the Irgun were Avraham Stern, known as "Yair," who joined the Irgun in 1931 and later became its staff secretary, and David Raziel, who was one of the founding members of the Irgun.

Raziel and Stern were appointed officers of the High Command of the Irgun, which by 1937 for a few months was headed by Robert Bitker, a former commander of Betar from Shanghai, China. Later he was succeeded by Moshe Rosenberg, leader of the local Betar.

In 1937, Raziel took over as Commander-in-Chief, and the Irgun began to fulfill the task for which it was established: resistance to the Arab attacks, contrary to the Haganah's policy of *havlaga*. The Irgun also began at this time to publish an underground newspaper, *Baherev* (by the sword). It was edited by Uriel Shelah, a well-known poet whose pen name was Yonatan Ratosh. This journal consolidated the ideological foundation of the Irgun and served as an excellent educational tool for the Irgun's membership.

The British refused to protect the Jewish population against Arab terrorism, and we felt that the best deterrent to continued terror was retaliation. Attacks on Arab centers were carried out in towns with mixed Arab and Jewish populations, and the Arabs suffered many losses. Arabs began to face some of the terror that they had hitherto inflicted upon the Jews. They could no longer wander complacently in the Jewish neighborhoods as peddlers and cart drivers by day, returning at night as terrorists; they could no longer enjoy freedom of movement on the highways, which they tried to deny the Jewish population. They were no longer safe from harm even within their own neighborhoods and towns.

The termination of the policy of *havlaga* was not accomplished by the Irgun without losses. Before long, there arose a gallery of Jewish martyrs to the cause as well as a rising number of Arab dead who were no doubt considered heroes by their compatriots. It was a tragic confrontation in which many people on both sides would give their lives.

In 1938, the Irgun took over the blockade-running activities of the *Af-Al-Pi* movement from Betar. New beaches

for debarkation were found in Netanya, Herzliya, and elsewhere. Ships arrived in increasing numbers, and armed men of the Irgun secured the safe passage of the immigrants to shore.

The Irgun had become an important factor in the Eretz Israel political arena. Various foreign powers began to take an interest in its leaders. Possibilities for negotiations between the Irgun and these governments were thus opened. By the end of 1938, the first such agreement was forged with the government of Poland, which was then represented by Foreign Minister Colonel Josef Beck and the military Commander-in-Chief of Poland, Marshall Eduard Smigly-Rydz.

I heard the details of the agreement from Raziel and Stern. The novelty of these negotiations was that representatives of the Irgun had secured political recognition abroad as a military force, albeit of an occupied country.

True, the bargaining power of the two parties was unequal. Irgun's representatives could make only future commitments in return for immediate assistance on the part of Poland. Our side of the bargain was to carry out the evacuation of Polish Jewry according to Jabotinsky's evacuation plan.

In the middle thirties, Jabotinsky was haunted by the vision of an impending calamity in the central and eastern parts of Europe. In 1936, he proposed an evacuation of one and a half million Jews (about half of the Jewish population) from Poland to Eretz Israel. This plan stirred up a storm of opposition, in Poland, in the United States and in Eretz Israel, particularly among the leftist parties. Many people felt that Jews should not allow themselves to be "expelled" to Palestine by Polish anti-Semites. In the United States, the plan was attacked by Dr. Stephen Wise, leader of the American Jewish Congress.

Jews constituted ten percent of the total population of Poland, and Poland was interested in such an evacuation – probably for anti-Semitic reasons – as well as in acquiring a political advantage in the Middle East. Moreover, Poland was, as always, caught in a vise between Russia and Germany. The Poles believed that the only hope for an independent existence lay in an alliance with the Western powers of France, England, and the United States. Foreign Minister Josef Beck was then lobbying for a military treaty with England and France, and the Polish government in general was interested in gaining friendly public opinion in the Western countries.

The fact that the Polish government's support of the Irgun could be viewed as an unfriendly act toward Britain, with whom Poland wanted to sign a treaty, was a serious obstacle in our negotiations. But the Polish representatives who dealt with the Irgun were convinced that strengthening the Jewish forces in the eastern Mediterranean, and their evolution into a major power in that area, would in the long term be beneficial to British interests. All that was left for the Poles was to convince the British that this was possible. This had been the consistent viewpoint of Zeev Jabotinsky as well as that of friends of Zionism in England such as Josiah Wedgwood.

The crux of the problem was how to prove this theory. The answer was obvious to us. We needed to establish a sufficiently large military force to make us a political power to be reckoned with. The Irgun needed Polish assistance to create such a force. Until the arrangements were concluded, the rendering of that assistance would have to be executed with the utmost secrecy. In return, the Irgun would bring all of its influence and connections to bear within Jewish circles in the Diaspora to muster support for Poland's political and economic aims.

The negotiations were a success, and an agreement was

signed. The Poles promised us arms, professional military training, and the opportunity to establish Irgun cells in Poland. They also promised to expedite the emigration of Polish Jews in the meantime by way of the *Af-Al-Pi* illegal immigration movement. As an initial step, a special military training course was organized for officers of the Irgun.

On the evening of February 25, 1939, 25 young commanders of all branches of the Irgun gathered in a dwelling on Yehuda Halevi Street in Tel Aviv. They approached the apartment one by one, knocked on the door, whispered the password, and were ushered in. Most of those assembled did not know one another. Extra precautionary measures and strict instructions for extraordinary secrecy heightened the tension in the room.

At eight o'clock, a man entered the room and sat down at the head of the table. He was wearing a new suit, a white shirt with a stiff collar, and a silk tie. His close-cropped hair, neatly shaved cheeks, and pince-nez lent him an air of elegance. One might have thought that he was a diplomat on his way to a *soiree*. Despite the change in his attire, those who had met him before recognized him by his broad shoulders, protruding chin, and forceful speech as David Raziel, the Irgun's Commander-in-Chief. His name was already a focus of interest in political circles both inside and outside of Eretz Israel.

We had captured world attention with our offensive tactics against the Arabs. Legends were spun about the mysterious commander of the Irgun, who had forged a mighty underground army. Foreign newspapers put forth various suggestions as to the identity of this commander.

Only two years earlier, no one had heard of David Raziel. He was raised in an orthodox Jewish household in Jerusalem, the son of devoutly religious parents. Erudite in Talmudic literature, he was also imbued with a strong sense

of national values. His activity in the Irgun began in 1931, while he was a student at the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus.

The secret gathering on Yehuda Halevi Street was the first meeting with Raziel of the candidates for the officers' training course in Poland.

Raziel spoke briefly, summarizing the accomplishments of the Irgun in the past year. He praised the Irgun members for their activities against the marauding Arabs, spoke of the fame acquired by the Irgun throughout the world, and emphasized that this had been merely the first phase in the Irgun's plan. Our primary goal was independence for the Jews in Eretz Israel. Raziel told us that the leadership of the Irgun had made an irrevocable decision to establish a military force capable of fulfilling this goal.

Finally, he announced that a course was being offered in a foreign land and that we, the young commanders assembled, were candidates for the course. The strictest secrecy was necessary. Raziel stressed the confidence in us by the Irgun command and the great responsibility placed on us by this assignment. He concluded with the request that we be on our best behavior while attending the course as guests of a foreign power. Then he wished us success and took his leave.

The next day found us making feverish preparations for the trip. Those of us who were legally in the country were instructed to apply for passports through regular channels. The Irgun's underground laboratory issued documents for the others. All the passports were taken by the secretary of the general staff in order to arrange for transit visas and entrance visas to various countries. None of the candidates had an inkling of his final destination.

We were divided into a few small groups, each departing on a different date. The head of each group was handed an

address to contact upon arriving at their destination. On the very day of departure, we were given our documents. We found transit visas for Egypt, Greece, Turkey, and Rumania, and visitors' visas for Poland.

The groups sailed in March on the ships *Bessarabia* and *Transylvania*, which plied the route from Haifa to Constanza, Rumania. From there, our group boarded a train and arrived in Poland after a 24-hour trip. The last station was the city of Krakow.

We were dispersed in various hotels and ordered to wait. In the interim, we were to conceal our presence by avoiding contact with the Jewish population of Krakow and to refrain from writing letters home, speaking Hebrew, or even appearing in public places. We were permitted to walk outdoors only singly.

Several days later, we received the order to proceed in small groups. My group boarded a train en route to southwest Poland and alighted at a small town where we were met by a driver with a cart. After a slow ride through snowy forests, we arrived at dusk at a summit in the Zakopane Mountains about 100 kilometers south of Krakow. There we found a three-storied villa with a spacious courtyard, completely surrounded by virgin forest. Not a living soul was in sight. We entered the house in amazement.

Here we were, young Jews, hunted members of the underground, in a strange and distant land, embarking on a military course. The isolated villa was ideally suited for our purpose, which was to engage openly in military maneuvers, fully armed, under the tutelage of officers of a regular army. It was hard to believe our good fortune.

The villa was comprised of a lecture hall, dining room, dormitories, instructors' quarters, and an armory. In the basement were the kitchen, pantry, and servants' quarters, where Polish cooks, laundresses, a concierge, and a chauf-

feur had been brought from a great distance to serve the Irgun trainees.

We were issued special uniforms, a sort of blue battle-dress. Overnight, we were turned into soldiers.

At the opening exercises, those Polish officers who were to be our instructors were presented to us. Some were quartered on the premises, including the captain in charge of our training. Others came to lecture on specific subjects and spent several days in the villa until they had concluded instruction in their particular field.

The training program was divided into two parts: regular military instruction and guerilla warfare tactics. The military instruction included individual, group, and platoon training, as well as lectures on military tactics, fortifications, communications, and topography. The second part of the program included demolition, conspiracy and secret communication, and guerilla fighting. We were also taught basic concepts in planning armed uprisings against a foreign power.

The study of demolition was quite technical. Many hours were devoted to working out the quantities of explosives necessary to demolish various targets of concrete, steel, wood, bricks, earth, or other materials.

Every day, we went to the forests for drill. The area thundered with the noise of bombardments, the rattle of automatic weapons, and the blast of guns. The program was all-encompassing and time was limited, so the training was very intensive. We went on excursions early in the morning and returned to the villa at night tired, frozen, filthy, yet satisfied and encouraged. Our spirits were high. The Polish officers seemed to be impressed by our stamina and our strong desire to learn.

The lectures on theory were presented in the Polish language and translated simultaneously into Hebrew, sentence by sentence, by Polish-speaking trainees. Sometimes,

officers ranking as high as brigadier came to lecture but disappeared before the trainees could commit their features to memory.

In May, just four months before Hitler's army was to invade Poland, the course of study was completed and we prepared for our examinations. We were told that our grades would determine our future assignments in the underground. A delegation of examiners arrived – high-ranking Polish officers headed by a general. The Poles were joined by Avraham Stern (Yair) who traveled there from Eretz Israel to represent the Irgun High Command. At a ceremonial parade, the general and Yair reviewed the ranks. The general spoke with each of the 25 trainees and discovered, to his surprise, that the young men of Eretz Israel's underground came from all parts of the world – from China to South America.

We passed the examinations with flying colors. The examiners were open in their admiration and esteem for the expertise and high level of preparedness of their trainees. The chief instructor stated frankly that he had trained many officers from among his own people, but had never derived such great satisfaction from the results of his instruction as he had in this course for the young men of Eretz Israel. The Polish officers wished us success in our war of liberation.

Then it was Yair's turn to speak. First he spoke in Polish to the instructors, officers, and representatives of the host government, expressing the gratitude of the Irgun for enabling its members to receive such professional military training in Poland under such favorable conditions and under its finest officers. The second part of the address, in Hebrew, was intended for the trainees.

Yair's eloquence was known to us all. His brilliant use of the Hebrew language was no revelation for most of us, but the content of his speech on that occasion astounded us all. For the first time, a representative of the High Command of

the Irgun revealed to us the military and political program of the Irgun in its entirety.

I cannot recall all he said, but I remember well the main points. He spoke of acquiring allies, of the recovery of our land by an army of Jews from Eretz Israel and the Diaspora, of giving military training to this army, and of transporting fully trained and equipped men from the Diaspora to Eretz Israel. At this point in his speech, I recalled my reverie that night of Kol Nidrei on the beach at Binyamina: "Guns instead of knapsacks."

Many details of the Irgun's achievements were disclosed to us that day. We learned that large quantities of arms were already in our hands and awaited shipment to Eretz Israel. Plans called for the acquisition of bases for military training and concentration of men for military infiltration into Eretz Israel. In some countries, young Jews were already recruited and undergoing training. Several graduates of the officers' course would remain in the Diaspora to coordinate these activities. Their purpose would be to train personnel and arrange for packing and shipping large quantities of ammunition to Eretz Israel.

At the conclusion of this course, when we graduates had assumed our assignments, a new group of commanders were due to arrive for training. Hitler's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, altered this plan.

Fortune continued to favor our group of trainees. Zeev Jabotinsky was in Poland and all of us went to Warsaw to hear him speak. This was the first and only time I saw Rosh Betar (Head of Betar), which was the title reserved for Jabotinsky. The experience was overwhelming. On this occasion, Jabotinsky uttered his well-known prophecy: "If you don't liquidate the Diaspora, the Diaspora will liquidate you!"

Jabotinsky dedicated a portion of his oration to the Irgun

Zvai Leumi in Eretz Israel. When he called out "Long live the Irgun!", the walls resounded from the ringing echoes of those words shouted again and again by an audience of thousands of Polish Jews. Of course, no one knew that 25 Irgun commanders were in the audience as well.

The program itself, our success, and practical achievements all gave rise to great expectations and self-assurance. We felt with joy that we were soon to be participants in momentous historical events.

5

Clipped Wings

When I returned from Poland, I was imbued with faith and optimism such as I had never experienced before. I could already visualize the "waving flag of David over the tower of David" as described by the poet Uri Zvi Greenberg.

But fate soon frustrated our hopes and stunned the entire world. On September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland. Eretz Israel was cut off from the Jewish masses in central and eastern Europe. The Irgun plans for training an army in Poland had to be abandoned.

The months following the outbreak of the war will remain engraved in my memory as the darkest days in the history of the Jewish people. The anti-Zionist policy of the British administration bore its bitter fruit. The 1939 White Paper – that most inane and nefarious document in the history of the British Mandatory Administration – denied the Jews their national homeland, whose establishment had been acknowledged as the primary purpose of the British Mandate. The White Paper decreed drastic curtailment of Jewish immigration for several years, to be followed by its

total cessation, while Arab immigration was not controlled at all. Jews were forbidden to acquire land within 90 percent of the area of Eretz Israel. The political status of the Jewish population was to remain that of a national minority forever.

Meanwhile, the Holocaust had begun in Europe. We knew that disaster was imminent, although we could not yet conceive of its horrible magnitude. Jabotinsky's prophecy that "if you don't liquidate the Diaspora, the Diaspora will liquidate you," was being realized. Through the years, we had watched with horror the burgeoning of the Nazi beast and its destructive instinct, while the world remained apathetic as long as Jews were the sole victims. Now the beast had overpowered Poland, the country with the largest Jewish population in the world. Soon it would devour all of Europe.

Never had our people been in such dire need of strong support and wise leadership. And yet fate decreed that on August 4, 1940, when Britain was the only one of the Allied countries in Europe holding Hitler at bay, Jabotinsky, our leader, died at a Betar camp in New York far from those who needed him in Eretz Israel.

Early in the war, the Irgun suffered another major setback as a result of an estrangement between its two leaders, David Raziel and Avraham Stern.

By Summer 1939, the Irgun had reached its zenith both ideologically and organizationally. Then, suddenly, it was confronted by a new reality – the world war against Hitler. Some priorities had to be changed; new strategies and different tactics had to be devised within the Irgun.

A debate ensued. What is permissible and what is forbidden? What is worthwhile and what is too risky? Policies that had been generally accepted before the war became the subject of arguments and dissension. Decisions demanded by the reality of the present appeared to be violations of past

policies. Divisiveness reared its ugly head, and an internal feud resulted in a split within the Irgun.

I shall not dwell at length on that painful period. As an eyewitness, I merely wish to record my impressions of the dissension between Raziel and Stern. There are those who are blessed with acute hindsight and who claim that the split was inevitable. *Post factum* they find substantiation and vindication in support of their claim. They cite two points as principal evidence. One is the Irgun's pronouncement of the cessation of hostilities against the British for the duration of the war against Hitler, and the other is the fact that Irgun officers started serving in British Intelligence and the British army. These decisions were made with the knowledge and approval of both Raziel and Stern. At the time, no one could have predicted the split that was to come.

It is difficult to accept the premise that Raziel and Stern, the two soulmates who established the Irgun, who shaped its ideological and political foundation, who developed its strength and brought it to the high point of its effectiveness, suddenly "renounced their principles," "took the wrong path," and "led the younger generation astray" – phrases I have heard from followers of both leaders.

I spoke to Raziel and Stern during the debates preceding and following their estrangement. In the Spring of 1939, they had both spoken about the far-reaching political and military plans of the Irgun and both had spoken in one voice. At the graduation celebration of the Irgun officers' course in Poland, I had watched Stern lift his glass in a toast to the life of the Irgun's commander, Raziel, and reverently speak his praises.

Less than a year later, they developed deep-seated tactical differences. There was criticism of some past activities (in which both had participated and for which both were responsible), and there were personal confrontations. All

these obscured their debate concerning ideological principles.

During my conversations with them, I insisted on knowing what had happened and why – I did not understand their disagreement. I listened to hours of mutual accusations, but I could detect no fundamental difference between their goals. Their primary argument seemed to be one of priorities. Was Hitler the Jews' greatest enemy or was Britain? Was the liberation of Eretz Israel the first priority or was it paramount to defeat the Nazis first?

Before the split, the Irgun's actions were approved and directed under the joint leadership of Raziel and Stern. Then, after the outbreak of the war, Stern demanded a change in tactics. He wanted to sever the painstakingly formed, carefully cultivated connections of certain Irgun men with British Intelligence. He felt that these connections might place the Irgun in jeopardy.

Raziel's men countered: "We formed these connections for the purpose of counterespionage. Our men were sent to establish these connections in order to maintain a pipeline through which we would receive information necessary for our battle. These connections will still prove useful in the future. We rely on the integrity and effectiveness of our men."

On another point, Stern's men contended: "We must sever our connections with the leaders of the Revisionist party. They have tied our hands. As leaders of a legal party, they undermine the conspiracy and they hinder the progress of our struggle in its full scope because of their concern for the welfare of the Zionist movement."

Raziel's men replied: "The Revisionist movement is the source that nurtured and educated us. It is the source of our manpower; from it we also derive moral backing. The Revisionists constitute our public support. Although

we shall staunchly maintain our independence from the leaders of this movement, we must not reject them."

On still another point, Stern's men argued: "We must resume our war with the British immediately. It does not matter that they are conducting a world war against Hitler. They are still foreign usurpers in our land, and it is our duty to continue our war against them incessantly. They are our number one enemy."

Raziel's men responded: "We decided jointly on cessation of hostilities against the British. We must not add to their difficulty in their war against Hitler, our nation's number one enemy. The truce is temporary. We will resume our war with the British as soon as we ascertain that we will not jeopardize those forces fighting Hitler, when the outcome of the war in Europe becomes evident."

With all the earnestness and intensity of these differences of opinion, I still believe that the split between Stern and Raziel could have been prevented. There was no objective justification for their estrangement. A solution could have been found for all the problems in dispute. I make this assertion even though, in my heart, I was in agreement with some of Stern's contentions.

The split occurred in the summer of 1940. First the groups fought over the name. Which of the two organizations would bear the original name of The Irgun Zvai Leumi in Eretz Israel? Finally, it was Stern who introduced a change in the name. First he called his organization the Irgun Zvai Leumi in Israel instead of in Eretz Israel. The latter referred to the goal of freeing the land, while "in Israel" included freeing the people as well. Raziel adhered to the original name. Stern's group later renamed their organization Lohamei Herut Israel (The Fighters for the Freedom of Israel), or LEHI for short.

Almost a year after the separation, Stern formulated the ideological foundation of his organization in the "Thirteen

Principles of Revival," a brilliant lyric creation. In it, he spoke of the "Kingdom of Israel," of the "Jewish sovereign power of the highest order in the East and in the Mediterranean," of "the sword and the book which descended together from heaven," and so on – poetic words, expressions of yearning, a prayer for the realization of the sublime dream of a Jewish patriot. But these "Principles of Revival" lacked the realistic plans and tactical guidelines necessary for a political underground movement. When I questioned Stern about these omissions, when I asked what he wanted me to do tomorrow morning after reading the "Principles of Revival" and where was the plan of action, he had no reply. He admitted that there was still no program.

In the early days following the estrangement, I did not take sides. I was unhappy with what was happening within the Irgun and found no place for myself there. Stern repelled me with his political strategy of making contact with the Axis. He believed that it was possible to persuade Hitler to concentrate all the Jews in Eretz Israel instead of in Madagascar, a country mentioned in Nazi propaganda at the beginning of the war before the Germans embarked upon their course of genocide.

Besides, I could not accept Stern's poetic formulation of ideological principles of a revolutionary body as a substitute for a formal political framework. And some of those principles of revival did not appeal to me. For instance, I could not accept the premise that the sword and the book descended from heaven together, nor can I accept it today. A book from heaven? Yes, indeed. But the sword is a curse upon the brotherhood of man.

Stern was more of a dreamer, poet, idealist and patriot than a man of action. He had a sensitive soul and a keen mind, but he did not excel in the skills of leadership and organization. He was not a good revolutionary commander. On the other hand, Raziel was a natural leader with

extraordinary organizational qualities. Working together, they had complemented each other's talents and made a well-balanced pair. They did not succeed separately.

Both met their death a short time after their separation. Raziel was killed in May 1941 while on a secret British Intelligence mission in Iraq, which was then occupied by the Nazis. And Stern, who had declared a war of terror against the British, was murdered in cold blood by police detectives who cornered him in his hideout – an apartment in south Tel Aviv – in February 1942. The British detectives shackled him and shot him in the head.

With Stern and Raziel dead, the underground movements they had established almost disintegrated. Only a handful of hunted "Stern men" succeeded in escaping the dragnet spread for them by British Intelligence. They survived by hiding in orange groves and cellars, listening for the rustling of a leaf, and quaking at the sound of footsteps. The few Irgun men who had not despaired, waited until the course was clear. These few were the keepers of the flame.

6

Am Lohem – Fighting Nation

In the Fall of 1939, for the first time since my arrival in Eretz Israel, I became a civilian earning my living and spending my time at will. I was not accustomed to this way of life, and for me it was especially strange in the depressing atmosphere that gripped the world and particularly our own country in those days.

In Europe, Hitler was on the rampage. His armies were in control of the entire continent. Mysterious trains loaded with human cargo began to move eastward to an unfamiliar destination called Auschwitz.

Sir Harold MacMichael, then the British High Commissioner, replaced Lord Gort, a kind-hearted army veteran who was recalled to active duty on the French front at the outbreak of the war. MacMichael radically differed from Gort. He believed in the White Paper and thought it his duty to implement it fully and precisely. He was a confirmed anti-Semite.

MacMichael's actions complemented those of Hitler.

They worked as a team. One built the furnaces at Auschwitz and ordered the annihilation of the Jews; the other saw to it that no Jew would escape the Holocaust. While Eretz Israel served as a haven for non-Jewish refugees from all of Europe – while numerous Poles, Yugoslavs, and Greeks arrived and were admitted into Eretz Israel – its gates were barred to Jews. At Nahal Sorek, in the foothills east of Jerusalem, a large refugee camp was set up where non-Jews who were suspected of espionage against the British were held until they were interrogated and released or prosecuted. Those who were not suspect, were allowed to travel freely and even received financial support from the British.

Nor was there any restriction on Arab immigration. During the Second World War, new opportunities for employment opened up in the towns and on military projects in Eretz Israel, and these jobs attracted many Arab immigrants from neighboring countries. They entered Eretz Israel without any restrictions and without their presence being officially recorded.[1]

Yet when ships arrived carrying Jewish refugees fleeing from Hitler's Holocaust, they were not allowed to land. The lucky ones were exiled to Mauritius or Cyprus; less fortunate souls were returned to Hitler's Europe and eventually perished in concentration camps.

One ship, the *Struma*, succeeded in salvaging its human cargo from occupied Europe. Yet passage through the Dardanelles was denied her, because MacMichael refused to give assurance that her passengers would be permitted to enter the country – not even for transfer to a detention camp. The *Struma* was sent back to Nazi-occupied Rumania, but the ancient hulk disintegrated en route. Its engine exploded, and all its passengers, except one, and crew were drowned in the Black Sea, just a few kilometers from the Turkish shore.

True, MacMichael acted by the authority of the British

Government, but he personally identified himself with this policy beyond the call of duty. His obvious hatred of Jews, coupled with his zealousness, became a burden that weighed heavily upon the Jewish population of Israel.

Both the Haganah and LEHI were almost entirely dormant. Within the Irgun, some organizational activity continued; but this, too, was curbed after the murder of Avraham Stern by the British.

Our youth were in a state of turmoil – not only the Irgun and LEHI, but also the members of the Haganah and units of the Jewish Brigade, the only large Jewish military unit to serve in World War II as part of British forces. Young Jews in Eretz Israel were agitated and angry. They awaited a call to action. The atmosphere was charged with tension.

One day towards the end of 1942, the darkest year of the war for the Allies, my friend Eliyahu Ravid, a veteran of the underground, came to visit me. I hadn't seen him for several years. At one time, he had sided with Stern and had come to Jerusalem to try to convince me to join LEHI. After that he disappeared. Later I heard that he, too, became disillusioned, abandoned the underground, and returned to family life.

My friend spoke to me of the discontent of our youth.

"The turbulence among young people of all factions today is proof that they are eager for action! We must find a way to reach them, wherever they may be. Why not establish one common front?"

I did not need much persuasion.

Ravid and I continued to meet and discuss what steps we should take to unite all the factions. I had maintained some contact with the Irgun throughout my period of inaction. I had known its commander at the time, Yaakov Meridor, since the days of the officers' course in Poland and had kept in touch with him. Meridor had arrived at

the same conclusion and was wrestling with the problem of how to revive the immobile body under his command. The solution was not simple, but he promised to "untangle the knots and take the plunge."

Stern's men also began to regroup with the view of renewing action against the British. LEHI and the Irgun would certainly fight despite their many organizational difficulties. And the others? Eliyahu Ravid pressed me, "Come on, let's go talk to the others and try to convince them."

We began knocking on doors of the members of the Revisionist Movement, members of Betar, veterans of the Irgun, plain folk from the Citizen's Bloc, and Haganah members. All understood that the state of paralysis we were in should not be allowed to continue. We heard people make such comments as, "Make our protest heard," "Demonstrate our rage," "Prove our opposition," but in the end, few gave us their support or lent a helping hand.

Ravid succeeded in contacting a group of Haganah members who were frustrated by the inaction. These included some senior men, such as Yosef Idelberg from Haifa, Yigal Horwitz of Nahalal, and Aharon Kadishman (Ben Ami) of Nahalat Yehuda. Ravid proceeded to negotiate with them. At first, caution was of primary concern – words were weighed and measured with reservations and misgivings. Little by little, confidence grew and, with it, frankness. Finally, a group emerged that was ready to establish a united front for the purpose of demonstrating to the world "the fury of Jewish youth." Eventually this group adopted the name *Am Lohem* (The Fighting Nation).

LEHI did not join *Am Lohem*. We had believed that the Stern group would not turn their backs on the opportunity to fight side by side. But to our great disappointment, when we brought the matter before Israel Eldad, who was then one of the leaders of LEHI, we were given the "wet

blanket" treatment. The attitude of the men of LEHI was disparaging. They said that the Irgun did not really intend to wage serious war against the British, and they cited as proof our alliance with the Haganah.

In response to our initial appeal, Eldad agreed to meet for a discussion with one of the Haganah men. Due to an innocent misunderstanding, I sent the man to Eldad's home; and I believe that he never forgave me for that breach of security. I do not know the details of this meeting, but the outcome was negative, as the LEHI men remained skeptical of the merger and withdrew after the first contact.

On the other hand, there were many more meetings between the Haganah men and ourselves, even though their leaders were opposed to a united front. Initially, men of the Jerusalem branch of the Palmach were quite interested, and several meetings were held at Ravid's house. Prospects looked bright, although the Haganah men were in a quandary. For the first time, they realized that the men of the Irgun did not have horns and that the Irgun was also comprised of hard-working laborers who earned their living by the sweat of their brow. To their surprise, they also found that Irgun men were even willing to fight under the command of Ben-Gurion if he were to lead them into battle.

The Haganah men were told the following:

1. The Jewish community was a factor that would influence the future of Eretz Israel. No force in the world could determine the future of the country without considering Jewish interest. Any effort to impose conditions on this part of the world contrary to our interests would encounter strong opposition, even bloody conflict. It was our obligation to prove this to the British.

At the same time, we needed to convince other

world powers that it was to their advantage to intervene and that they would be able to count on us as a strong and valuable ally. In this context, the political achievements of the Irgun prior to the outbreak of the war were summarized.

2. As proof both to the British and to other world powers, the only course that remained was war against British rule. We were capable of waging such a war. We had proved it in the past and we could prove it again. If all the military organizations took up arms, the intensity of the war would undoubtedly shock the British and would show us to be right.

3. If the Haganah men refused to fight without express orders from their commanders (which obviously would not be forthcoming), we only demanded that they use their good offices among their colleagues so as not to hinder those who *would* fight. They should not intervene nor turn the fighters over to the foreign ruler.

With the last point, the entire group agreed unanimously. With this, they said they would gladly comply, since informing and betrayal were unthinkable practices and never to be employed. Later, much to our sorrow, this pledge was broken. In this spirit, the discussions continued. We finally concluded that together we shall take action.

What action? Despite our enthusiastic talk (especially that of Eliyahu Ravid), it was clear to us that our strength and numbers were too small for an actual declaration of revolt. But Ravid and I thought that some kind of action should be carried out anyway. We proposed to our Haganah partners an operation to capture the old city of Jerusalem and display the Star of David upon its ramparts.

As fantastic as this sounded, it seemed feasible to us. As a matter of fact, I still believe that it was practical even

with our meagre strength. I recall how Eliyahu Ravid, his wife, Miriam, and I spent many hours in exploratory trips surveying the ancient walls and alleys, checking the police posts and those of the Arab supernumerary police, noting areas of weakness and planning our itinerary: "We'll break through here; here we'll concentrate the policemen we will capture..."

We planned to overpower the police station at King David's Tower near the Jaffa Gate, the only police station in the Old City. We would capture the other gates, bar them and declare a curfew throughout the city. Immediately, our men would station themselves upon the walls and an announcement of the Jewish revolt and the establishment of a Jewish State would be broadcast in the streets of Jerusalem.

We were certain that very quickly – within days or perhaps hours – the British would recover from their shock and would crush us by the sheer number of their military forces in Eretz Israel. But the impact of our action on world public opinion – particularly our last stand – would make our sacrifice worthwhile. Future generations would continue the battle.

It was abundantly clear that this was a plan of desperation, but at that time we saw no alternative. Eliyahu Ravid gave the reason for this plan: "We came to Eretz Israel not `to build and be built up,'" he argued quoting the words of a popular song. "We came to establish a state that will provide a haven for Jews of the Diaspora; and here we are, some of us even members of Betar and the Irgun, sitting with folded arms. So what can we demand of the others?"

"Operation Old City" remained a fantasy only. None of our associates treated it seriously, but the boldness of the idea and the heat of the argument had their effect. The Haganah began to consider the idea of revolt against the British more seriously.

Ravid was not satisfied with the results of our dis-

cussions with the Haganah men with whom we were in contact. He decided to turn to Moshe Dayan and include him in our negotiations. His reasoning was this: A year earlier, Dayan had been wounded and lost his eye as he led a Haganah unit acting as vanguard for the Allied Army operation that penetrated Syria. Having spent a long period in hospitals, explained Ravid, "Dayan had ample time to ponder over past events; and whoever has given the matter some thought, must have reached conclusions identical with ours ..."

A more convincing reason was, of course, that among Haganah men, Moshe Dayan was known as a man of action. Contacting Dayan was a simple matter. Ravid learned from an acquaintance that Dayan frequented the World Zionist Executive Building (then on Allenby Street across from Lillienblum Street) and dined in an adjacent restaurant. He asked his acquaintance to leave a note for Dayan with the cashier: "Someone wishes to meet you concerning matters dear to your heart." The following day Ravid found Dayan's reply: a telephone number in Jerusalem at the home of Attorney Zvi Schwartz, Moshe Dayan's father-in-law.

Ravid phoned and made an appointment. He introduced himself, as was his custom with the Haganah, by his full name and by stating that he was a member of the Irgun High Command.

The conversations that ensued between the two men were lengthy and numerous. Ravid placed before Dayan the plan for capturing the old city, which had, in the meantime, been developed in greater detail and had begun to assume concrete form. Dayan examined it in minute detail and argued about the feasibility of its implementation. At last, Dayan agreed that the political situation warranted far-reaching decisions but declared: "I draw my own conclusions – but I shall not break down the [organizational] framework." Meetings with Dayan continued for about

half a year. In the meantime the idea of *Am Lohem* was abandoned and Irgun began to act independently under Begin's command.

After the Irgun operation against the CID offices, Dayan came to Ravid's home in Tel Aviv and said, "Our leaders are quarreling among themselves, but we the soldiers need not participate in the controversy."

He explained that he wanted to learn the military lessons from the Irgun operations. "We learn from the action of the Irish, Polish, and Indian undergrounds," he said. "Why not benefit as well from the experiences of Jewish fighters?"

Then Ravid invited me to his house for a meeting with Dayan. We sat for several hours, and I explained the detailed planning and execution of our operation and the lessons we learned. He was a good listener.

Although Dayan chose not to join us, some of his friends came around to our way of thinking, and we began to plan practical actions together.

We kept Yaakov Meridor informed. He had already decided at that time to carry on with unilateral Irgun actions, but he was still willing to join forces with the Haganah and with anyone else who would join a general united front. He had no personal or partisan ambitions. He recognized the importance of unity in these operations and was willing to experiment. He reorganized the Irgun and appointed new leaders to the High Command, including Eliyahu Meridor (no relation to Yaakov), Yaacov Ben-Dov, Eliyahu Ravid, Shlomo Levi (Lev Ami), and me.

A joint meeting of the Haganah and the Irgun was held. We decided to establish a temporary joint command and to name the united body *Am Lohem* to emphasize that the nation as a whole was fighting and not merely a small segment representing a political minority.

Our first proclamation was to be broadcast over the fa-

cilities of the broadcasting station that the Irgun had placed at our disposal. Aharon Kadishman of the Haganah wrote the text. The proclamation called on youth of all parties to unite in a war against the government of suppression. In order to emphasize the unity of *Am Lohem*, he suggested that we quote a passage from one of the stronger speeches by the Chairman of the Jewish Agency, David Ben- Gurion. We agreed to that, too. A few months later, Kadishman would be confused and amazed at having to read another passage from a "strong" speech by Ben- Gurion denouncing the "madness" of the men of the fighting underground, their stabbing the organized Jewish community in the back, the danger caused by the dissidents, and the national duty to turn them in to the British and destroy them.

At this point, the deliberations of *Am Lohem* entered a practical phase, and we began to detail our first operations. Proposals vied with each other in their extremity: attacks on CID headquarters; elimination of CID officers – Wilkins, Catling, Giles, and others. Yaakov Meridor was even more aggressive. He suggested that we kidnap High Commissioner MacMichael! The Irgun was ready to act. Would *Am Lohem* grant its seal of approval?

Wonder of wonders, everyone was in favor!

An executive command was selected to plan the kidnapping. Yaakov Meridor, Aharon Kadishman (of the Haganah) and I mapped out the details. The governor's palace would be attacked by three columns. The first would capture the sentries at the gate. The second would break through the fence from the south and proceed to the main entrance. The third, from the north, would enter the palace from the rear and go right up to MacMichael's bedroom. We obtained exact diagrams of the High Commisioner's palace and photographs of all the entrances. The unit commanders were to learn their routes of attack according to these maps and make exploratory trips as well. The telephone lines

between the palace and the city, as well as those between the various police stations and the Allenby army barracks, would be cut simultaneously by special units within the city. Central thoroughfares at several intersections and the main highway to Jerusalem would be barricaded.

Yaakov Meridor would lead the operation in person. The first column would be commanded by Amichai Paglin (Gideon), one of the most able and experienced young Irgun commanders. The second column would be composed of armed Palmach men led by Aharon Kadishman. I would be in command of the third column. Everyone would be given *Am Lohem* insignia. Anyone caught would refuse to recognize the British courts and would make a political statement. A car would deliver the captive High Commissioner, accompanied by armed guards, by circuitous routes to Petah Tikvah where a large subterranean bunker would be constructed in one of the groves. A ladder would descend from the concrete roof of the bunker into a room equipped with all the necessities: beds, mattresses, sheets, pillows, reservoirs of water, even a bathroom with a flush toilet.

The High Commissioner would be held in this bunker by two armed guards. The bunker would be covered with earth from above and only an air pipe would protrude, disguised as an irrigation pipe for the grove. There would be no other visible markers above the ground.

Immediately after the kidnapping, *Am Lohem* would publish a special bulletin announcing that MacMichael was being held captive and would stand trial as an individual for his personal responsibility in various acts of murder, such as the *Struma* disaster, and as an illegal resident in Eretz Israel. Regular bulletins would be issued concerning the progress of the trial.

Meanwhile, the two English-speaking guards lodged in the bunker with the High Commissioner would enter into political discussions with him for the purpose of indoctri-

nating him about Zionism. They would demand that he sign a declaration stating that he would henceforth disassociate himself from British policy.

Lengthy discussions were devoted by *Am Lohem* to the possible outcome of this operation. Fears were expressed that the British authorities would go on an uncontrolled rampage, causing great harm and damage to the *Yishuv*. On the other hand, the Command reasoned that the British would not indulge in such a bloodbath if, immediately after the kidnapping, an announcement was made stating that the High Commissioner was held by *Am Lohem* and was alive and well. This announcement would be coupled with an admonition to refrain from harming Jewish civilians or their property lest the High Commissioner pay for it with his life. In addition, we planned to demand a letter from the High Commissioner in his own handwriting, stating that he was alive and well, which we would release to the press. He would write such a letter if he knew that his life depended on it. We reckoned there was no fear that the High Commissioner might wish to prove his personal courage by risking his life.

We also believed that kidnapping the High Commissioner would be beneficial for boosting the morale of the Jewish population. MacMichael was hated by the entire *Yishuv*, regardless of people's political views. No other High Commissioner in Eretz Israel had been viewed with such fierce personal hatred. The Jews would certainly regard the kidnapping with mixed emotions: amazement at the boldness of the act and a natural and understandable fear of what would become of them. We could utilize the first emotion to create an atmosphere of rebellion in the land. If it was possible to kidnap the High Commissioner and to turn him into an object of disgrace and ridicule, then the Jewish rebel forces in the country could accomplish many other actions to speed the departure of the British. This

would raise the morale of the *Yishuv*. As for the fear, we were confident that our first bulletin would calm the public.

We did not plan every detail of our conduct after the kidnapping. In our first joint action, we did not want to plunge the *Yishuv* into a maelstrom of internal conflict. We would have to act with deliberate caution. We certainly did not wish to execute MacMichael. We intended to plan our final steps as the "game" progressed. Perhaps it would be possible to begin some negotiations on basic political issues. Perhaps we would cause sufficient confusion among the country's rulers to enable us to take additional steps. Perhaps we would free MacMichael unconditionally, if we determined that serious consequences might ensue.

At any rate, it was clear that MacMichael would not remain High Commissioner after his release. The embarrassment would be too great for him to remain in his post. His departure would be a great victory for *Am Lohem*.

Twenty-four hours before zero hour, we were notified that two generals of the High Command of the British Army were to arrive in Jerusalem (if my memory serves me correctly, General Alexander was one of them). Their arrival was top secret and was disclosed only on the last day. Special security measures were taken to guarantee their safety. Police and army forces in the capital were increased. Additional units of guards were stationed at central locations (as well as at the High Commissioner's palace, which the delegation would be visiting). The implementation of our operation on the scheduled night was impossible. We were forced to postpone our plans.

Moreover, *Am Lohem* policy was not to attack the British forces fighting against Hitler. Our activities were directed against the Mandatory Administration in Eretz Israel and not against the army and its commanders who had no direct connection to the local government and whose assignment was to fight the Nazis. If the kidnapping had been carried

out that night while the generals were in the capital, we might have been accused of planning to harm them and we would have incurred the wrath of the Jewish population and of the entire civilized world.

After the departure of the generals, we encountered new difficulties. We began to receive reports that the existence of the plan was known to persons who should not have known about it. And then came a final blow. We were informed that the guard at the High Commissioner's palace had been reinforced on a permanent basis and that additional forces had been employed to maintain his security.

Yaakov Meridor still was not put off. He thought the plan could be altered to accommodate the new situation. Aharon, our Haganah man, agreed with him. It was decided to go ahead. If the kidnapping of the High Commissioner should prove unsuccessful, a mini-plan such as an assault on the palace and a retreat would be put into operation. This plan was not difficult to execute, but enthusiasm waned with each delay, and it, too, was finally abandoned.

By mid-1944, the aborted plan had been reported to the Command Headquarters of the Haganah. Pressure was applied on the Haganah dissidents to stop attending *Am Lohem* meetings, and they eventually capitulated. Only Aharon Kadishman remained faithful to our cause. He joined the Irgun and fought in its ranks until the day of its disbandment after the establishment of the State of Israel.

7

The Leadership of Menachem Begin

We learned from our experience with *Am Lohem* that Jewish youth and the *Yishuv* in general detested the British rule and hated to cooperate with them. But relatively few were willing to fight, although it seemed that the majority of Jews would welcome a revolt.

Since the effort to create a united front in the war of liberation had failed, the responsibility for action seemed to rest upon those underground forces that were ready to fight for freedom – the Irgun and LEHI.

Conditions for a revolt were favorable in the Diaspora too. There would be international support for an uprising of the *Yishuv* in Eretz Israel. This message was relayed to us by Irgun veteran Aryeh Ben-Eliezer, who arrived from the United States at the end of 1943 to find out why our flag of revolt had not yet been raised.

Ben-Eliezer was one of the leaders of the Irgun sent to New York in 1939 to raise funds and to gain support of the American public. Under the leadership of Hillel

Kook (known in the U.S. under the pseudonym of Peter Bergson), the Irgun emissaries, who included Sam Merlin, Alex Rafaeli and Yitzhak Ben Ami, besides Kook and Ben-Eliezer, set up *The American Friends of Jewish Palestine.*

By the end of 1940, the Irgun efforts to evacuate as many Jews as possible from Eastern Europe came to a standstill as the Nazi control of the region became fully effective. Then, following Raziel's death in the spring of 1941, communications between the New York group and the Irgun High Command almost ceased partly because of organizational problems of Irgun and partly because of rigorous censorship imposed by the British in Eretz Israel. Therefore, Ben- Eliezer's report to us upon his arrival from the U.S. was truly a revelation.

The American group, left pretty much to their own resources, focused their attention on gaining political recognition of the Nazi threat to Jews in Europe and on support for the right to fight the Nazis as an identifiable Jewish military unit. Early in 1940, just six months prior to his death, Jabotinsky formulated the following Jewish war demands:

1. A Jewish Army on the Allied fronts.
2. Recognition of a representative Jewish body at the Peace Conference at the end of the war.
3. A "covenant of equality" as a war aim of the allies – a rudimentary concept of united nations discipline in dealing with worldwide human rights, and
4. Formation of a Jewish State at the end of the war.

In 1942, almost two years later, Irgun emissaries in America formed *The Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews,* which stated its aim as follows:

> "To bring about, by legal means in accordance with the laws and policies of the United States, the

> formation of a Jewish Army based in Palestine to fight for the survival of the Jewish people and the preservation of democracy. This army, composed primarily of Palestinian Jews and refugees as well as of volunteers from free countries, will fight on all required battlefields side by side with the United States, Great Britain, and the other allied nations."

Even before the committee was formed, the Irgun emissaries contacted the leaders of the Jewish establishment, both Zionist and non-Zionist, requesting their support. The leaders not only refused to support the *Committee*, but they actively interfered with its work. The Jewish establishment gave various reasons for their rejection, but essentially the objections came down to two points: the Irgun emissaries exaggerated the Nazi threat to Jewish survival, and their tactics were too militant and were likely to contribute to the spread of anti-semitism in the U.S. These views were largely a reflection of the official position of the U.S. Government. The Jewish establishment was simply afraid to "rock the boat." The indifference of the allied governments and of the Jewish community's silent acceptance of the position of the allies on the fate of the Jews under the Nazis became known as "the abandonment of the Jews."

On January 5, 1942, the *Committee* published its first full-page advertisement in the New York Times under a banner heading: JEWS FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT TO FIGHT. This ad was signed by, among others, Ben Hecht, Dr. Samuel Harden Church, then President of the Carnegie Institute, Louis Bromfield, Melvyn Douglas, Leon Feuchtwanger, Bruno Frank, Waldo Frank, Max Lerner, Reinhold Niehbuhr, Abraham L. Sacher, Paul Tillich and Lowell Thomas. Before long the Committee attracted the support of James Roosevelt, Senator Guy Gillette, Will Rogers Jr.,

Paul Muni, Edward G. Robinson, Billy Rose, Moss Hart and John Garfield among others.

We discovered how much could be accomplished – even without resources and in the face of strong opposition – by a handful of dedicated people who believe in their cause. We realized how sensible our course appeared to non-Jews who were accustomed to the notion of fighting for freedom and whose political thinking had not been narrowed by generations of ghetto living.

Aryeh Ben-Eliezer arrived with the question: "Why are you sitting passively on the sidelines? Where is our Jewish youth? Where are the former members of Betar and the Irgun?"

Our reply was unequivocal: "You came at the right time. We are ready to take the offensive."

Ben-Eliezer participated in some of the sessions with the leaders of *Am Lohem*. I recall the deep impression he left on Haganah members as he expounded on the *Committee*'s work in the United States and its expectation of support for our uprising.

By the end of 1943, initial organizational changes had already been made to place the Irgun on a wartime footing. The delay in an outright declaration of war was caused by the delicate, ongoing negotiations of *Am Lohem*. The Irgun postponed unilateral action until these negotiations were completed.

The New York group also changed the focus of their activity. They established the *Hebrew Committee for National Liberation*, which promoted the idea of establishing a sovereign Jewish State in Eretz Israel.

Immediately after the collapse of *Am Lohem* at the end of 1943, the Irgun command began practical deliberations regarding a declaration of war against the British administration and completion of the underground reorganization. We felt the need for an authoritative figure to lead the

Jewish revolt, a person capable and knowledgeable in the conduct of warfare; but even more than that, we needed a charismatic political personality who would be able to lead the revolutionary movement of the underground.

Yaakov Meridor, who had replaced the late David Raziel, had suggested as early as 1942 that we invite Menachem Begin to head the underground. Begin was known to us as the commander of Polish Betar, a post he had assumed in 1938. After the Soviet authorities occupied Eastern Poland in 1939, Begin was arrested by the KGB and spent about two years in a concentration camp in Siberia. He had arrived in Eretz Israel in 1942 as a soldier in the Polish army, conscripted in Soviet Russia and brought to the Middle East for combat on the side of the Allies.

He was discharged at the end of 1943 by the Polish Command as a result of contacts made by Ben-Eliezer with the Polish military staff. Theoretically, the Poles gave Begin leave for only one year, but obviously this implied a permanent separation. Earlier, Begin had refused to desert the Polish army during the war against the Nazis. He insisted that he would only leave the service, if he were discharged from the army.

It is difficult to write about Menachem Begin without repeating what has already been said by others. Whatever is written about him here will concern only his role as commander and leader of the Irgun. Few knew Menachem in this capacity, and even today, many are curious about this aspect of his personality. I shall limit my remarks to my personal impressions of that period.

I must admit candidly that when Begin was being considered for the position of Irgun Commander-in-Chief, I supported his candidacy with some reservations. The Irgun had already had its share of defeats and disappointments. We needed a person who possessed broad political intel-

ligence, a man with a fresh outlook who had not been involved in past crises and one whose name was not associated with discouraging memories. I was not sure that Begin was that man. My reservations, as it turned out, were not justified.

By the end of 1943, the reorganization of the Irgun into a revolutionary army had already been completed. It was only necessary to formulate our tactics and issue orders.

As his first step, Begin suggested a declaration of war against the Mandatory Government. In his *Proclamation of Revolt To the Jewish Nation in Zion* issued in January 1944, he articulated the platform for the Irgun's War of Liberation.

The proclamation began with an account of the support for the Allied cause by the Jews in Eretz Israel, the Allies' abandonment of European Jewry to slaughter by Hitler, the Arab support for Hitler and his agents, and the anti-Jewish policies of the British in Eretz Israel. The Irgun demanded that the British turn over Eretz Israel to a provisional Jewish government. Begin's proclamation declared a war against foreign rule until its liquidation with no retreat. Like Patrick Henry, he demanded "liberty or death."

In his book, *The Revolt*,[1] Begin wrote:

> "Isn't it preferable to begin at once with action instead of explanation? Some of my colleagues believed that for external as well as internal reasons we should initiate a military attack rather than a political declaration ..."

I confess that I was one of those colleagues who held that opinion, because I felt that we had had enough declarations. Menachem Begin promised us that war would, without fail, follow its declaration. He asked for our trust.

And indeed, action did follow immediately. By the end of February, a series of operations were carried out against

the CID offices in Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Haifa. Aggressive actions continued without cessation until the British departed and a Jewish Provisional Government was formed.

The new ideological and political image of the Irgun was forged in the days that followed. In June 1944, Begin issued the *Proclamation to the Arab Population of the Land Called Palestine.* In this document, he set out the Irgun's policy toward their Arab neighbors. Arabs were to be treated as neighbors, with equal rights under the law and sovereignty over their holy places; both Hebrew and Arabic were to be the country's official languages; and there would be no displacement of Arab landowners, nor employment discrimination. The proclamation ended with the cry, "Our Arab neighbors! We stretch out our hand to you in peace. Do not reject it!" Unfortunately, this appeal was not heeded.

At meetings of the High Command, Menachem Begin set the tone, although more than once he deferred to the opinions of his comrades in his belief that their experience counted. Menachem's sensitivity revealed itself to us in his parliamentary style. I cannot recall even one session in which he overruled staff members by virtue of his authority as Commander-in-Chief; and when there were issues on which he stood alone or in the minority, he would accept majority rule without hesitation.

The camaraderie with which Menachem conducted the sessions encouraged freedom of expression, mitigated tension, and dispensed with stilted formalities. Staff members felt that they shared equal responsibility in any matter under discussion.

Usually we were in the habit of rising upon Begin's entrance into the conference room; he would hurry toward each of us, shake hands, and ask us to be seated. He came prepared with an agenda, although anyone was free to add an item or to request a change in the order of discussion.

Each day he devoted some time to his paperwork at 60 Mazeh Street in Tel Aviv, where I shared an office with him. The first few sessions of the Irgun High Command were held there, too. I was with Menachem from morning till night and observed him in a variety of moods. I saw him happy and sad, angry and amiable, serious and humorous; but I never knew him to be in despair or to lose his self-control.

On a day when a staff session was scheduled, Begin would pace the room, calculating and planning the discussions. He prepared himself systematically and thoroughly, fully cognizant of his responsibility as Commander-in-Chief.

Usually he began each meeting with a general survey of the situation at hand. Then he opened the floor for discussion according to the agenda. He would present an item and invite each of us to express an opinion. At times, in the heat of argument, someone would attempt to interject a comment while a colleague held the floor. Begin would tell each man to wait his turn patiently. Generally, the sessions were brief. In public life, I have had occasion to attend many meetings; but I have never heard such practical, basic, and terse deliberations as those of the Irgun's commanders.

Nature has not endowed Begin with a prepossessing physique. He was always thin and gaunt, but his power of endurance was phenomenal. He could easily forego his meals or dispense with sleep, and he could sit in a room for days on end without a ray of sunshine or a breath of fresh air.

His Achilles' heel was always the state of his personal finances. Often people would come to offer him money. Sometimes he would answer: "All right, give me a few pounds," and then we knew that his wife was penniless;

because as long as she had a few pounds, Menachem would answer that he required nothing.

Begin used no subterfuge or disguise during most of his time in the underground. When he left the Polish army, he had no civilian clothes; so we bought him a gray "austerity" suit and a winter coat. All the time he was with us, until my imprisonment, I remember him in that gray suit.

But in the course of time, when the searches for him grew more frequent and when we learned that the secret police had obtained his picture, Begin decided to alter his appearance. He grew a beard and began wearing the skull-cap of an orthodox Jew. In the neighborhood where he resided, he became known as the Yeshiva scholar Rabbi Sassover. This was the only disguise he affected at any time. Newspaper accounts of plastic surgery and the like were completely unfounded.

Begin believed in our ultimate triumph. His belief was not mystical; it was the faith of a patriot who led a war against mightier forces, certain that he would overcome because of the righteousness of his cause.

His absolute faith in victory gave rise to a disagreement between us. When I called for commencement of the war against British rule in our land, it was based not so much on the conviction that we would win, but rather on the conviction that we, the Jewish youth, had an obligation to fight for what we believed to be right no matter what the outcome. I argued that even if we were certain that we would go down in defeat and fall in battle, we were obliged to fight so that our sacrifice would serve as an example for those who would follow to complete our task. For these reasons I objected to the optimistic note sounded by the Irgun for propaganda purposes and to the use of such slogans as "We shall yet see redemption," or "Victory will come," and the like. I rebelled against this phraseology and told Menachem that he ought not to promise victory or

mislead the people with hopes that might not be fulfilled in our lifetime. All we could rightfully promise to the youth of our nation was war without retreat – "liberty or death."

I recall that, while in exile in Europe, I once received a declaration written by Begin which contained the promise that "victory is imminent, it is drawing near." This was during the Irgun's most difficult days in Eretz Israel. Many had fallen in battle, British persecution and repression were at their peak, and, in addition, Haganah was conducting a campaign to liquidate the militant underground. From afar, I could not assess the strength of the Irgun to withstand all these assaults. I was anxious about the future. Perhaps our fighters could not withstand the siege.

Upon reading Menachem's declaration written during those dark days, I wrote a letter of protest to him: "On what basis do you promise victory? Why do you lead the people on with false hopes?"

In reply, I received a long letter containing a sober and reasoned evaluation of the political situation in Israel, the prevailing emotional atmosphere, the cataclysmic decline of British prestige, with logical proofs that the British would be unable to maintain their hold for more than a year, that their government was crumbling and their defeat was inevitable.

That letter was written in 1947, a year before the State of Israel came into being.

Much has been written about the sense of fairness and integrity of Menachem Begin. This has been cited as a failing that might have prevented him from assuming his rightful position as a political leader of great stature. Some prophesied his downfall in public life because of these supposed weaknesses. For how could a man succeed in politics if he spoke truthfully of things he believed in, was incapable of disguising his convictions, and insisted on ethical standards in the political arena, while his political

opponents were experienced tacticians who never revealed their true intentions and spoke glibly on matters that were neither clear nor simple?

How would a man like Begin measure up to the Jewish Machiavellis? I believed that if fortune decreed that he fail in a public career because he was not a hypocrite, then even such a failure would be a laurel wreath.

In the deliberations with his colleagues of the High Command, Menachem displayed little emotion. His political analyses and assessments were based on cold logic, on minute calculations, and a very practical approach. Even in the most difficult situations in times of reversals and sorrows, he spoke with restraint and equanimity.

His love and devotion to everything connected with our national ideals and to his colleagues were noted by all, but these characteristics were apparent only in the intimate atmosphere of friendship. In the working conditions of the underground, there was neither time nor opportunity to display emotion.

There were instances in which Begin's sense of fairness and his integrity were his undoing. He believed everyone; and when we were suspicious of someone, he would stand aloof from our suspicions and demand to see incriminating evidence.

At times, this attitude exacted a high toll. For example, there was the case of Jacob Hilewitz. He was not a member of the Irgun; but before Begin assumed command back in the early 1940s, Hilewitz was engaged in collecting contributions for the Irgun's operations. In this capacity, Hilewitz met many people, visited the homes of many Irgun members, and was familiar with the organization's activities. In those days, the Irgun had not yet begun to fight against the British and actually did nothing more than routine organizational work. Secrecy was not yet strictly enforced. Even people who were not within the ranks of

the Irgun could learn its secrets with little effort. Hilewitz, who turned out to be a traitor, was able to compile a long and detailed list which he later turned over to the British in exchange for 5,000 pounds sterling and a visa to the United States. Arrests followed almost immediately. Since I had been inactive at the time and only maintained personal contact with Yaakov Meridor, I was fortunate enough not to be identified by Hilewitz. Thus, I was not included in this wave of arrests.

As soon as we learned about the systematic arrests of Irgun activists, we started an investigation. It was not difficult to discover that British Intelligence received the list from Hilewitz. Under rules of war, we demanded his assassination. We knew by then that he was preparing to leave the country, and we begged Begin to confirm this sentence.

But Menachem hesitated. He feared that there might be a mistake and demanded that we produce positive proof of Hilewitz's betrayal or that we bring him in for a trial. Meanwhile, Hilewitz succeeded in fleeing the country to Cairo, where two of our young men who were in the British army caught up with him and demanded that he return to Israel. He turned those two over to British Intelligence as well and flew to America.

The British did everything possible to assist Hilewitz's escape in order to encourage future informers. Yet he only escaped our retribution, because Menachem insisted on a fair trial before ordering his execution. Faced with the responsibility of sentencing a human being to death, his conscience forbade him to be hasty in passing judgment without proof beyond doubt of the man's guilt.

8

The Irgun and LEHI: Failure to Bridge the Gap

The Irgun's proclamation of revolt published in January 1944 was an irrevocable call to arms against the British until their departure. From that time on, there was no longer any validity to the argument of LEHI that the Irgun was unwilling to go all the way in its battle against the British and that its intention was merely to exert pressure on them to change their hostile policy toward the Jews.

Of course, it can be argued that LEHI did not believe in the sincerity of the declaration and, therefore, their apprehensions regarding the Irgun were never allayed. What can you say to those who don't believe you? In any case, the mutual distrust of the leaders was certainly not an objective reason for the continued existence of two separate underground movements; and this was especially unjustifiable, *post factum*, after it was proven that both undergrounds fought valiantly to the end. Clearly both underground organizations had only one aim and that was to turn Eretz Israel into a sovereign Jewish State. The contention that the

Irgun's activities were directed merely toward pressuring the British to modify their policies while tolerating their rule in Eretz Israel cannot be taken seriously.

Even the fundamental strategy employed by both movements to achieve their mutual goal was basically the same: war against the Mandatory Administration until its absolute defeat and expulsion from our land.

The first difference of opinion arose in defining precisely who was the enemy. LEHI men believed that we were at war with British Imperialism wherever it occurred and argued that a Jewish State could rise only on the ruins of the British Empire.

On the other hand, the Irgun wanted only to drive the British out of the territorial limits of the homeland. Menachem Begin wrote that our aim was "to fight British rule until the High Commissioner will be replaced by the Ambassador, who will appear before a Jewish President." In this context, the prognosis of the Irgun command was more optimistic, because it believed that "the Jewish State will arise long before the crumbling of the British Empire," as Begin said to LEHI's leaders. The Irgun maintained that immediately after we expelled the British and gained our independence, we would be ready to end hostilities and arrive at normal relations as is customary between two sovereign states.

In retrospect, it seems that LEHI leaders were not entirely consistent in defining their objectives. For if they were at war with "British Imperialism," why did they cease their attacks against Britain when the British left Israel? LEHI could have carried on its war against the Empire in Malaysia or in Kenya with the Mau Mau.

There were also differences in tactics between the two organizations.

The Irgun began its battle with attacks against government *institutions*, whereas LEHI attacked government

personnel – a strategy of so-called "individual terror." The Irgun did not approve of individual terror and attacked government personnel only in specific cases decided by the High Command – such as against officers who had brutally tortured Jewish detainees – or in the course of attacks on government installations, army camps, and so on.

On the other hand, the LEHI tactics encouraged attacks on government personnel. The motto, "Strike an Englishman at every opportunity," was typical of their rhetoric. Even at a later phase, when LEHI attacked government institutions as well, it remained faithful to that motto.

At the onset of battle, neither of the two underground forces could foresee how our war would end nor predict during which of the war's phases the British would withdraw. We had to make long-term strategic plans that took into account various possible future scenarios until the war's final outcome.

Several such plans made during the days of David Raziel and Avraham Stern's joint leadership have already been mentioned. Under the command of Menachem Begin, the Irgun High Command set for itself essentially the same agenda. We set as our priorities acquiring allies in various lands, enlistment of youth in the Diaspora and their preparation for war in Eretz Israel, and training of Irgun soldiers in Eretz Israel to conduct operations against the British in coordination with military landings by soldiers of the Diaspora on the shores of Israel. By 1944, the Irgun already had several thousand active members, and our plans envisaged supplementing this force by tens of thousands of fighters both from Eretz Israel and the Diaspora.

Even though this "grand plan" could materialize in its entirety only in the later stages of the war, it nevertheless determined the organizational character and composition of the underground throughout the struggle. The Irgun was structured as a military organization, divided into army

units with a hierarchic command. We sought to enlist the maximal number of youths for an armed revolt against the British, though only a small number would be needed for the underground's operations.

I did not hear much of LEHI's long-term plans except for the acquisition of allies. They did not seek mass enlistment as we did, and this approach was justified for a relatively small group of underground activists. Organizationally, LEHI was divided into small cells, each headed by a person who was responsible for his own men. There were no distinctions regarding military rank within their units, and there was no hierarchy of command. At the beginning of 1944, LEHI had only several hundred active members.

In my opinion, these were the most striking differences between the two underground forces. It is clear that the schism between the two organizations was not caused so much by ideological differences as by mutual distrust and a difference in tactics; but for both the Irgun and LEHI, the goals were essentially the same.

The Irgun leadership was well aware of the moral perils from without as well as the ethical danger from within. It was obvious that the underground atmosphere could inure its men to contempt for human life. It was necessary to lay down rules for the use of the ammunition we turned over to our young men and to insist that these rules be strictly observed.

We were guided by one major principle. Weapons could be used only against the foreign usurper in our land. Under no circumstances would our boys raise arms against other Jews.

In the Summer of 1944, Operation Cloth was carried out in which hundreds of thousands of meters of cloth were confiscated from government warehouses. The fabric had previously been confiscated by the British from Jewish

owners. The members of the underground who participated in this operation carried pistols without bullets, since the warehouse where the cloth was stored was on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv and there was not even one British soldier in that area. All the guards and clerks in that building were Jews.

The pistols were needed for the psychological effect they would have on those inside the building, because it was necessary to hustle the people from all the offices into one room. If the clerks had displayed any resistance, the Irgun soldiers would have used physical force but no bullets. If need be, they would have left the cloth behind rather than seriously harm the clerks.

LEHI used other methods. Early in 1944, two LEHI members entered a Hashomer Hatzair club in Tel Aviv to distribute their leaflets. When they encountered resistance, they drew their revolvers and shot and wounded a young Jewish club member. At the time, Begin wrote: "Morality without arms these days is an empty word; but arms without morality is a gaping pit of iniquity." This reaction angered the LEHI men. Taunts were directed at us for our ethics. I, for one, am proud to this day that we trained our men in the spirit of Menachem's slogan. And on the battlefield our men acquitted themselves no less bravely than those who taunted them.

In my opinion, it is only due to these principles instilled during the training of Irgun members that an outright civil war was averted when persecution of our men was initiated by the Haganah. I am certain that none of the Irgun commanders regretted this policy of self-restraint.

The Irgun High Command sincerely desired unification with LEHI, since we believed this to be for the national good; but the many efforts at unification that were renewed from time to time ultimately came to naught.

In retrospect it appears that LEHI leaders simply did not

want unification. One of their top leaders and ideologues, Israel Eldad, stated in *The First Decade*,[1] that Nathan Friedman Yellin (later known as Yellin-Mor), who headed LEHI, was opposed to unification and blocked it.

One of the reasons offered by LEHI in favor of the separate existence of the two undergrounds was that as long as LEHI existed, the Irgun would not dare to end its war, because the Irgun knew that its "competitors" would continue to fight. From our point of view, this argument had no validity and was childish as well.

On November 6, 1944, Lord Moyne, who was the British Minister of State for Middle Eastern Affairs, was assassinated in Cairo by two members of LEHI, Eliyahu Bet-Zouri and Eliyahu Hakim. This assassination marked the beginning of the ignominious Season, the code name given to the Haganah's campaign of betrayal of Irgun members to the British authorities. This campaign, which resulted from a deed perpetrated by LEHI alone, was directed exclusively against the Irgun. LEHI members went unmolested. There were reports that they were even given shelter in the *kibbutzim*. LEHI had a ready explanation for this strange phenomenon. They had notified Haganah leaders that if they dared harm LEHI fighters, LEHI would retaliate by shooting Haganah men. This supposedly had frightened them off.

This explanation was clearly fictitious. Even before the Season, in one of our official meetings with the Haganah, Eliyahu Golomb announced that LEHI commander Nathan Friedman-Yellin had capitulated to the demands of the Haganah command and pledged to cease LEHI's activities against the British. In return, Golomb promised not to persecute LEHI men. At that same meeting, Golomb demanded a similar arrangement with us, emphasizing that if the "extreme dissidents" had agreed to his demands, the Irgun could surely comply as well.

Israel Eldad confirms this fact in *The First Decade*. He states that he did not know at first about this commitment made by Friedman-Yellin, because Eldad was being held in detention at Latrun at the time. Although there was constant communication between Friedman-Yellin and Eldad, his colleague kept this matter from him. He only learned later about the pledge to cease activities against the British.

All this is incidental to my story. Let it be clearly understood that I do not intend to cast aspersions on Nathan Friedman-Yellin. I assume that his promise was given to Golomb because of tactical considerations. I bring up this episode only to counter the claims of LEHI men that they avoided a unification of the underground out of fear that the Irgun would cease their war against the British. History clearly shows that there was no ground for such fears.

Both organizations would determine whether it was worthwhile, and under what conditions, to terminate combat operations and open negotiations with the enemy. In 1946, when the Anglo-American Inquiry Committee offered to bring 100,000 Jews to Israel within a limited time period, both the Irgun and LEHI were ready to cease operations for the duration of that period. A temporarily united resistance movement announced this decision in the name of "the Haganah, the Irgun and LEHI," and no one considered this to be a deviation from the principles of combat for the liberation of Eretz Israel.

9

Military Failure – Romantic Success

In the Summer of 1944, the Irgun High Command decided to concentrate its attacks against the British administration in Jerusalem. One of these plans was called "Operation Square," so named because four objectives were targeted for a major coordinated attack: the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) headquartered in the Russian Compound (once the property of the Russian Orthodox Church), the District Governor's office on Jaffa Street near the CID building, the Immigration Office on Mellisandra Street, and the Land Registration Offices and the district CID building near the Palace Hotel on Mamilla Street. The objective was to destroy all the files of the CID, lists of persons suspected of membership in the underground, lists of illegal immigrants, and similar records. The operation called for a great deal of planning and careful preparation.

First, we had to establish a centrally located base for men and ammunition which would be both near the place where our forces were concentrated and convenient for the

attack on the target areas. The attackers were divided into nine squads: two for each objective – one demolitions group and one to provide cover; the ninth squad was a special mine-laying task force.

The operation was planned to the minutest detail. The groups providing cover would be the first to leave the base, taking up their positions in order to engage police patrols if necessary. The demolition squads would follow immediately to lay explosives at predetermined locations, light the fuses, and retreat cautiously.

The ninth squad would spread out in the area surrounding the objectives and would mine all the streets leading to them. We wanted to sidetrack the units of police reinforcements which undoubtedly would be summoned to the areas under attack. In each area, the ninth squad would set up signs bearing the emblem of the Irgun to warn civilians of the danger. Lanterns would be attached to their signs to illuminate the writing.

A special site was allocated for a first-aid station with a physician and several nurses in attendance. Mines across each street would be connected by wires so that a pull or cut of the wires would cause an explosion. The objectives were simple. While the police were engaged in dismantling the mines – a painstaking and time-consuming operation – we would accomplish our mission. We calculated that the whole operation, from departure to retreat, would take no longer than fifteen minutes. Five minutes after we had laid the explosives, the buildings would be demolished and with them all the documents we sought to destroy.

We knew that the success of the operation depended on the degree of surprise and the speed of execution. Timing had to be coordinated to the second in order to heighten the effect and increase the confusion.

At the conclusion of the operation, each squad would retreat through the alleys of Nahalat Shiva and, from there,

along the fence of the Moslem cemetery across King George Street and over to Keren Kayemet Street which led out of the populated area to the Valley of the Cross. There the squads would be met by the "quartermasters" (mostly girls) who would receive the arms and hide them under rocks in previously prepared spots. Free of any incriminating or dangerous burdens, the men would scatter in different directions and return to the city via Bet Hakerem and Nahalat Ahim and go to prearranged meeting places. The commanders of each squad would call the roll, dismiss their men, and report at a staff meeting for individual briefings.

That was the plan.

Preparations lasted for over a month. First of all, we had to find a warehouse to store the arms. The most convenient place was the Nahalat Shiva section, which was near all the objectives. Fortunately we learned of an abandoned warehouse whose owner, a carpenter, was interested in renting it out. We told him that we manufactured mattresses and needed a warehouse to store a stock of seaweed used for stuffing as well as the finished mattresses. We bargained like experienced businessmen, and finally the man received the first month's rent and we got the key. We bought mattresses and stocks of seaweed at Mahane Yehuda and brought them to our storeroom amid great commotion. The carpenter approved of our industriousness, but his approval for his tenants was short-lived. Later on, when our use of the warehouse became known to the police, they arrested the carpenter for a few days and investigated him thoroughly. He described the man who rented the warehouse as a redhead, and the next day all young red-haired men in the street were caught in the police dragnet and arrested.

Our warehouse was perfect for our purpose. It stood in an open yard and it could be approached from four alleys. Amid the typically crowded conditions of Nahalat Shiva with its small workshops and storerooms, the comings and

goings of our boys did not arouse suspicion. From our armory, we could walk to the Russian Compound, the High Commissioner's office on Jaffa Street and the Immigration office within only three minutes, and to the building on Mamilla Road within ten minutes. We decided that the units attacking the building on Mamilla Road would leave a few minutes earlier than the others.

The next problem was the first-aid room. Two of our boys, passing themselves off as students, rented a room on a ground floor with a separate entrance.

There would be 72 people participating in this operation, and there were not arms for all of them within the city. Irgun headquarters issued instructions to other branches to transfer the necessary weapons to Jerusalem. One day, several tins containing pickles were received by the Egged bus office in Jerusalem. No one suspected that under the top layer of pickles was a tin partition and underneath it were revolvers, bullets, packages of dynamite, and other explosives.

A separate problem was that of familiarizing ourselves with the buildings inside and out. We had to determine their internal layout to calculate the amount of explosives required for demolition. It was also necessary to find out details about how each building was guarded. We created "couples" among our young men and women who went strolling during the hour when the attack was scheduled to eventually take place. While ambling along, these couples would halt here and there to examine and commit to memory details about the posting of the guards and their duties. Little by little, we were able to construct almost a complete picture of the buildings' protective forces.

"Upstanding citizens" in our ranks who were in possession of valid identity documents and respectable appearance, inspected the interiors of the buildings. Each of these people had his own excuse for the visit. One wanted to

check on some detail, another sought information, and a third entered by mistake and exited with the clerk while expressing his apologies. All took their time. Upon leaving, each one had an additional piece of essential information.

Finally, our preparations were complete. Battle-seasoned men from all branches of the Irgun converged in Jerusalem. The day of action arrived.

The participants were instructed to report for duty at six o'clock in the evening. They were to present themselves at a small school hidden in one of the alleys of Mahane-Yehuda. One man in particular stood out from among those assembled. He was a commander from Tel-Aviv, a dark, handsome young fellow, nearly six feet tall and thin as a rail. This was Amichai Paglin (Gideon), future operations officer of the Irgun, who had already established his reputation as a brave fighter after many successfully executed operations. He was also an expert at assembling mines with complex mechanisms. All our mines and bombs were manufactured under his direction. Paglin's latest inventions were discussed with admiration. Now he was given command of one of the attacking units.

Receiving their final instructions, each man visited his scene of future action before nine o'clock.

Zero hour was set for 11:30 p.m.

At nine o'clock, all participants attended a second performance at either the Orion or the Zion cinemas, both of which were in the vicinity of our arsenal at Nahalat Shiva. At the conclusion of the performance, tens of young men mingled with the crowd streaming out in all directions, passed innocently through the alleys of Nahalat Shiva and disappeared unnoticed into an open yard. The second performance was due to end at eleven o'clock; and half an hour later, the entire neighborhood would be completely deserted as was characteristic of Jerusalem. There would be

no danger of anyone on the street being hit by a stray bullet when the action began.

All was set. Soon Jerusalem would be rocked by the blast of explosives and the rattle of gun fire. But suddenly we hit a snag.

At about 9:30 p.m., a woman resident of Nahalat Shiva noticed two young men strolling past her house, which happened to be near our armory. She began to scream, "Thieves! Thieves!", causing a panic among her neighbors. Someone quickly phoned the police. The two boys got away; but the police decided to continue the search the following morning, when they would determine whether something had been stolen from any of the storage places or dwellings. A police unit remained in the immediate area. All this was reported to us by our scouts who reconnoitered the area while mingling with the crowd.

It was already after 10:00 p.m. Soon our boys would leave the cinemas and arrive at the scene. It was necessary to notify them all of the sudden turn of events and of the danger. All the boys and girls who were on duty that evening were sent to meet the young men leaving the cinemas and direct them to an alternate meeting place – an isolated lot on the other side of the city.

By 11:30, everyone had arrived. However, it was evident that the operation would have to be postponed because of the impending search by the police. The question arose how were we to get the large quantity of arms and ammunition out of the warehouse. If it remained there, it would certainly fall into the hands of the police on the following day. The quantity of weapons was substantial. If it was confiscated, Irgun operations would be paralyzed for a long time.

Paglin, the young commander from Tel-Aviv, was agitated: "We can't leave the 'iron'[2] to them," he said. "We must get it out!" This was the unanimous feeling among us. The major difficulty was that we were all unarmed and would

be unable to overpower the police before we got to the warehouse.

"I'll go and assess the situation," suggested Paglin. "Perhaps we can overcome the policemen by surprise even without arms."

But I detained him. "I'll agree to let you go, but not alone. First I'll go. All of you wait for me here. I'll return soon."

I hurried to our first aid station, where all the girls who were to participate in that evening's operation were gathered. I had a glimmer of an idea that could work.

Tension was reflected in the girls' faces. They had been waiting anxiously for the order to go to their posts, some as quartermasters to collect weapons after the action and some assigned to locations as lookouts to warn us of any police or army units which might penetrate our network of diversionary actions. The order had not yet come, although it was past zero hour. Their confusion grew when they saw me, since they knew I should have been at the scene of the operation.

I told them briefly that there had been an unforeseen delay and asked for a volunteer for a dangerous assignment. All of them jumped forward in response. I chose one and we left.

When I returned to the young men at the empty lot, I called Paglin and introduced him to the girl. I said, "You'll have to visit the warehouse to check the situation. This is an important assignment. According to our information, the place is surrounded by police. Most of the Irgun's arms and ammunition is concentrated there, and we are determined to save it. Our success in removing those weapons depends on the accuracy of your observations. But as a cover, you must pretend to be lovers seeking a dark and quiet alley."

I sensed the embarrassment of the couple. Paglin shuffled his feet while the girl turned away. I ignored their

discomfort and continued, addressing him. "I don't know if you are experienced in such a role, so as you walk along, you put your arm around her shoulders and she will place her arm around your waist. Stroll along slowly as though rapt in intimate conversation. As you approach the warehouse, stop and begin to kiss. Your kisses must seem natural like lovers' kisses. When you see the first policeman, note where he is standing and where his weapon is. Continue in the direction of the warehouse. Halt at some distance from the next policeman you encounter, kiss and embrace again until you are certain he has noticed you. Sit somewhere on a stoop or a low wall and repeat your performance. Then continue and inspect all the entrances to the warehouse, counting all the policemen there and noting their stations. Remember, this is a very important assignment. Human lives depend on you, so this is not the time for excess modesty or bashfulness. Begin by telling each other the important details about yourselves as soon as you leave, so that you will be able to respond to questions in case the police become suspicious and detain you."

I pitied that poor girl. She dropped her eyes silently; Paglin averted his face. Their discomfort was enormous, but I had no choice. I pretended not to be aware of their embarrassment and asked them if they were ready to go. The girl whispered yes; he spoke up valiantly and said yes, too. Then they disappeared into the dark streets.

It was after midnight and the city was calm. I worried about the young pair, since, in the meantime, we had received reports that the police suspected the thieves in Nahalat Shiva to have been terrorists planning some action. It was certain that, in this case, the couple would arouse suspicion. What could I do? The risk had to be taken.

A short while later, I saw Paglin and the girl return and I breathed more easily. They reported excitedly that the police had left the place. They had walked through all

the alleys without meeting a living soul. The way to the warehouse was open and safe.

We learned much later that a British officer decided to send the policemen home on the assumption that the "terrorists" were afraid and would not dare approach the warehouse. The police remained until after midnight, then left Nahalat Shiva.

From here on, matters developed without complications or obstacles. One of the boys remembered an acquaintance who drove a bakery truck. He woke the driver and persuaded him to lend his closed truck for a while. The driver understood why and who was asking for it. Perhaps he acquiesced out of sympathy, perhaps out of fear. At any rate, the truck was commandeered. The boys drove over and removed all the arms from the warehouse. We had no more need to worry. Even if one of the neighbors should wake up, he or she would be told bluntly that Irgun men were transporting weapons and it would be well to go back to sleep quietly.

Operation Square was postponed, of course, and in its place came an attack two weeks later on the district offices of the CID on Mamilla Road. We bombed the building. It remained a ruin without walls for many years, standing on the pillars of its foundation. Our boys referred to it as "the wedding canopy."

Eventually, Operation Square resulted not only in the canopy of Mamilla Road but in a real wedding canopy for the couple who played such an important role in it. Years later, during my sojourn in Paris, Shmuel Katz met me as an emissary from Israel. Long bereft of news, I bombarded him with questions about each and every one of our boys. He told me that Paglin – who was by then Operations Officer of the Irgun – had married the same girl with whom he had strolled on my orders on that fateful night in Nahalat Shiva.

I was happy that at least my tutelage in love had been successful that night. Belatedly, I found comfort in romantic compensation for the military failure of an operation that had been so well planned.

10

The Meeting on Allenby Street

The escalation of our attacks against the British administration heightened the tension in the country and aroused strong opposition of the leaders of the official Zionist institutions. In the fall of 1944, Haganah Commander Eliyahu Golomb returned from England, bringing with him a directive of the Executive of the World Zionist Organization to serve the Irgun and LEHI with an ultimatum to cease operations against the British. Shortly after his return, the Irgun High Command received an official invitation to meet with their counterparts in the Haganah. I had yearned for some resolution to our internal strife. My role had been that of *nudnik* (nag) among my colleagues in the Irgun. I had insisted and persisted in pressing for a meeting with the Haganah to negotiate, to try to prove our case, to persuade and convince them to cooperate with us.

My friends had been skeptical. They had seen no need for a meeting. It had seemed to them that the Haganah

would simply demand the cessation of our activities and we would refuse. But I had stood my ground. Was there no turmoil within their ranks? Wasn't the entire *Yishuv* seething? The Haganah could not simply ignore this pressure and continue with their "business as usual." They would be forced to seek new avenues for the struggle. What if they were to propose that we join them in a concerted effort to bring illegal immigrants into the country? Would we not agree?

I had pressed on. "They are apprehensive lest we increase our strength and one day take over the government. Perhaps we might succeed in convincing them that our only objective is to rid the land of the foreign usurper and that after he had departed, our job would be done. We could propose that if they order their people to fight, we would fight under their command. We could propose that we are willing to accept the authority of Ben-Gurion on condition that he lead the war against British rule."

My friends yielded to my pressure and agreed that it was worth a try.

"You shall accompany me," Menachem said to me, "You are the optimist. Maybe you will contribute toward a spirit of consensus." I was pleased to accept his suggestion and went to the meeting with great expectations.

The meeting took place on October 31, 1944, at the home of a Jewish businessman, sympathizer of Irgun, who for some time had been seeking a peace settlement between the two sides. He lived on Allenby Street, the main thoroughfare of Tel Aviv, in an apartment on the second floor. There were four of us who sat behind closed shutters around a table laden with cold drinks, fruit, and cakes served by our host to create an amicable atmosphere.

The Haganah was represented by its Commander, Eliyahu Golomb and Moshe Sneh, the Chief of Staff. Speaking for the Irgun were Menachem and I.

We expected the meeting to be very brief, since each side knew what it wanted. The Haganah would demand that we cease our attacks against British rule, and Menachem and I would refuse; but neither side rushed matters. Instead of a brusque exchange of demands and replies, there developed a lengthy dialogue that lasted until dawn.

The discussion was quite animated. Each side tried to convince the other of the justice of its position by analyzing the broader political situation, providing evidence, quoting well-known men in the political arena, citing the history of nations, and surveying the situation of the Jewish nation in the Diaspora and the *Yishuv*.

Eliyahu Golomb opened the meeting with an announcement that he and Moshe Sneh were representing the National Council (Vaad Leumi), which was an executive organ of the *Yishuv*'s elected Representative Assembly, and its "security forces" (the Haganah). They were thereby authorized to inform us of the wishes of those institutions. Golomb was a man of serious mien; his hair was almost white, and he spoke in an official and intimidating tone. In a long and exhaustive speech, he explained why the *Yishuv* organizations were opposed to our strategy and operations and concluded with one demand: "Cease!"

Sneh spoke after him. His tone was friendlier, although his message was the same. He did not threaten us. He only tried to prove that our way would not bring positive results, that the organized community of Jews in Eretz Israel opposed our war and that the "only" concession demanded of us was that we give up our aggressive tactics against the British.

Then Begin spoke. He explained why we could not comply with their demand, why our war was imperative, and why there was no alternative. He attempted to convince them that our war of "dissidents" was worthwhile and useful for the official Jewish community as well, since their

leaders could use our war as leverage in their negotiations with the British. Our activities would testify to the anger within the Jewish community while absolving the Haganah of complicity in our violent actions.

I pleaded for understanding instead of ultimatums, for cooperation instead of threats, pointing out that many in the rank-and-file of Haganah held views similar to ours. IZL men were willing to risk their lives in the struggle with the British, and I asked the Haganah men not to increase that risk by their actions against us. My remarks were followed by endless arguments and counterarguments for hours on end. Each reply brought another in its wake.

The discussion was carried on in a calm tone, as befitting two civilized parties in serious negotiations, without vocal fireworks or outbursts. When all our arguments were exhausted, we rose from our chairs in the pale light of dawn. It was apparent that nothing had been accomplished.

Menachem called out, "This war is between us and the British – don't interfere!" And Golomb retorted, "We cannot remain neutral, we shall intervene!" After this, all said Shalom to one another and shook hands. Golomb and Sneh departed.

Cigarette smoke hung heavy in the room that was suddenly quiet. We were tormented by doubts. Was all this really just an exercise in futility? Would the meeting bring us any closer to some agreement, or had it failed and an internal struggle between the underground factions was inevitable?

After the assassination of Lord Moyne, British Minister of State for Middle Eastern Affairs, in Cairo by two LEHI men, the Haganah argued that this murder caused Churchill to turn against Zionism and exposed the *Yishuv* to the danger of Britain's oppressive measures. The irony of this view is that the assassinations were carried out long after Britain's anti-Zionist policies were an established fact.

At the meeting of the Haganah's executive committee on November 7, 1944, the day after Lord Moyne's murder, the decision to cooperate with the British was confirmed. The murder of Lord Moyne served as the moral pretext for this decision, but they found a "practical" pretext for this betrayal as well. David Ben-Gurion stated that the *Yishuv* had no facilities to hold hundreds of Irgun people in detention. As long as there was no "Jewish government" within the land, the Jewish community had to utilize the existing governmental institutions. This was the burden of his speech at the Histadrut Convention at that time. He was actually the first Jewish leader to publicly espouse cooperation with the British against fellow Jews. This operation by the Haganah was given the code name: The Season.

In December 1944, thunderstorms swept the land. Dark clouds hid the sun. The air was heavy and the rain implacable. Even though the Allies were now winning the war against Hitler in Europe, Jerusalem was a gloomy place on these rainy days. Houses, buffeted by the ceaseless downpour, were cold and bleak. Outdoors – we were in a deluge; indoors – depression engulfed us. The political climate in Eretz Israel was equally dark and forboding. Pessimism gripped us all as the specter of fratricide hovered near. And then the Haganah launched The Season, their violent operation to dismantle the fighting underground.

Everyone anxiously awaited the decision of the Irgun leadership. Would we oppose the Haganah with military force, or would we refrain from retaliation?

I received a note: "A meeting of the High Command will take place tomorrow morning. Come to Tel Aviv at 10:00 a.m."

I waited anxiously for this meeting, which would provide an answer to the question on everyone's mind. Would there be civil war in Eretz Israel?

As usual, Menachem opened the meeting with a general assessment of the situation. He raised only one question for discussion. How should we react to the attacks that had begun to proliferate against our men by members of the Haganah? No other matter was closer to our hearts at that moment.

Everyone understood the seriousness of the situation and the risks involved. If we were to use force, there undoubtedly would be bloodshed. There were great numbers of Haganah men in all the cities and settlements in which the Irgun was active. Hundreds of young men who were ready to be informers were on the streets, sitting in cafes, following "suspects," noting addresses, adding names to the Haganah's long list of activists in the underground. So far, these young men were armed only with cudgels; but if clashes occurred, the situation could escalate quickly. Each retaliation would bring on another strike, conflicts would proliferate, blood would be spilled, hospital emergency rooms would overflow. Madness would prevail. There would be no means to control passions nor an end to the cruelty. Every act of violence would find its justification in someone's philosophy. That is the general rule in human behavior – it is even more applicable in civil war.

Men of the Haganah would have the upper hand. They could devote themselves to persecuting members of the Irgun, whereas we were obliged to continue our war against British rule. The war against the British in Eretz Israel was our main task, our dedication, our *raison d'etre*. And how could we fight on two fronts?

But what was most chilling was that the British were waiting for this moment. They would rejoice. They, and they alone, would benefit from our bitter internal strife.

We decided at that meeting of the Irgun High Command that we would not give this satisfaction to our enemies. Our

conflict was internal, a family affair. We were not about to hand to the British an opportunity to gloat over our agony.

That afternoon, the Irgun High Command announced our unanimous decision: Restraint.

Menachem issued an open letter to the nation: "There will not be fratricide..."

An hour later, I sat on the bus to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv. I was calm and confident that the onslaught of Haganah violence against us would soon lose its momentum.

I little guessed how soon my optimism and my very freedom would come crashing down around me. I, the optimist who believed in seeking a common language with our adversaries, was to be the first victim of the kidnapping and betrayals that were soon to follow.

11

The Season

After my return from the unsuccessful lengthy meeting in Tel Aviv, I rented a small room on the second floor of a decrepit building near the old Egged Bus Station on a lane called Menorah. As well as housing me, the room served as the staff office for the Irgun in the Jerusalem sector.

To this very day, I can recall the odor given off by the wooden ceiling in that room – an unidentifiable foul smell. It was getting worse daily, until I finally discovered the source – a family of dead mice whose bodies had apparently passed through all the stages of decay.

Despite this defect, the room was convenient and secure. From its window we could observe the Egged Station and Jaffa Street as well as the traffic on Menorah Lane. The window commanded a view of the entire neighborhood. In a moment of danger, we would be able to flee to the vacant yard surrounding the house, cut across in the direction of the German hospital, and disappear. No one could possibly surprise us there. At the same time, the movements of our people to and from the place did not attract attention, for

nowhere was traffic heavier in Jerusalem than around the Egged Station.

It was the beginning of November 1944. I heard a knock at the door. I was puzzled, because none of my friends knew of my return from Tel Aviv and I had no appointments. Strangers did not come here to this room. When I opened the door, I found a young man standing before me. He inquired about the office of a certain architect whose address had been given to him. I replied that an architect could surely find an office in a nicer place and that obviously he had been given an incorrect address. The man apologized and left.

That was my first call from the Shin Bet, the intelligence service of the Haganah. Apparently, my address was now known and I was being followed. For the life of me, I could not understand why a Shin Bet man could not invent a more plausible excuse than looking for an architect in this abandoned ruin.

As I left the house, I noticed another young man at the Egged Station who seemed to be guarding the entrance to the yard that led to our building. He followed me meticulously, keeping a certain distance between us. I made several sharp turns into various alleys in opposite directions. He consistently followed.

Three bus lines departed from the Jaffa Street station: the 3, 3a, and 3b. I waited at the bus stop with two shadows–my own and its counterpart from Shin Bet. A number 3 bus arrived and my shadow drew nearer. I walked away to indicate that I was not waiting for that particular bus. He, too, relaxed and waited. Another bus came, a 3b, but I did not board that one either. When another number 3 pulled up, the Shin Bet man paid no attention, since a number 3 had already come and gone without my having boarded it. I took advantage of his relaxed vigilance. As the bus began to move, I raced after it and jumped aboard. The young

man recovered his wits and tried to catch up with me, but the bus sped away. I saw him standing there watching the disappearing bus.

In the following days, other Shin Bet agents and I continued to play cat and mouse games. Haganah men would discover my tracks and follow me, and I would lead them on until I found an opportunity to lose them. When they caught up with me, they did not try to detain me. They were, at this point, still following me only to discover my connections.

I never returned to my room in the Menorah Lane but rented another one in Bet Hamaalot, a building on King George Street. I presented myself as a student, paid a month's rent, and took possession of the key. The room was nicely furnished and comfortable.

Against all the rules of conspiracy, I shared the room with Dov Efrat (Yehoshafat) who had moved to Jerusalem at that time to be my aide in managing the local branch of the Irgun and relieve me of some of my duties. Our decision was an economic one. The administrative budget was not sufficient to pay the rent on two separate rooms.

In ordinary times, I would probably have enjoyed my new room, as it was unusually comfortable; but this was not an ordinary or a natural season.

The skies finally cleared on a Friday morning, December 15, 1944, for the first time in several weeks. The driving rain ceased and the sun came out. I left our room on King George Street to find two young Haganah men standing on the staircase. I knew these two but passed them without acknowledgment. They followed me into the street. I hurried my pace to cross to the other side. They caught up with me at the corner of Ben Yehuda Street, attacked me from behind, and bound my hands. Immediately more young men appeared. A taxi stood there waiting. It was suddenly

clear to me what this Season was: *the hunting season.* Men of the Irgun were the prey.

Several minutes later, the taxi delivered us to the police station in Mahane Yehuda. Someone phoned the CID and in broken English announced his success. Soon afterwards, British detective officers Curtis and Hamilton arrived by car, and I was surrendered to them. My Jewish captors vanished, their job completed.

I was transferred to Detective Headquarters in the old Russian Compound. Since I had been prepared to be arrested during the past few weeks, I did not carry any incriminating papers with me except for a little note on which I had scribbled appointments and other essential data. I kept the note in a handkerchief. When I was brought into the Mahane Yehuda Station, I took out my handkerchief, put it to my nose and, as I did so, swallowed the note.

The investigation began with the usual questions: name, age, address, and so on. Then the investigators asked me about the Irgun Zvai Leumi. Was I a member of it? Did I know Menachem Begin? I insisted that I was just an ordinary citizen and denied being a member of IZL and knowing Begin.

My interrogators were very polite. They offered me a chair and a cigarette and spoke in a friendly tone. Their investigation yielded nothing they did not already know. When they asked where I got my forged identity card, I answered that I had bought it in the black market. They wrote a memorandum, phoned Jaffa headquarters that I had been arrested, and the so-called investigation was then closed.

Only a few hours after leaving my comfortable room on King George Street, I found myself in the Central Prison at the Russian Compound in the company of other prisoners, members of the Irgun and LEHI, many of whom I had known for years.

Nothing is more heartening for a new prisoner than a friendly reception by his fellow inmates. The boys shook my hand and showed interest in my situation–after all, I brought news from the outside. They offered me everything extra they had among them: a towel, a toothbrush, soap and shaving kit, cigarettes and matches. The camaraderie eased my adjustment to prison life.

Three cells in the central prison were set aside for political detainees: cell 18 for LEHI members, cell 19 for members of the Irgun, cell 21 for the Haganah men of the arms trial whose heroes were Sirkin, Reichlin and Saharov. I was assigned a corner among my mates in cell 19.

The LEHI and Irgun cells were adjacent to each other. Somehow, the ideological differences and hostility between the two factions of the militant underground failed to spoil the cordial relationships that existed among us when we were behind bars together. The men of both cells shared everything – money, cigarettes, the food packages that occasionally made it past the authorities. Unfortunately, except for the few pounds I had in my pocket at the time of my arrest, I had nothing of my own to contribute.

We had no significant communication with the Haganah men in cell 21. Sometimes we exchanged pleasantries or reading matter, but that was all. Relations that at best had been shaky ceased almost entirely upon my entry into prison as the realities of The Season sank in for all of us. When my mates learned the circumstances of my arrest and heard that hundreds of Haganah men had been brought into the cities for the purpose of hunting down their Jewish brothers, relations became very strained indeed.

At first, the Haganah men denied the stories about the activities of their comrades on the outside; but after several days, they received confirmation of the new policies adopted by their leadership. Half-heartedly, they tried to

justify the operation. There were those among them who even denounced The Season openly.

To illustrate the fate of those IZL men held by the Haganah and not surrendered to the British, I shall describe the case of Eliyahu Ravid. He was my partner in the attempt to establish *Am Lohem*, and now was one of the officers of the Irgun "reserve staff" formed at the time of The Season for the back up of the arrested members of the High Command. His identity was well known to the men of the Haganah. He never hid behind a false identity. In the course of his transactions on behalf of *Am Lohem*, he appeared before Haganah members using his true name. He was, therefore, not surprised to notice that starting in November 1944, he was followed by the Haganah.

He eluded his trackers, but the hunt escalated from day to day. Eliyahu left his home and found shelter nightly in the homes of different relatives and friends. His pursuers discovered his protectors and stationed guards at their homes, and soon nearly all doors were closed to him. He wandered in the streets – tired, hungry, despondent, in helpless rage.

Ravid had been one of the Irgun's commanders who was embittered over the policy of restraint adopted by the High Command. He believed that it was imperative to retaliate, to forcibly resist the kidnappers and informers. He considered it degrading for a fighter ready to lay down his life for a cause to capitulate helplessly before traitors.

While he was being pursued, Ravid would meet his wife only at appointed times that had been cautiously arranged. His abduction occurred during one such rendezvous at the *Ess Delicatessen* on Allenby Street.

He told me afterwards: "I became so expert in detecting my pursuers that I was able to notice their presence within minutes after they attached themselves to my trail. This time, too, as we entered the restaurant, I said to my wife,

`You see the one with the newspaper in his hand? He's one of them'."

Eliyahu was already weary and despondent from the prolonged pursuit, which had been going on for many weeks. He no longer tried to evade his pursuers, but finished his meal – his first in two days – and got up to leave with his wife. The man with the newspaper in his hand detained Ravid at the threshold and remarked quietly, "Don't resist. The area is completely surrounded."

The Palmach man did not prevent Ravid from turning over to his wife the rest of his money and the key to their apartment. The agent even allowed Eliyahu to take leave of Miriam. His last words to her were: "Don't worry, no harm will come to me. Try to get in touch with me through Moshe Dayan. You'll find him in the Executive Committee Building."

And he turned from her and went with his abductors.

They led him on foot to Pinsker Street near the Mugrabi Theater. A pick-up truck awaited them there. After Ravid climbed in, he was blindfolded and his hands were tied. To this day, he does not know where he was taken. The ride lasted about half an hour. He was held for several hours in a dark room, which he believed was in one of the kibbutzim near Rehovot.

That night, Ravid was brought to a cave whose entrance was protected by iron bars. In the cave stood an iron bedstead and a lantern. Ravid was chained to the bed and remained chained during the four months of his captivity. Only when taken for questioning at regular intervals was he released from his "prison."

Despite the chains and the bars at the opening, there was always a guard with him and at least one other standing outside at the mouth of the cave.

During the interrogations, Ravid would hear screams of pain and moaning from an adjacent room, but he was never

able to learn whether it was indeed one of his comrades or a psychological tactic designed to break his own resistance.

Once, during an interrogation, the Haganah man addressed Ravid as "Menachem," then apologized for his slip of the tongue. Ravid believed that this intentional *faux pas* was engineered to create the impression that Menachem Begin was also a prisoner of the Haganah and that the interrogator had just come from a session with him (this was, in fact, *not* the case).

The interrogations took the form of political disputations. Ravid's captors tried to convince him that it was imperative for the good of the nation that the Irgun cease its activities and that he, as a patriot who had the welfare of his people at heart, was obliged to speed up this process by revealing details concerning the organization.

At a certain stage, the jailers proposed releasing Ravid against his promise that he would resign from the Irgun. He rejected the proposal.

Ravid told me later that there was only one worry hounding him during all his months of imprisonment. He feared that the Haganah would discover that besides being in charge of the Irgun printing press (a fact known to the interrogators), he also served the organization in the capacity of "quartermaster." In that case, he was certain the interrogation would have been more violent in an attempt to find out the details about Irgun's stock of weapons.

Several days after Eliyahu's arrest, when he had failed to be turned over to the police and was still missing, Miriam Ravid followed his parting instructions and sought out Moshe Dayan at the Executive Committee Building, the headquarters of the Zionist Organization in Tel Aviv. Dayan, at the time one of the senior commanders of the Haganah, denied any knowledge of the abductions generally and of the fate of Eliyahu in particular; but he nonetheless agreed

to take a letter from Miriam Ravid to her husband and to try to see that it was delivered to its destination.

Ravid received the letter. He was even permitted to send a reply which was delivered to Miriam during a subsequent visit with Dayan. As Eliyahu suffered much from the cold dampness of the cave (he was confined during the winter and early part of spring), he requested that his wife be permitted to send him woolen clothes and books. These comforts were not allowed him, but the correspondence continued uninterruptedly.

On one of her visits with Dayan, Miriam said that she was envious of her friends who had to go to Giles, the Chief of the CID, or to his deputy, Catling, to inquire about their husbands, while she had to go to a Jew.

"If you are so eager, it can be arranged," Dayan told her. Strange words from one denying the existence of The Season.

Ravid himself was convinced that he would be confined to that cave for years to come. But one night at the end of March 1945, he was again blindfolded, unchained, lifted onto a pick-up truck and driven away. After half an hour's journey, the truck stopped, his blindfold was removed, and he was told: "You are free." It seems that the Palmach repudiated The Season at about this time.

Ravid found himself not far from the police station of North Tel Aviv. He had a four-month's growth of beard and was dressed in the same filthy clothes he had worn during his lengthy detention. Thus, in the unintentional guise of a destitute beggar, he made his way along sidestreets to his home in the south of the city without being stopped even once.

Many years have elapsed since then. The conspiracy of silence between the Haganah and the Jewish Agency to obliterate this dismal chapter of history has long been

breached. The first to address the subject was the writer Yigael Mosenson, a member of a kibbutz and a former member of the Palmah. In his novel, *The Way of A Man*,[1] which appeared in 1953, Mosenson describes the Season from the vantage point of one of the kidnappers. He puts words in his character's mouth that had obviously disturbed his own peace of mind: "The shame of the Season still burns within me. Perhaps I'll tell those who directed me to turn (Jewish) fighters over to the British that I am appointing myself as their judge..."

In the Summer of 1966, the newspaper *Ma'ariv* held a symposium on the campaign against British rule, with the participation of the former commanders of all three of the underground factions. Naturally, The Season was one of the central issues in the discussion. Dr. Moshe Sneh, Chief of Staff of the Haganah in the 1940's, tried to minimize the political significance of The Season, denied that it constituted the official policy of the Haganah command, and presented this entire chapter as though it were a prank of some few individuals. He claimed that The Season was not an official operation of the Haganah but rather was the project of some volunteers from among its ranks. He wrote that those who refused to take part in abductions were allowed not to do so.

The assertion that The Season was executed by volunteers is correct; but Dr. Sneh's suggestion that it was not the official policy of the Haganah leadership or of the Jewish Agency is refuted by many who were associated with The Season, by official documents that have been made public since then, and by historians who have delved into the matter.

One such document is a copy of a telegram dated December 8, 1944, sent by Chaim Weizmann to Winston Churchill, then Prime Minister of Great Britain. This doc-

ument, reproduced in Yosef Nedava's book *Who Forced the British Out of Palestine*,"[2] said in part:

> "I am deeply grateful for the consideration you have shown to our cause and for your personal reference to me. I fully realize the gravity of the situation. Our co-operation with the authorities in stamping out terrorism is proceeding satisfactorily. 500 names of suspects have already been supplied to the police as a result of which over 250 have been arrested. *Effective co-operation has been tendered also in other forms.* [emphasis author's] It is, of course, impossible to venture any forecasts in dealing with secret organizations, but it is confidently believed that severe blows have already been dealt to them and there is every determination to persevere with the campaign until decisive results are achieved. We can only do our best."

At the time, the role of informer as well as "cooperation tendered also in other forms" had been vehemently denied both by the Zionist Executive and the Jewish Agency. It clearly illustrates not only the official sanction for the Haganah actions, but also the intent to gain British favor in exchange for betrayal of political opponents.

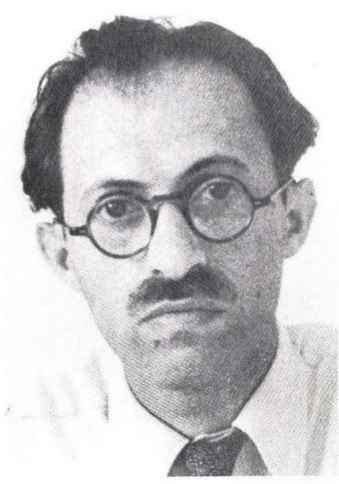
From all this evidence – particularly when examined in the light of events that followed – it is clear beyond any doubt that not only did the Season constitute official policy, but the Haganah also intended thereby to destroy the Irgun. The Season was directed by Jews against Jews and was simply a maneuver devised to seize power. To that end, its perpetrators did not hesitate to kidnap and torture their brethren, cooperate with the British CID and betray Jewish fighters to the British authorities.

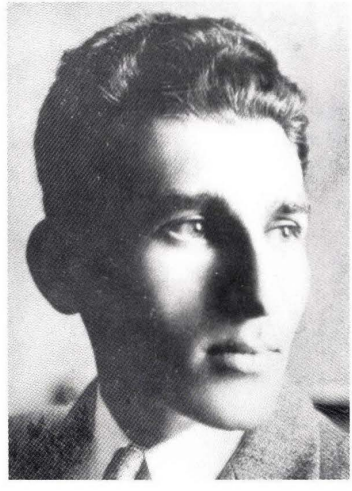
My own arrest on Friday morning, December 15, 1944, was announced by the British over the radio that same day. On the following day, the Sabbath, I was visited in prison by Rabbi Aryeh Levin, "the Rabbi of the prisoners," beloved by all. Rabbi Levin was a constant visitor in the prisons during the years of the British Mandatory Administration, leading incarcerated Jews in prayer, speaking to each of them, bringing a kind word of solace, clasping a hand, giving his blessing, and conveying a feeling of serenity to the extent that serenity was possible in such places. His spiritual support for the Jewish political prisoners was recognized officially after the establishment of the State by naming one of the Jerusalem streets after him.

A few days after my arrest, I was transferred from the prison in Jerusalem to Acre Prison; and from there, with 13 of my comrades, I was transported by military plane to exile in Africa to join more than 200 detainees in Eritrea who had already been there for three months.



Group of Betar *shomrim* in Zichron Yaakov, 1935. Man on horseback is Yaakov Epstein, standing next on his right is the author (front) and Gershon Amitai (back). Photo courtesy of Jabotinsky Institute, Tel Aviv.

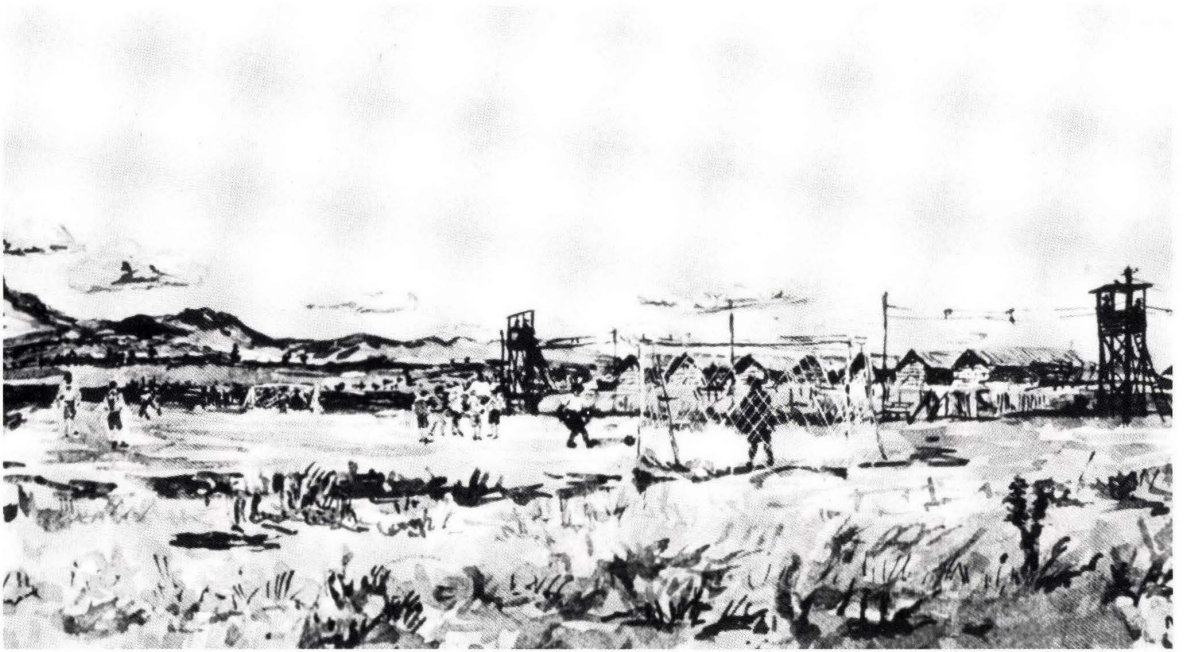


Top: Menachem Begin (left), Yaakov Meridor (right). Bottom: David Raziel (left), Avraham Stern (right). Photos courtesy of Jabotinsky Institute, Tel Aviv.



Detainees in the British camp in Asmara. The sign in front reads – EXILES OF ZION IN ASMARA, with inscription above, IF I FORGET THEE JERUSALEM, LET MY RIGHT HAND WITHER. Photo courtesy of Naomi Niv, Jerusalem.



Sembel playing field, barracks, and watchtowers in the background
(from a sketch by I. Pinhasovich). Photo courtesy of Naomi Niv, Jerusalem.



Entrance to the British Embassy in Rome after bombing by the IZL.
Photo courtesy of Jabotinsky Institute, Tel Aviv.



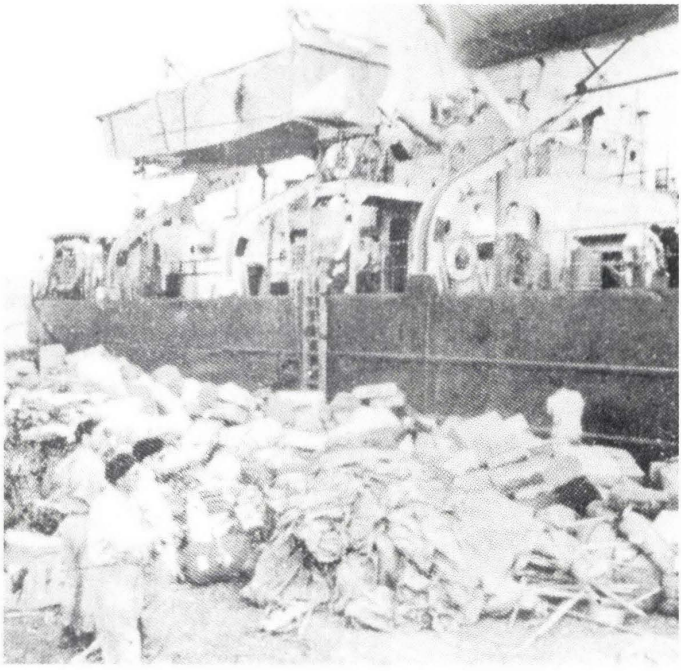


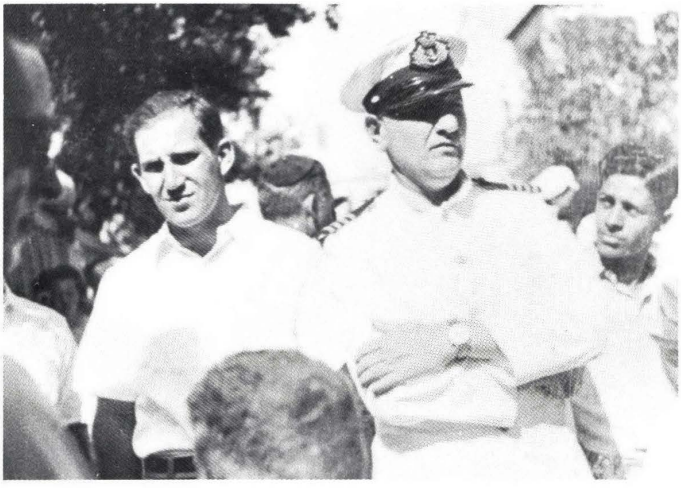




Top: Eliahu Lankin (left), Irma Helpern (right) in the uniform of the Captain of M.S. *Sara Primo*, training ship of the Betar maritime school in Civitta Vecchia, Italy. Photo courtesy of Jabotinsky Institute, Tel Aviv.

Bottom: Eli Tavin (left). Photo courtesy of Jabotinsky Institute, Tel Aviv. Natan Germant (right). Photo courtesy of Natan Germant, Tel Aviv.





Top: *Altalena* loading foot lockers at Port de Bouc, June 1948.
Bottom: Monroe Fein and Irma Helpern. Photos courtesy of Jabotinsky Institute, Tel Aviv.



Top: On deck of *Altalena* en route to Eretz Israel.
Bottom: *Altalena* burning off the Tel Aviv beach.
Photos courtesy of Jabotinsky Insitute, Tel Aviv.

PART TWO

Africa


BLACK SEA
CASPIAN SEA
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Beirut
Damascus
Baghdad
Tel Aviv
Amman
Jerusalem
Cairo
EGYPT
Aswan
Medina
Riyadh
Mecca
RED SEA
Wadi Halfa
Khartoum
Massawa
Asmara
(Sembel)
ERITREA
SUDAN
Aden
Djibouti
Adis Ababa
ETHIOPIA
SOMALIA
Gilgil
Nairobi
KENYA
ERITREA
AND
N.E. AFRICA
British Detention Camp
at Sembel
0
500
km

12

Escape Plans

It was early January, 1945. The military plane in which we sat shackled to one another flew thousands of miles from the shores of Eretz Israel.

We were en route to Eritrea, at that time part of Ethiopia. We made one stop at Wadi Halfa, a small town on the shores of the Nile in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The airfield there was surrounded by British soldiers; a military vehicle was waiting for us. We spent the night in the local prison, in the same cells with Sudanese murderers and thieves.

It came as a surprise to find Hebrew inscriptions on the walls of the cell we occupied: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning" (Psalms, 137:5). Also scratched on the wall was a hand grasping a rifle upon a background of the map of Eretz Israel with the words *Rak Kach* (Only Thus), the symbol and the slogan used by the Irgun on all its proclamations.

The next morning, we were loaded back onto the plane; and several hours later we landed in Asmara, the capital

of Eritrea. After a 15-minute car ride from the airport, the gates of the British detention camp closed behind us.

The camp was located at a place outside Asmara called Sembel. It consisted of barracks for dormitories and service shacks accommodating a storeroom, a barber shop, a library, a canteen, and even a small synagogue. A double barbed wire fence enclosed everything. A gate in this fence led to a large grassy field maintained for team sports and exercise. The field was also enclosed by barbed wire. As long as the gate was open, guards stood in watchtowers surrounding the courtyard of the barracks and the playing field. We had the run of these areas, as well as the yards surrounding them. In the evening, all the prisoners were ordered to leave the field, the gate was locked, and the guards focused their attention on the areas around the barracks. Other than the barbed wire fences and guard towers, the camp was run as a military base. We had ample food and clothing and were allowed parcels from home and some special tools and equipment for our hobbies.

We were met, greeted, and questioned by many friends who had disappeared from Eretz Israel before us and were now hungry for news of the underground.

The 251 prisoners in the camp fell into three categories. The largest group was comprised of men of the Irgun. We were organized into units even within the confines of the camp and actively engaged in physical exercises, tactical maneuvers (to the extent possible), and a lively exchange of information and ideas.

In the second category were LEHI men who had been arrested prior to The Season. They were also organized and continued to function as a unit within the camp.

In the third category were the "neutrals" – those men who were neither members of the Irgun nor LEHI, but were being detained on suspicion of some illegal activity under British rule. Most of the neutrals had been imprisoned for

several years and were now expending all their efforts in petitioning the authorities to grant them an amnesty. These men were willing to promise almost anything in exchange for their freedom.

Hardly any of the Irgun or LEHI men entertained any hopes of securing their freedom through official channels – after all, we were at war with the British in Eretz Israel. So our considerable energy during our years of detention was devoted to elaborate plans for escape.

From time to time, the camp commander would receive warnings from the CID about a particular prisoner and would convey this information to the guards. But all the extra precautions of our British jailers were in vain. We devoted all our spare time to planning our escape. It was an uneven contest in the end. On one side were the British officers and soldiers whose minds were occupied with their own domestic and private affairs. They whiled away their time in routine assignments, drinking whiskey when they could, and having as good a time as they could manage under the circumstances. On the other side were members of the underground who were determined to escape and to continue their national struggle for liberation, which they would not be able to accomplish from within the prison.

The playing field remained dark after nightfall. We figured that if some of us could succeed in remaining on the playing field after sunset, we could wait until dark and then climb over the fence and disappear. The problem was how to conceal ourselves.

Before the gates were locked, the British guards would check to see whether any of the prisoners were still lying around on the grass. At first, we thought of leaving blankets behind on the playing field to see if a blanket might provide a hiding place in the future; but each time a blanket was deliberately left behind, it was retrieved by the guards and

returned to the barracks. We then thought of burying the would-be escapees in the ground.

There was a shallow ditch, probably caused by erosion from rainwater, in one corner of the field near the gate. There was no vegetation around this ditch, and the earth surrounding it was soft.

For several days prior to the escape, some of us made a habit of congregating near the ditch, lying on our blankets there, reading, playing chess and cards.

On the day of the escape, our "group" was gathered in the usual place; but this time, we began digging with our hands to deepen the ditch. The job was done slowly, hour after hour, while a watch was kept on all sides. When a stranger approached, we covered up the excavation with our blankets and pretended to be lounging.

By four o'clock in the afternoon, the ditch was long and deep enough to accommodate three prone men. The three hopeful escapees lay buried in this grave with rubber tubes in their mouths so that they could breathe. They were covered first with blankets and then with soil, leaving the breathing tubes protruding only slightly above the ground.

When the whistle was heard signaling the curfew, the ditch appeared as it always had. This time, the men were particularly careful not to leave any blankets behind – at least not above ground.

When the gate to the playing field was locked, one of the conspirators called out loudly to a friend standing in the yard near the gate, "Hey! See if the gate is locked! I forgot my hat on the field." The reply came in an even louder voice: "The gate's already locked. You can get your hat tomorrow!"

The escapees heard the signal and understood it. The three could alter their positions only slightly to relieve their paralyzed limbs. They lay underground waiting for the next signal.

When total darkness had fallen, some of the men in the barracks started singing, as they often did. This time the words that thundered forth were: "Arise, O Israel, Arise with your young and with your old, knapsacks on your shoulders; Arise, arise O Israel!" And the men buried in the playing field arose from the earth with their knapsacks. Before crawling to the fence, they smoothed over the earth in the ditch and threw the blankets in the center of the field so that the guards would not discover the hiding place.

That is how the first three prisoners escaped from the detention camp in Asmara. They were Binyamin Zeironi, Shimon Shaibe, and Haggai Lev. Three days later, unable to find safe passage out of Asmara, they were captured and returned to Sembel. But our men had proven that the barbed wire fences were not high enough to hold them there.

Shortly after this escape, the entire population of Sembel was evacuated by train and trucks to another British detention camp, hundreds of miles away in the Sudan. We arrived there towards the end of January 1945. Cold winds blew unabated in the desert winter. Four blankets were not enough to keep a man warm. In the summer, the cold was replaced by searing heat. We threw off our blankets then, and walked around stripped down to our shorts. Then came the sandstorms and rain.

The Sudanese weather was extreme in its vehemence. One summer day, we saw a huge dark-yellow funnel of sand approaching from the west at tremendous speed. It descended on the camp like a hurricane, overturning and sweeping away everything that was not bolted down. We found it impossible to maintain our footing and took shelter in the dormitories. But even there, the shutters and blankets covering the windows were useless. Sand came in through hitherto unknown cracks in the roof, trickling in between the seams of the windows and doors. It got into

our ears, hair, noses, mouths – into every bodily opening. Our faces were soon covered with sand making us all but unrecognizable. The contours of tables, shelves, beds, and floor were also soon obscured beneath a obliterating yellow layer. The barrage of the sands and the wind outside made it impossible even to shout and be understood.

When the storm finally subsided, we watched the cloud wend its way eastward, a celestial tidal wave erect as a giant wall joining heaven and earth. The yard seemed to have been swept bare by some monstrous broom. Like a chameleon, the camp and its inhabitants had changed color to match the desert. There was yellow sand on the roofs and windows, on fences and faces, covering the walls and our clothes.

Torrential rains came the next day – a true deluge from Noah's era – rain and hail, lightning and thunder, accompanied by gales of such power that they shook the concrete walls and the foundations of the prison.

Another sandstorm followed, then more rain. And in the intervals between the storms, the sun blazed like a furnace fanned by the winds.

The first news I heard after my arrival at Sembel was that six other detainees had been evacuated a mere half-hour before our arrival. They were Aryeh Ben-Eliezer, Eliyahu Meridor, Shimshon Yunitchman, Ben-Zion Katzenelbogen, Natan Germant, and Yaakov Hillel. We must have passed each other on the road. With scant warning, they had been told to gather their belongings and were then trucked away under heavy guard.

Three months after their departure from Sembel under armed guard, our six absent comrades finally joined us at the prison in the Sudan. We learned that they had been flown from Asmara to Cairo, where they had been incarcerated in the central prison for political detainees under

the supervision of British Near East Intelligence. Although the six were held in separate cells, they maintained contact amongst themselves by singing or praying loudly, all the while sneaking in apocryphal text that conveyed whatever information each individual was able to glean. Thus, they established that they were incarcerated with Poles and Russians who had joined the German armies, with Greeks who rebelled against the British occupation, and with Italians, Germans, and other prisoners of war.

Discipline in the Cairo prison was particularly harsh. A thorough search of clothing and persons was conducted before the Irgun men were admitted to their cells. All sorts of articles were confiscated: belts, shoelaces, pencils, pens, and of course, shaving tools. The prison guards were British soldiers in the Intelligence Service, specially trained for guard duty.

The reason our six comrades were brought to this prison became apparent to them after several days, when they were taken out one by one and brought to the interrogation office located in the prison courtyard. High-ranking British Intelligence officers were there to question them. The British evidently believed these six men to be important leaders in IZL; and except for Yunitchman (who was a Revisionist leader not active in IZL), so they were. Periodically, each one would be removed from his cell in the middle of the night for interrogation. Sometimes the questioning would last for several minutes, sometimes for many uninterrupted hours. The interrogators were sometimes amicable and conciliatory, but at other times the prisoners were subjected to verbal abuse and intimidation.

The six men were threatened variously with rotting in prison, never again seeing their families, and imprisonment of their wives, children, and aged parents. There were also offers of money and jobs if only they would divulge information about the underground's membership

and operations. But all such efforts were in vain. Our six comrades did not yield to pressure and were not deceived by promises. British Intelligence found itself up against an unbreachable wall. Three months later, these six men were returned to the prison in Africa which, in the meantime, had been moved from Eritrea to the Sudan.

We spent almost a year at the camp in Sudan. In October 1945, we were returned to Asmara in Eritrea and placed in the same camp in which we had started.

There were several unsuccessful escape attempts in the first year of our internment. I will not describe all the escapes organized by our men in the African camps. Much has already been written about them (for example, *Long is the Road to Freedom* by Yaakov Meridor[1]). Most of the early ones were not successful. The first escape from Sembel took place in January 1945 and pointed the way to my own eventual flight.

13

Successful Escape

When we were brought back to the Sembel prison, we found that some changes had been made to enhance security. A service yard had been added and new searchlights now illuminated every corner of the area surrounding the service shacks and our dormitories, but the playing field still remained dark.

The British guards at the Sembel camp kept a close watch over us during the day, but after dark the camp was guarded by colonial soldiers from the Sudan – impecunious and uneducated men whose allegiance to the crown was much less firmly rooted. For some time, a "flirtation" had been taking place between several of these Sudanese and our men. The Sudanese did much for their British rulers but were poorly rewarded. Their paltry salaries were insufficient to support their large families and left them in a perpetual state of need. It did not help that the Sudanese were obliged to guard fellow "colonials" from another British protectorate.

We were quite ready to exploit this situation at the

camp. While there was a serious shortage of clothing for sale throughout this area of Africa, an abundance of clothing issued to us was of little use to incarcerated men. Our supply ration provided us with more than we could use. And so, on an appropriate occasion, a representative of the prisoners offered to sell one of the Sudanese a shirt for very little money so that he could resell it at a profit while on leave.

This first transaction was successful and opened the way for a flourishing black market in shirts, sweaters, sheets (this was the most valuable item on the market), towels, and other supplies. Local Eritreans, as well as the Sudanese, became involved. True, there were fellows in the camp who slept without a sheet or were left without a sweater, but what of it? They could ask for an additional clothing ration from the camp commander and would receive it. The British commander was all too pleased to comply with all our requests and seemed willing to overlook tremendous irregularities simply to keep us contented and avoid the bother of our repeated attempts at escape. The Sudanese prospered and grew lax in their vigilance, and our store of funds for potential escapees began to swell. Besides its other amenities, the Sembel camp provided us with recreational metal and carpentry workshops, which we used to produce all the tools required for escapes.

In November 1945, a month after we returned to Sembel, we had four new candidates for escape: Binyamin Zeironi, Yaakov Gurevitz, Rahamim Mizrahi, and me. On November 10, shortly before dark, we went unobserved to the clothing storeroom in the service yard outside the inner fence. We put on khaki uniforms, issued to us by the British, over our civilian clothes and packed what few personal belongings we had in small kits. Then we hid under piles of sacks and rags in the storeroom. Some friends who had come to see us off covered us more deeply and then departed. We enjoyed a more comfortable wait for darkness than our

comrades who had been buried alive underground in an earlier escape attempt.

At five o'clock, a shrill whistle sounded calling for the service yard to be cleared. We heard the prisoners leaving the canteen and the creaking of hinges as the large gate within the fence was closed. A British sergeant inspected the service shacks hurriedly, passing from room to room to see that no one remained. We heard his footsteps – could even hear his breathing – as he entered our storeroom, but apparently he saw nothing to arouse his suspicions. We heard him return to the yard.

Several minutes later, we heard singing from the direction of the kitchen which was housed in the barrack nearest the inner fence of the service yard. This was the prearranged signal informing us that inspection at the service shacks was over. We still had to wait until the watch was transferred to the towers of the inner camp.

An hour later, we again heard singing from the kitchen. This meant that the guards were now gone from the outer camp. Quietly and carefully we emerged from under the sacks, surprised to find that the British guard had left the door slightly ajar.

We could hear a noisy Sabbath party in progress in the dining hall. Only a few of the prisoners knew the real reason for the sudden festivity, for the biscuits and beer that were distributed so lavishly. We heard thunderous singing. As soon as it became dark, someone suggested: "Come on, gang, let's go out to dance!" Before anyone could hesitate or object, a *hora* circle was formed outside near one of the watchtowers; we watched the dancers through the crack in the door. Atop the watchtower, a Sudanese soldier stood scanning the barracks area. Occasionally, he glanced in the direction of the service shacks beyond the fence, a distance of about fifteen yards.

The *hora* ended as abruptly as it began. Several of the

boys began a wild Beduin *debka* dance and others assisted them with Arabic songs and hand-clapping. The Sudanese guard who was closest to the group, as well as his neighbors to the right and left, gradually became involved in the exhilaration of the dance. When a song was familiar to them, they joined in the singing and hand-clapping. If not for their positions high in their towers, they would certainly have joined in the dance. The service yard was entirely enveloped in darkness. There was little to distract the guards' attention from the dancing below.

At the same time, another of our men stood at the opposite end of the yard just below the watchtower that overlooked both yards – the barracks yard on one side and the service yard on the other. This was our "merchant" who had come to discuss a new, very enticing deal with the sentry. Our agent dickered with the guard, raising the price of the merchandise. The Sudanese objected, pleading that his profits were small and that he could not afford to pay the higher price. The discussion became animated. Before long, the guard forgot his duty in the heat of the argument.

Another prearranged signal reached our ears – the song that heralded the complete distraction of the sentries who were now so engrossed in the activities about them that there was little to hinder our escape.

One by one, we eased through the door and began to crawl in the direction of the outer fence. In former military drills in Eretz Israel and in Poland, we had learned to crawl even under live fire; but we had never crept as cautiously, so intent on all the refinements of military crawling, as we did this time. We stayed as close to the ground as snakes; and yet, if the Sudanese had turned their heads in our direction even for a moment, they would have seen us clearly in the light from the towers. The nearest guard post was only 15 yards away!

It was about 30 yards from where we started to the

fence. It took us about 20 minutes to cover the distance on our bellies. Stretching our hands out in front of us, we held on to the ground and dragged our bodies silently, halting momentarily to listen, and then continued the process. We crawled in single file. Binyamin, who was first in line, had a wire-cutter made by one of the prisoners in the metal shop. These were rather primitive but powerful shears held together by screws; their jaws snapped shut with only the slightest pressure on the handles. We had wrapped the handles in a rag to muffle any clicking sound. Binyamin cut the barbed wire with painstaking, maddening slowness.

It took half an hour before he succeeded in cutting through enough of the fence to allow our passage. During that time, the comrades we were leaving behind took pains to see that the dancing and singing at the barracks continued at full pitch. Sounds of the party reached our ears, even after we had reached a distance of several hundred yards from the perimeter of the camp.

We took off our torn and soiled khaki uniforms and threw them into an irrigation canal. The lights of Asmara flickered at us about four kilometers away. We headed in their direction, taking our first steps in many months as free men.

After crossing plowed fields, irrigation canals, and threshing platforms, we reached the road that led to Asmara's suburbs. Here we stopped briefly to check our attire and appearance. Our suits, neckties, and neatly shaved faces were satisfactory. According to Binyamin, who knew Asmara from his first escape attempt, we looked like all the other white citizens of the city.

Before his capture, Binyamin had managed over the course of two days to become acquainted with several of Asmara's Jewish inhabitants and to familiarize himself somewhat with the layout of the town. Yaakov Gurevitz had been a sailor in the British Navy before his internment.

His ship had been anchored for long periods of time at Massawa, the Eritrean harbor, and he had spent all his leaves in Asmara. He, too, was acquainted with many of the Jewish residents, had eaten at their tables, visited their homes. We depended a great deal upon Binyamin and Yaakov's connections.

We hailed a passing taxi and, speaking only in English, we instructed the driver to take us to the center of town. We were sufficiently convincing for the Italian driver to mistake us for officials of the local British government. He treated us with due respect. For many days before our escape, all of us had studied the city map, learned the names of the main streets, the public institutions, and other details. We told the driver to drop us at the cathedral on the main square. We arrived ten minutes later.

Although it was ten o'clock at night, the streets were teeming. No one took particular notice of the four Englishmen who alighted from the cab and chattered among themselves while standing on the street corner. We decided that Yaakov should go immediately to one of his Jewish friends. We would wait for him in the cathedral.

When he returned half an hour later, Yaakov told us that his friend was surprised to see him and a bit frightened, but had promised to help. The friend was to contact another friend who would come to the cathedral to fetch us.

A full hour passed as we stood waiting self-consciously on the steps of the cathedral. Suddenly, a passerby blurted out a whispered *Shalom!* without looking at us or stopping. This turned out to be Hayim Gamliel, who was to become our faithful friend who later took great risks upon himself in order to help us. We followed him from a distance, until we arrived at our place of lodging.

The hour was very late. We found ourselves at the Jewish slaughterhouse of Asmara – a small courtyard surrounded by a few apartments, some empty, and some inhabited by

Jews. We were ushered into one of the rooms occupied by two men of the community. They received us warmly, brought us a basin of water so that we could wash, and sat us down to a meal. Afterwards, we spread blankets on the floor and prepared ourselves for sleep. But who could sleep? We spent the entire night talking to our hosts about the war of liberation in Eretz Israel.

Our hosts heard us out with excitement and fascination. They were devoted Jews; and though we barely knew them, we felt as if we were among brothers. All through the period of our hiding and wanderings, such kindred souls took great risks for us. Some paid dearly for their help. Hayim Gamliel would eventually be arrested and serve a 14-month sentence in an Ethiopian prison for his part in helping us. He took this risk for us, complete strangers, even though he had a wife and six children to support!

Most of our friends and helpers, Gamliel among them, settled in Israel. All went through the difficulties of absorption, lived in immigrant huts, were unemployed, and are even now barely eking out a living. Those of us who were recipients of their aid can never adequately repay them. At least in these few lines, I can express my gratitude and that of my comrades to these kindly people, and particularly to Hayim Gamliel, without whom we might never have overcome the many difficulties we encountered during our escape.

The hunt for us began at dawn the next day. Our friends of the Jewish community reported to us that hundreds of armed soldiers swarmed through the streets of the city. Tanks barred the crossroads. Planes circled over the surrounding mountains. Vehicles were halted on roads and passengers' identity papers were checked. Jewish homes and shops in Asmara were searched, but the authorities overlooked the slaugherhouse in the black mercantile quar-

ter of the city. Our friends supplied all our wants, purchased food for us with the money we brought from prison and gave us news of the manhunt that was in progress.

We were told that searches such as these had not occurred in Asmara since the British captured Eritrea from the Italians in 1941, not even when a number of important Ethiopian or Italian prisoners had escaped from jail. Our prestige rose in the eyes of those who protected us. If the British went to such lengths on our account, we must be very important personages indeed.

The four of us moved into a vacant apartment off the courtyard where we stayed for two days. On the morning of the third day, we were stunned to see a face glued to the shutter of our window, black eyes peering at us in amazement. The face vanished. As we hurried to the window, we recognized the retreating form of the black maid from a neighboring house. We guessed that she must have heard a noise from the supposedly empty apartment and had come over to investigate. The sight of four white men in an empty room in a house in the black quarter was a rare enough occurrence to arouse her suspicion.

Our friends were very concerned when we told them that our hiding place had been discovered. It appeared that this servant had a brother who was a policeman. If she were to tell him what she had seen – even if only in the course of idle chatter – we were bound to be captured. The streets were full of policemen and army personnel. People were being detained and questioned everywhere in the city.

Fearing for our safety, our hosts brought us a Jewish wagon driver named Menachem, who owned a horse and cart. Our friends assured us of this man's reliability. Together we decided that Menachem would go immediately to the city and arrange to rent some sort of flat in his name where we could all hide. Soon afterward, Menachem returned with the news that he had found a place for us.

We did not want to wait until dark to move. Our new friends brought large sacks into which to pack us. I was the first to climb into the sack while straw was packed around me. When the sack had enough straw sticking out of it to look as if it contained something other than a man, it was lifted and tossed into the wagon. I felt the bruises for a long time afterwards. Thus, one by one, we were transported in Menachem's cart to our new quarters.

14

A Hideout Worse Than Prison

When my sack was untied and I emerged, my entire body was racked with pain and I felt sick from the motion of the journey. I found myself in a barn made of clay with a tin roof and a dirt floor that was paved with horse dung. A dizzying stench permeated the air. Nevertheless, we thanked the Lord for this safe haven in the black quarter of the city. As the others arrived, we began to set up housekeeping. Menachem brought us a bale of fresh hay and scattered it in one corner for bedding. Two old blankets served us as covers.

We felt some evidence of the bugs right away – a slight itch here and a scratch there. But it was only at night, when we settled as best we could into our nests on the ground, that the other inhabitants of our home came to life – the mice, rats, fleas, mosquitoes, and lice. These last, in particular, carried out the Biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply. They were a particular breed of ground lice that I had never seen before – very small, almost invisible

to the naked eye. They came by the thousands and showed us no mercy. We slept in our clothes, the ends of our sleeves tied to the waistbands of our trousers, our shirts buttoned to the neck, and our faces covered with handkerchiefs. But every precaution was in vain. The lice penetrated all these barriers and fed on us ravenously. As soon as we lay down upon the straw, we were busy scratching until daybreak. It was impossible to sleep.

At dawn of our first day in the barn, our skin was bleeding. We had another day and night of horrible suffering; on the morning of the third day, we felt as if we were about to lose our minds. After renting the place, Menachem moved in with us to provide cover for signs of life in the abandoned barn and to take care of us. Each morning he would go out to do his work, and upon his return he would bring us food. We begged him to buy a few bottles of kerosene. That evening before retiring, we bathed in kerosene from head to toe and went to bed trying to overcome the nausea and the stinging occasioned by the kerosene's contact with our open sores.

We lay down on the straw, deathly tired after two sleepless nights. Apparently, the lice were sufficiently offended to leave us alone, and we drifted off gratefully to sleep. But as soon as the odor of kerosene evaporated, the lice returned to their meal.

We arose and doused ourselves with kerosene again, splashing ourselves thoroughly – I shudder to think what would have happened if someone had lit a match in that barn! Again, we grabbed a few hours of sleep until the process had to be repeated again. Our days and nights were permeated with the sickening odor of kerosene. As soon as the smell lost its strength, we were forced to douse ourselves again.

Two days later, our skin began to peel. The new skin

underneath was delicate and more sensitive to the kerosene; and apparently, it was even more delectable to the lice. Their bites were severalfold bolder and more painful. Our suffering was unbearable.

One night after a kerosene bath, lying enervated with closed eyes, I felt something soft touch my face. I assumed that one of my companions had extended his hand in his sleep and that these were his fingers brushing my nose. As I reached to push him away, a large rat jumped from my face onto my chest and from there into the haystack. I was already unnerved, and the sight of this huge rat promenading across my face was more than I could tolerate. I jumped from my bed and screamed hysterically, madly.

We had not dared make a sound in the barn for fear of being discovered by people in the neighboring buildings. Our speech was always whispered; we muffled every cough and sneeze. Then suddenly to let forth with this blood-curdling scream at midnight! My friends shot me horrified looks while we cringed in silence, but no one came. We heard only the sounds of the city outside and the scuffling of the rat in the hay.

Sleep was now impossible. We searched for the rat's hole and filled it with stones, then lay awake listening to the digging of his feet trying to reach us again. The lice had not been banished though, and soon they came to punish us. We rose to bathe in kerosene once more.

Fourteen days and fourteen nights we lived in this hell, and each day seemed as long as a year. Our nerves began to unravel. We quarreled over trifles. Our health was weakened until we suffered constant dizziness. Yet, we saw no way out of this anguish.

The searches in Asmara continued unremittingly. We were kept up to date by Hayim Gamliel, who visited us every evening. On the tenth day after our escape, our pictures had been printed on posters offering rewards. The

posters were printed in four languages – English, Italian, Amharic, and Arabic – and were distributed throughout the country. In Asmara, the notices were pasted on the walls of houses, plastered on electric poles, displayed at bars and coffeehouses, on buses, at government offices – in short, our faces by now were well-known to the inhabitants of Asmara.

Our friends removed one poster and brought it to us as a "souvenir." When we looked at this notice, we could not restrain our laughter despite the worry and nervousness – under the picture of Yaakov Gurevitz was printed the name of Shlomo Dula, one of the prisoners who had remained in the camp. It seems that, as far as the British were concerned, Yaakov Gurevitz had remained in camp and was not troubling them at all; whereas Shlomo Dula was being hunted by the British authorities everywhere, and a reward was offered to anyone who found him.

Several weeks later, we found out the reason for this error. On the evening of our escape, when the camp officers came for the routine count of prisoners, our comrades tried to confuse them in order to delay the discovery of the escape and to enable us to find secure quarters on the outside. When the officers called the name of Yaakov Gurevitz, Shlomo Dula responded; and they wrote "present" next to the name of Yaakov Gurevitz. When Shlomo Dula's name was called, no one responded, so they concluded that he was the fourth absentee.

Menachem's activities began to arouse the suspicions of neighbors, who observed the Jewish wagon driver entering every day laden with baskets of food and buckets of water in quantities too large for the needs of just one person.

We decided that if our friends in Asmara could not find us other accommodations, we would begin our trek in the direction of Ethiopia. Our plan was to blacken our skin and

wear disguises, to keep away from the highways and move through the mountains and forests by night. Ever-faithful Menachem, who seemed to have grown quite attached to us, decided that he would accompany us as well. We were happy to accept his offer, since he was a local resident and spoke Amharic. He would be very useful on our long journey.

Hayim Gamliel brought us maps of Eritrea and the neighboring countries, a compass, and other instruments needed for several weeks' travel through wild country. Menachem purchased Ethiopian clothing for us and dye for our skin and hair. The distance between Asmara and Addis Ababa was about 1000 kilometers. It was a desperate plan.

15

A Safe House in Asmara

At the last minute, Menachem found us a house in one of the Italian suburbs where we could remain safely in Asmara and plan for the escape of our other comrades from Sembel. It was a European-style detached house with two rooms, plus a kitchen and even a modern bathroom. It had a small fenced yard all around. After the privations of the barn, heaven itself could not have seemed nicer to us.

Before leaving the barn, we took one last kerosene bath. Then, dressed in Ethiopian clothing, our skin blackened, we left as passengers in Menachem's cart.

For the first time since our escape from Sembel, we saw the sky over our heads. At sundown we crossed through city streets, even passed the police station where we saw the posters offering a reward for our return. No one took special notice of the cart with its four black passengers.

We arrived at our new dwelling deloused and dyed black. Immediately, we sent Menachem out to buy us soap, cooking utensils, two mattresses and extra blankets. At last,

we would live like human beings again! Hayim Gamliel even provided us with kosher meat, and we were careful to cook it in accordance with all religious prescriptions more to respect his sensibilities than our own.

In the meantime, our circle of friends among Asmara's Jewish community grew larger. Hayim Gamliel introduced us to Yaakov Trevis, a young Jew from Eretz Israel who was working in Asmara as a clerk in the Barclay's Bank. During the six months we would spend hiding out in Asmara, Yaakov's help was invaluable.

For years afterwards, I had a strong desire to meet him again, to shake his hand and thank him for all he had done. I was privileged to do this only after the establishment of the State of Israel.

We saw ourselves as the advance group of escapees from Sembel. Our mission was to establish a safe haven for tens of others to follow. According to the original plan, formulated while we were still in the camp, our comrades were to begin digging a tunnel under the fence of the camp. We would receive them on the other side and take them to a safe house. Although the good Jews of Asmara were so enthusiastic in their assistance that they raised money among themselves and doubled our cash, we still did not have sufficient funds; we had to establish contact with Eretz Israel, to secure a larger amount of money, and to arrange a way to get all of us eventually back home. We needed a wider circle of contacts, if we were to accomplish these goals. We also needed to re-establish contact with our co-conspirators in the camp.

The British would have been most surprised to learn that we were living only a few minutes' walk from their headquarters and a distance of only several kilometers from Sembel itself. They would be even more surprised to know that we had exchanged about 20 letters with our comrades

in the camp without the aid of go-betweens and without even enlisting the aid of the Sudanese guards.

We had arranged our mode of communication and a secret code prior to our escape.

The gate between the dormitory area and the playing field was opened every morning at six o'clock. Detainees were allowed to go out in small groups for exercise. Several of our comrades were to arrange to be the first ones out. While jogging around the field, they were to search for half a brick thrown onto the field by one of us four during the night, after the guards had retired from their posts on the field to the watchtowers. We had arranged to pack encoded letters between two pieces of cardboard tied to these bricks.

Once the search for us had died down, we decided that it was time to make contact.

Rahamim Mizrahi, who spoke fluent Arabic, disguised himself as an Arab – there were thousands of them in Asmara – and set out at noon on a reconnaissance mission to see whether our plan was still feasible.

He was excited and confident when he returned an hour and a half later. Despite its dangers, Rahamim had performed his task very easily. He had passed by the camp and recognized some of our comrades playing football, but even they did not suspect his disguise and had not even glanced in his direction.

That evening at dusk, Rahamim set out again but with a letter this time. When he returned an hour and half later, he told us how he had walked as close as several yards from the fence and had tossed his brick over the gate near the playing field as was prearranged.

In this letter, we asked that our comrades confirm its receipt and reply by wearing blue or red sweaters in a particular pattern at a specified time on the porch of the canteen.

The next day, Rahamim went to the camp in his Arab disguise and returned safely again. Our letter had been received and a reply was given. The fellows, who had been told in the letter how to recognize him, immediately stood in formation on the porch spelling out responses to our questions in sequences of red and blue.

The most vital question was, "Have you already begun to dig the tunnel?" Their answer was "yes." This meant that the time remaining for us to complete our preparations was growing shorter.

Several days later, we sent another letter via Rahamim. We asked our men at the camp to reply in writing by means of the "stone post." They were to toss their letter, attached to a brick, over the fence during the morning of a specified day when Rahamim would again pass by the camp in his disguise.

To allay the suspicions of the sentries, we asked our boys to begin indulging in a new sport of throwing stones over the gate several days in advance. The sentries soon grew used to the sight of prisoners attempting to achieve records in their stone-throwing competitions.

On a prearranged day, one of the prisoners threw half a brick at an Arab who passed by the gate. The unjustly attacked man began to curse them; he picked up the brick in order to hurl it back, but at the last moment changed his mind and continued on his way. The brick disappeared between the folds of his garment.

Of course, it was not always possible to receive our comrades' replies in this manner. For the third round of communiques, we proposed that they throw the brick over a certain point in the fence and that our messenger would come to pick it up at night. They were to paint it with white lime to enable him to find the brick in the dark. Improving on our original arrangement, we now bored holes in red

bricks of the kind that are common in Asmara and hid the letters within. We then filled the holes with mortar compounded from the brick dust. Once the mortar dried, there was nothing out of the ordinary about these bricks. They would not have aroused the guards' suspicions, even if they had picked one up to examine it closely.

This precaution proved superfluous, because our comrades always managed to be first on the field every morning. Eventually, communication evolved to the point where we supplied the camp with tools for digging the tunnel, including chisels and a hammerhead weighing five kilograms. We also provided compasses to point the way underground.

When we had exhausted our supply of money, we asked the camp to send over any additional funds they might have received from Eretz Israel. Our comrades threw over the fence a plastered tin box containing 100 Israeli pounds in one-pound notes. This occurred as preparations for the major breakout were coming to an end. But I am getting ahead of my story.

16

Thwarted Plans

We were still engaged in improving our communication with the camp when we heard that a ship from Eretz Israel was scheduled to dock at Massawa Port in Eritrea within a few days. We received this news as a heaven-sent solution to our problem of raising funds to provide for the safe passage of our fellows once they had escaped from the camp and joined us in Asmara.

Our friend Menachem, who was still living with us and serving us faithfully, was to go to Massawa ahead of us. Our plan was to get to Eretz Israel, mobilize the necessary funds to rent a ship of our own, sail back to Eritrea and rescue the fugitives who had managed to escape through the tunnel. Admittedly, this was another desperate plan – but we were willing to risk it, determined to return to fight the war of liberation in Eretz Israel.

Enthusiastically, we began preparing for our departure. We decided to travel to Massawa disguised as Ethiopians, as

the British police were still spot-checking the identification of all white passengers leaving Asmara.

Through the "stone-post," we notified our fellows at the camp of our plan. And then, we learned that the ship would not be docking at Massawa after all.

Before we had the opportunity to inform them of the change in our plans, we were awakened at night by to the sound of tapping on the waterpipe behind the house. Peering through the shutters, we asked fearfully in Italian, "Who is there?" In reply, we heard the password, "Aviram," the Hebrew acronym made up from the first letters of our four names plus that of Menachem. We opened the door.

Before us stood Yaakov Trevis, accompanied by Shimon Shaibe, one of our fellow prisoners from Sembel and a veteran escape artist. Our surprise, excitement, and joy were overwhelming, but we were also seized by the fear that something had happened at the camp.

Shimon explained all. When our comrades in camp had learned that we would soon leave for Massawa to board the Jewish ship, they were very upset with us and sent Shimon to try and change our plan, if it was not already too late. If Shimon arrived in Asmara and found that we had already left for the ship, he was to remain at liberty and continue our work of trying to find a safe house for the men who would manage to escape from Sembel and find safe passage for them out of Eritrea. If we were still in Asmara, Shimon was to deliver their message and return to camp that same night so that his absence would go undetected. Renewed searches would jeopardize all of us now and in the future. The sentiment in the camp was one of resentment and anger. How could we think of abandoning them now? Even if we did manage to return with a ship, we still had not found a way to smuggle escaped prisoners out of the city.

Shimon had left the camp with no great difficulty. He spoke fluent Arabic and had befriended one of the Sudanese

guards. Shimon told this man that his wealthy parents in Eretz Israel had sent him a large sum of money, and that he wished to go out on the town for the evening. He promised the guard fifteen lira in return for his assistance. This was a goodly sum in those parts. The five of us could have lived on it for about two weeks. The guard was to receive half the payment upon enabling Shimon to leave and the other half upon his return.

This offer was too tempting to refuse. After the prisoners were locked in their barracks, the guard in question placed a ladder against the fence near his post. Shimon then climbed over the fence easily and made his way to the city. He knew the town well because of his escape and recapture the previous year. Once in the city, Shimon contacted Hayim Gamliel. Our young Eretz Israeli friend was summoned and he brought Shimon to our house in the Italian suburbs.

We talked almost until daybreak, and then Shimon prepared to return to camp. We all sympathized with him. Imprisoned for over four years, Shimon had made three previous escapes from the camp and had been caught each time. Now he was obliged to return of his own volition to his confines of barbed wire. It was a painful decision, but staying was impossible. If he did not return, there would be renewed searches in the city that would jeopardize our entire operation.

Rahamim decided to accompany Shimon, dressed in his usual Arab disguise, so that he could show him a short-cut from our house to Sembel.

On Rahamim's return, we learned that Shimon's "night on the town" had not passed unobserved. When they approached the camp, they found all the barracks lit up, guards running to and fro, and everyone in turmoil. Evidently, the escape had been discovered.

Shimon continued alone directly to the main gate and turned himself in to the guards, hoping that his return

would prevent further searches in town. Rahamim decided not to endanger himself or us unnecessarily by loitering there and returned home immediately.

We later found out that the Sudanese guard had neglected to move the ladder away from the fence after Shimon left the camp, perhaps keeping it there for his return which was to be at an unspecified hour. In any case, the sergeant on duty several hours later found the ladder and began to question the guard. The confused replies of the Sudanese only heightened the sergeant's suspicions. He set off the siren and ordered a count of the prisoners.

When Shimon was brought before the camp commander, he insisted that he had not intended to leave for good but rather meant to prove that he could do so at will despite the guards. He contended that this had merely been an escapade to protest his prolonged and guiltless imprisonment.

Even our gullible British commander failed to believe this tall tale. He sentenced Shimon to eight weeks of solitary confinement. But no one suspected that between Shimon's departure and the discovery of his return, he had managed to establish contact with previous escapees. Before his sentence was carried out, Shimon succeeded in passing to one of our comrades our coded letter containing detailed answers to the prisoners' protest mission.

When the plan for sailing aboard a Jewish vessel failed, we were forced to do some soul-searching. Obviously we had to make contacts extending beyond the borders of Eritrea, which seemed in reality to be nothing more than a huge detention camp meticulously guarded by the British. We had exhausted the resources of our friends in Asmara, and, in any case, these were insufficient to meet our needs. It was imperative that we make contact with the outside world.

As long as we were in the city and in their vicinity, our comrades in the detention camp could be sure of succor in Asmara once they escaped. We, on the outside, understood that the successful escape of hundreds of prisoners from a detention camp in Eritrea would be impossible without tremendous outside support. Experience had shown us that we could always find a way for our people to leave the camp. No force in the world could prevent us from escaping. But ensuring the safety of the escapees and their successful departure from Eritrea required greater planning and resources than the four us of could muster in our little house in the Italian suburbs.

The dilemma was a painful one. We felt obligated toward our comrades, knowing that we were merely the advance group in a larger operation. We tested every option by asking ourselves, "What will they say? Will they think we have ignored or abandoned them?" And yet we felt unable to meet their needs on our own. Meanwhile we were rotting from inactivity, as useless to the operation as if we had still been in prison.

In time, we found a middle road. We decided to divide into two groups. There was no reason for all four of us to remain in Asmara. Binyamin Zeironi and Yaakov Gurewitz would leave for Ethiopia and continue their journey to make the necessary arrangements outside, while Rahamim and I would remain in Asmara until arrangements for the escapees were completed.

The task of a preliminary survey again fell to our friend Menachem. He had been in Ethiopia several times and knew the way well. After several days of inquiries, he found out that veiled Moslem women who traveled by bus from Asmara to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia were not required to uncover their faces, and their documents were

not examined at the border. This, then, seemed to provide a way.

With Menachem's help, we gathered everything needed for the costumes: appropriate shoes, stockings, veils, and head coverings. Binyamin and Yaakov dyed their hair yellow-brown, using a tint made from special henna, bought and cooked according to the directions of Hayim Gamliel who continued to advise us.

The four of us had spent 60 days together in hiding. It was not easy to separate after all we had been through together, but in these circumstances our emotions were irrelevant. The ties between us remained intact, and Binyamin and I have remained close friends.

Two veiled Arab women, one of normal height, but the other taller than usual for a woman and walking with a peculiar gait to try to conceal this, boarded the bus that left from the center of town for Addis Ababa. Menachem, dressed as an Arab man, accompanied them. Another friend from the Jewish community of Asmara went with them. He was to get off at the border and return by the next bus to give us a full report. He returned the next day and told us that he had seen the bus leaving the Eritrean checkpost and continuing on its way into Ethiopia. We breathed with relief and again set our minds to the task of contriving an underground railroad for the Sembel detainees.

Two days later, rumors reached us that two fugitives from the camp, dressed as Arab women, had been apprehended at the Ethiopian border. At first, we refused to believe this news. But a day later, an Italian police officer confirmed the rumor to Hayim Gamliel. It appeared that our friends had safely passed the checkpoints at both borders, as our contact from Asmara had reported; but when the bus began to move on, a Sudanese passenger suddenly began to demand that the bus stop and the police be summoned. He made such a fuss that the driver yielded and called

the police. The Sudanese passenger declared that he was prepared to take an oath that the two ungainly Arab women were impostors and demanded that their veils be removed. The Ethiopian policemen tried to question Binyamin and Yaakov, but they did not respond because they could not speak the language. They also despaired of being able to disguise their voices. Binyamin and Yaakov were removed from the bus and brought to the police station. Menachem, also refusing to speak, accompanied them.

At the police station, efforts to interrogate the suspects began anew. An Ethiopian policewoman was brought in. She tried to remove their veils, but Binyamin and Yaakov resisted forcibly. The district governor and several of his officers were then summoned. At this point, the charade ended. Now exposed as men, Binyamin and Yaakov admitted their identity and declared themselves to be political refugees. They demanded asylum according to international law.

A certain Dr. Levy, a wealthy resident of Addis Ababa, was traveling on the same bus from Asmara. When the governor of the border province was summoned to question these suspicious-looking women, and when the women were unveiled as two European youths, it was not difficult for Dr. Levy to guess their identity. The escape of the young Jewish prisoners from the detention camp at Asmara had been widely publicized in both countries.

After exposing Binyamin and Yaakov's identities, the Ethiopian governor had demanded that they sit on the floor of the bus for the remainder of the journey. An argument ensued in English between Binyamin and the governor, in the course of which the governor shoved Binyamin. Without a moment's hesitation, Binyamin hit the governor in the face with a clenched fist. A riot broke out on the bus. The policemen attacked Binyamin, but he defended himself vigorously. To the governor's credit, it must be said that he exercised a great deal of self-control. He ordered the

policemen to stop, seated the two prisoners on seats, and thus calmed the tumult.

Binyamin's insistence on his rights increased the governor's respect for him. The governor apologized, explaining to Binyamin that he had not intended to humiliate him and that the entire matter was the result of a misunderstanding. Moreover, he pledged his assistance in dealing with the authorities at Addis Ababa.

Dr. Levy, who was a witness to all of this, admired the fact that Binyamin had physically defended himself against the governor. At the earliest opportunity, Dr. Levy stood near Binyamin and whispered *Shema Yisrael* (Hear, O Israel). An assimilated Jew, these were the only Hebrew words he remembered. Binyamin was astounded – a Jew amongst the passengers! This was a stroke of luck for the two prisoners, who could now communicate with the outside world.

The long journey to Addis Ababa made it possible for Binyamin and Yaakov to talk to Dr. Levy. By the time they arrived in Addis Ababa, they were fast friends.

Information of the arrest spread quickly. It did not take long before high-ranking British officers arrived in Ethiopia to demand extradition of the escapees from Sembel. The district governor refused to comply. Instead, he ordered that Binyamin, Yaakov, and Menachem be jailed in the central prison of the capital.

17

Murder at Camp Sembel

Our news of the events in Ethiopia was sketchy at this point, but what we had learned depressed us deeply. Our comrades' imprisonment now meant that we were cut off from communication with the outside world. We were also broke, having turned over most of our funds to Binyamin and Yaakov upon their departure. While our comrades were making progress digging the tunnel under the camp, we had not yet managed during our two months on the outside to find a safe way to receive them; and we had no definite plan for smuggling the entire group of escapees out of Eritrea.

A few days after receiving the bad news, we heard tapping on our waterpipe. When we opened the door, we found a pale and agitated Hayim Gamliel. He told us that the British authorities had summoned the rabbi of the Asmara congregation to receive the bodies of two Jewish prisoners for burial. It was rumored in town that riots had broken out at the camp in Sembel. The guards had shot at

the detainees and several were hit. Hayim did not know the reason for the riots nor the names of the casualties.

Shaken and horrified, we asked him to try to obtain more details and return to us at once. We remained confined to our rooms, tortured by our inability to act.

The funeral of our two comrades took place that same day. Hayim, who had been appointed by the congregation to be one of the pallbearers, told the story to us afterwards.

One of the prisoners, a young man named Shaul Haglili, was sitting in the yard near the guard post of a Sudanese sentry. The sentry ordered him to sit somewhere else. Haglili answered that, according to camp regulations, he was entitled to sit anywhere within the fenced area. The Sudanese repeated his order, but Shaul again refused to move. The sentry then aimed his rifle and shot Shaul at close range.

At the sound of the shot, all the prisoners ran out of their barracks. They found Shaul lying on the ground, blood flowing from a wound in his neck. Using a mattress from the barracks, they carried him to the gate; but the Sudanese in charge refused to open it. Two British sergeants who were somewhere nearby called to the Sudanese guards to open the gate, but they persisted in their refusal. Meanwhile, blood flowed from the unattended wound and Shaul lost consciousness.

The prisoners screamed and pounded on the gate. Then scores of armed Sudanese appeared, taking up positions along the length of the fence that surrounded the camp. With no warning whatsoever, they began to fire into the crowd of prisoners. Shaul Haglili was hit by another bullet and died instantly. A second prisoner, Eliyahu Ezra, was also killed. Twenty-two others were wounded.

All this time, not one British officer had intervened, although their clubhouse was nearby and they could not help hearing the shots. After the Sudanese had vented their

wrath upon the prisoners, a British officer finally appeared, stopped the shooting, and rounded up the guards.

At first, all protests and demands for an investigation were ignored. Finally, the British appointed an investigating team, which eventually managed to find some way to justify the murders.

The day following the funeral, Rahamim stole into the Jewish cemetery to lay a wreath on the graves of the murdered prisoners. Throughout the rest of our stay in Asmara, we visited their graves regularly. That was all we could do.

The days that followed passed in deep depression. Needless to say, no further progress was made in preparations for receiving anyone else from Sembel.

After the murders, relations were strained between the prisoners and the camp authorities. Watches were increased, privileges were cancelled; we were forced to interrupt our exchange of letters for fear of being intercepted.

We heard from Addis Ababa that the Ethiopian Council of Ministers was dealing with the fate of our imprisoned comrades. Britain, which was then the dominant power in the region, was applying pressure on the Ethiopian ministers and even on Emperor Haile Selassie. There was danger that the Ethiopians would capitulate and extradite the two fugitives.

With the aid of the Jewish community in Addis Ababa, our comrades managed to communicate with the Hebrew Committee for National Liberation in the United States, which began to take steps to prevent extradition. Prominent Americans, including senators and members of Congress, sent telegrams to the government of Ethiopia, counseling the authorities not to hand the political fugitives over to the British. The Committee also communicated directly with the Ethiopian ambassador in the United States – but, all in all, hope was very dim.

In the Asmara camp, work on the tunnel had also been suspended. We decided that it was best to lie low temporarily. Thus we remained, Rahamim and I, lonely and isolated.

Rahamim, who was an accomplished linguist, had managed to learn quite a bit of Italian during our confinement. With his language skills and his dark, Sephardic looks, he could go freely to town in either Western or Arab clothes to buy our food and supplies.

My own situation was different. The only language I knew that was of any use to me in the city was English – and this was used in Asmara only by government officials. Thus, I remained confined to our house with no diversions during those long months of anxiety.

Rahamim and I spent long hours behind closed doors deliberating. How could we break this ever-tightening noose? Our funds were running out, and we had no means locally to replenish them.

Two weeks after the murders at the camp, we decided to renew contact with our imprisoned comrades. Fearing that they would now be forbidden to use the sports field, Rahamim went to investigate the situation. When he returned, he reported that he had seen prisoners on the field as usual. We prepared a letter, and at six o'clock in the evening Rahamim left for the camp.

Loneliness and frustration hung like a millstone around my neck. With frequent glances at my watch, I paced the floor. Time crept along at a maddening snail's pace. When the dial showed 7:30, the time estimated for Rahamim's return, I was feverish with anticipation and opened the window facing the field from which he was to appear.

But 7:30 came and went and my friend did not return. Ten more minutes passed (I thought this reasonable), then ten more, and ten more. Half an hour late. Such a thing had

never happened before. I was convinced that bad luck was continuing to hound us and that something had happened to Rahamim. After another horrible half-hour – at 8:30 – I gave in to despair. Rahamim must have been captured by guards as he approached the camp. I prayed that only this had occurred. "Pray God he wasn't shot," my heart murmured as I raced from corner to corner like a rat in the darkened room.

Slowly a thought penetrated my mind. I am now utterly alone. It is up to me to save my comrades at the camp. But how? Should I leave the house? Where would I go? Who could help me?

Finally, I decided to go to the city to seek the counsel of Hayim Gamliel. He was already under suspicion by the authorities. Sometimes he was followed; at other times detectives came to his shop. Rahamim and I had decided to sever our contact with Hayim simply to protect him. But now I could see no other choice. Surely he would understand my plight. I shaved and began to dress to go out.

Then, at the last moment, I decided to postpone the matter until morning. One night would not change the situation. I had learned something of the city through studying the maps and the descriptions of our friends, but I was liable to get lost in the dark – and of what help could I be then?

Another hour passed. Then another. I closed the window, lay down on the mattress, and fell into a sleep of nervous exhaustion.

I was awakened by the sound of tapping on the waterpipe.

The tapping was repeated weakly, nervously. Jumping to the window, I asked in Italian, "Who's there?" Then came the response: "Aviram," followed by a groan, "Open up, I'm dying!" It was Rahamim.

He nearly fell into my arms when I opened the door, staggered like a drunk, and dropped onto the mattress. I lit a lamp and was horrified at what I saw. Rahamim's face was bloody, his coat was blood-soaked, his clothes were tattered, and his Arab *keffiya* was missing. He breathed with difficulty and at first could not even speak.

We had no first-aid kit. Dipping my handkerchief in water, I began first to wash his face carefully. There was a deep gash in his forehead, his nose was swollen and bleeding, and his lips were swollen as well. I examined the wound in his forehead and was relieved to find that it was caused by a blow and not a gunshot. I covered his wounds with wet handkerchiefs, which I changed continuously.

After a while, Rahamim felt strong enough to relate what had befallen him.

He had arrived safely at the perimeter of the camp, tossed the brick with its letter into the compound, and turned to go home. It was pitch dark outside. As he approached one of the Italian farms whose fields he would have to cross, he heard a yell. He pretended not to have heard and continued on his way. The shout, in Italian, was repeated ordering Rahamim to halt, but he dared not comply. Then the farmhouse door opened and a man armed with a gun appeared on the threshold. Rahamim began to run, with the farm people in hot pursuit. He tripped and fell. Before he could regain his footing, his pursuers caught up with him – six Italians and one Eritrean. They attacked him, beating him with the butt of the gun, with stones and their bare hands. The rain of blows persisted until Rahamim was in a stupor. Then they dragged him to the farmhouse, and one of the Italians began tearing off the Arab clothes. When the kefiya was removed from Rahamim's head, the attackers exclaimed in surprise, "*Bianco!*"

They began to consult with each other in panic. Rahamim understood that this had been a case of mistaken

identity. He took the offensive and began by screaming in Spanish and English that he was white, a government official, and that they would pay dearly for the beating they had inflicted upon him.

The Italians fell all over themselves apologizing and explaining that they had mistaken him for a thief. They had seen him crossing through their farm on several occasions and had begun to suspect him of mischief. That evening, when they had seen Rahamim walking through their fields in the direction of the camp, they had waited in ambush to confront him on his return.

They did not believe his story about being a government official, openly stating their suspicion that he was one of the fugitives from the Jewish camp. Rahamim naturally denied this. The Italians assured him that they were no less hostile to the British government than he was himself. They brought him some cognac to revive him and then served him a meal, which he was barely able to get down because of his wounds.

Rahamim was anxious to cut his visit short, fearing the moment when the farmers would remember the large reward on his head, but he was dizzy from the beating and felt as though he might faint again. When the Italians offered to call a taxi to take him home, he stoutly refused. He did not want our hiding place to be revealed. He remained until he had regained sufficient strength to return alone and on foot. As he took leave of the Italians, they pressed him to return to visit them, accompanied him to the edge of their farm, and swore their friendship.

The way home took twice as long as usual, because Rahamim did not dare pass through the city, even at that late hour, with his bloodied face and clothing. Taking a roundabout route, he fainted again as he neared the house.

Later, as I stretched out on my mattress, I decided that this would be my last day of inactivity. It was clear to me

that I could do nothing of any use so long as I stayed here behind shuttered windows. In my capacity as leader of the group, I had issued orders – but I had not engaged in any independent action. I was now at the breaking point. Binyamin, Yaakov, and Menachem had been apprehended; Rahamim was endangering himself day by day and only remained alive by some miracle, while I was still unscathed. I could no longer sit with folded hands, hidden away in the suburbs of Asmara.

18

Fund-Raising

Soon only a large scar remained on Rahamim's forehead, a reminder of his nightmarish encounter with the Italians.

We renewed our contact with the camp, and learned that work on the tunnel had been resumed. A large sum of money,the equivalent of 1,000 Palestinian pounds, had been raised out of profits from trade with the Sudanese guards. Trade now included food items such as tea and canned goods, as well as clothing.

Meanwhile, the news from Ethiopia was more encouraging. We received word about Binyamin and Yaakov through Dr. Levy who travelled frequently on business between Addis Ababa and Asmara. They were still in prison, but there was still hope that they would not be extradited.

In Asmara, the search for us had died down. It had been more than five months since we had escaped – the local population seemed to have forgotten all about us. The arrest of our comrades at the border must have misled the British into thinking that we had already managed to sneak out of the country.

I was fed up with hiding and decided to change my way of life. I began to go to town, at first only in the evenings and for very short walks. Then I dared to go in the daytime as well. Rahamim and I renewed our friendships in the city. There was no longer a need for our friends to come to us in secret. We met them openly at public places. Once we even decided to go to a movie as guests of our young friend from Eretz Israel. We entered the hall after the lights had been dimmed and left a minute before the end of the film. Going out among people restored my confidence and vigor.

We began to search for a villa that would be suitable for the reception of our comrades from the camp, but the question of money arose again. Our till was almost empty. Despite the austerity of our daily regimen, the money we had would last for only about two weeks more. There was no hope of collecting additional funds from our Jewish friends, who had already extended themselves on our behalf to an embarrassing degree; and we were ashamed to ask for more money from our comrades at Sembel. We had to find another source of revenue.

Through Hayim Gamliel, we heard about a certain merchant in Eretz Israel who transacted business in Eritrea and who had a bank account in Asmara. He had tried to transfer this money to Eretz Israel; but under the foreign exchange regulations, it was forbidden to send more than 10 Palestinian pounds per month from Eritrea. We contacted the merchant's local representative and suggested that he pay us the money all at once – about 650 pounds. We would reimburse the merchant through our contacts in Eretz Israel. The agent was not against the scheme, but said that he needed written instructions from the merchant before he could release the funds.

We had to communicate with Tel Aviv. There was, at that time, strict censorship of the mail between Eretz Israel

and Eritrea. We did not have the current addresses of our comrades in Tel Aviv; and even if we had, we feared that the recipients would be arrested by the British authorities for being in communication with two fugitives from British law.

And then it occurred to me to write to a personal friend, Gershon Amitai, with whom I had grown up in China. He would recognize my handwriting, even if I signed a false name. My friend's address was not suspect, since as far as I knew, he was not currently active in the underground. Nevertheless, I took certain precautions in case the letter fell into the hands of the CID. I opened with the remark that although we had not met since he came to Eretz Israel and had not corresponded for many years, I hoped he still remembered me, his boyhood friend, who had landed in this God-forsaken place after tortuous wanderings. I told him that I was now in dire need. I invented a story of how I had left Harbin, where we had grown up together, and had begun a commercial venture in Asmara; but misfortune had befallen me, my business was destroyed, and I and all the numerous members of my family were destitute. Then I added that I had a rich uncle in Eretz Israel who would undoubtedly come to my aid if he knew about me, but I had lost his address. He was very well known in the country, and here I named this "uncle" by the title we ex-residents of Harbin used in discussing the Irgun among ourselves – *Gomindan*, which was the Russian version of Quomintang, the name of the Nationalist Party ruling China at that time. I asked my friend to search for Uncle Gomindan in Tel Aviv, to apprise him of my situation, and to ask him for a sum of money. The money was to be turned over to a particular merchant in Eretz Israel (whose address I included), who would order payment to me here by his local representative. I wrote the letter in Russian and signed it with a nickname, Shkotz, that was only known by my friends in high school. I

enclosed the bank order form that the merchant was to sign and return. The only return address we gave was Barclay's Bank in Asmara.

In truth, we had little hope of our plan succeeding. If the censor opened the letter, it would undoubtedly be held, since the proposed transfer of funds was strictly illegal. Even if the letter did pass by the censor without a hitch, there was still the possibility that the Irgun leadership in Eretz Israel would not have the required sum.

Against all odds, my friend received the letter, grasped its contents as well as its intent, and made contact with the Irgun. The required sum was obtained within a few days.

Before two weeks elapsed, the commercial agent in Asmara received the bank's remittance order; two days later, the money was ours. On that day, our purses had contained two pounds.

We also received a letter from Binyamin telling us that he, Yaakov, and Menachem had been released from prison in Addis Ababa and had been granted permission to leave Ethiopia, if they could obtain an entrance visa to any other country. They had already contacted the *Hebrew Committee for National Liberation* in the United States, which had begun to arrange their passage to a Latin American country.

I spent over half a year in Asmara, before the time came for my own departure. Not being an adventurer by nature, when I faced the decision of whether to take a chance or wait for a safer opportunity, I opted for "slow but sure." Others would no doubt have shown more daring, but this was my way. Throughout my career in the underground, I overcame my difficulties through patience, and through patience I avoided failure. Only when there was no other choice did I dare "leap". But once I had decided upon leaping, I knew that there would be no retreat.

19

Farewell to Asmara

In the course of time, we actually became "solid citizens" of Asmara. Sometimes I made appointments in coffee-houses and visited the homes of our friends; at regular intervals we attended movies. But these diversions did not distract us from the new plan we had forged. I was to leave Asmara, and Rahamim would stay behind to be the contact for our friends who were still in Sembel.

We studied Italian with a tutor. Rahamim, who grew up speaking Spanish, had already made rapid progress. Through our friends in the Jewish community, we acquired an identity card that had belonged to an Asmaran resident – an Italian – who had left the country. Our friends helped us forge the police stamp over Rahamim's photograph. After mastering his new identity, Rahamim became a "legal" resident of the city.

Passover arrived. If we had been told on the day of our escape from Sembel in November 1945 that at the end of April 1946 we would still be sitting in Asmara, we would

certainly have been crushed by such a forecast. But the Sephardic seder in Hayim Gamliel's home was a joyful and moving occasion. We, too, were in bondage in a North African kingdom. We yearned for our freedom and for the freedom of our brethren in Eretz Israel.

Our daily routine in Asmara was tedious. Most of the time when we were not preparing for my escape, we confined ourselves to the house. In those months, I read voluminously. Hebrew books were unavailable, and I did not know enough Italian to read the literature; so I made do with light English fare which was abundant in the bookstores and newsstands of the city. When we dared, we went to the British library where there were newspapers from all over the world.

Occasionally, concerts were organized by the British authorities in the army clubs; and we toyed with the idea of attending, even though it would be dangerous. Then one day, we came across a notice in the newspaper about a concert of recorded music to which civilian residents of Asmara were invited. Hungry for culture, we decided to attend.

We found that we were the only civilians in the hall among a sea of British officers and soldiers. Only later, we learned that the Italians of Eritrea boycotted all of the government's efforts toward rapprochement.

We endured two very difficult hours, albeit sitting in comfortable armchairs, our hearts pounding with fear lest one of the camp officers or soldiers should enter and recognize us. And just because we were the only civilians present, we were accorded special attention. At the conclusion of the concert, a woman soldier invited us to the buffet for a drink and a sandwich. We thanked her, looked at our watches, and said we were in hurry to get home. That was the last time we attended a musical fete in Asmara.

On another occasion when we went to a film, we noticed unusual movement in the boxes not far from our seats. Brigadier Greenfield, the military governor of Eritrea and known to us from his visits to the camp, entered a few minutes later with his entourage. The orchestra played "God Save the King," and the crowd stood at attention. As soon as the lights were dimmed, we stole away.

Days, weeks, months passed in this manner. By April, we had received a message from our comrades informing us that the tunnel was advancing swiftly and that they expected it to be completed within a month. We felt horrified to realize that we were still not ready to receive them!

With the money from Barclay's in hand, we doubled our efforts to obtain a suitable safe house. Rahamim applied to one of the Italian real estate agents, presenting himself as a wealthy Egyptian merchant. He told the agent that he intended to bring his family to Asmara for the summer months and that he required a large, isolated house with a yard surrounded by a wall so that he could lodge his wives away from prying eyes, as commanded by the Prophet.

The real estate agent found just what we needed. It was an isolated two-story house with a basement, surrounded by a high wall. We notified our fellows at the camp and began stocking the house with mattresses, blankets, and food. We kept busy from morning till night in feverish preparation.

In the meantime, Yaakov, Binyamin, and Menachem, who had been freed in Addis Ababa a month earlier, had been making preparations to leave for Eretz Israel. We hoped that they would be able to procure a ship to await us off the coast of Eritrea and provide a means of safe passage for us and all the escapees who made it through the tunnel. If they could not make such arrangements from Eretz Israel, the villa in Asmara would provide an interim safe haven.

But suddenly, they were arrested again. Their quarters were surrounded by Ethiopian police, and they were ordered to pack their belongings and get into a waiting car. Binyamin broke away, taking off at a run down the street. He would have succeeded in getting away, if he had not stumbled and fallen. The police caught up with him and beat him severely. All three were then taken by car to prison. The British had apparently succeeded in influencing some high Ethiopian official to order the extradition of the two fugitives and their accomplice to Eritrea.

On the outside, Irgun's friends in Diaspora began to move heaven and earth. There was an appeal to the Emperor, and cables were sent to America where public opinion was mobilized. Telegrams from America began to arrive addressed to the royal palace and government ministers.

At the last moment, pressure from the United States prevailed. Haile Selassie gave the order to prevent the extradition. Our comrades were brought to a village 200 kilometers from the border and imprisoned there. We had not yet lost hope of their liberation, but meanwhile the contacts they had established with the outside world and all our hopes for their procuring a ship were cut off.

Rahamim and I decided that the only course was for me to leave at once for Ethiopia, where I would be able to re-establish communications with our supporters in Eretz Israel and America.

One of the bus drivers on the Asmara-Addis Ababa line agreed to smuggle me across the border in return for 100 pounds. His plan was to hide me in the toilet compartment. Located at the rear of the bus, this cubbyhole was generally not used. Both the white and the black passengers preferred to wait until the bus arrived at a station. The compartment was usually kept locked and used as a storage space for spare parts, extra tires, and packing cases belonging to the bus owner. My driver knew that the toilet was generally

not checked at the border. As risky as the plan was, I could think of no better way.

I took my leave of Rahamim. After six months of living together in the Asmaran underground, we felt very close to each other. We parted emotionally, with the hope of meeting in a short while. But fate did not will it. I never saw him again. When Rahamim eventually arrived in the newly established State of Israel, he volunteered for the army and was killed on the front in Jerusalem.

I also took leave of all our friends in Asmara. I shall never forget parting with these Jews who risked their freedom for us. Without their help, we could not have held out for so long. They parted from me with glistening eyes, saying prayers for my successful journey. I felt overwhelmed with gratitude for these dear friends.

At sunrise, before the bus was driven from the depot to the terminal, the driver locked me up in the cubbyhole. The toilet compartment was very narrow, half full of spare parts and boxes. The toilet itself was so deeply buried that it could not be used. I had to sit doubled up with my knees close to my chin.

As we reached the terminal, I could hear passengers boarding the bus. The walls of my cubbyhole were made of thin metal. I could hear the voices, footsteps, and coughs of the passengers; and I was keenly aware that they could probably hear every noise that I made as well. I tried to stay perfectly still, barely daring to breathe.

After the bus took off and the noise of the motor provided some camouflage, I took the liberty of exercising slightly to circulate the blood in my numbed limbs; but I could not shift my position significantly during that entire trip.

I had fasted even before I boarded the bus, because I knew that the journey was to take three days and that I would not be able to relieve myself in the cell. The driver

left me a bottle of water, and I was able to urinate through the cracks in the floor. Hunger did not bother me, but the rough motion of the bus inflicted painful blows to my body. The highway was in wretched shape. Occasionally, the bus would hit a pothole and sway violently, and the motion was particularly violent in the rear of the bus. Dust filled my cubbyhole and made breathing difficult.

We reached the Ethiopian border on the first day of our journey. At the Eritrean border station, all the passengers were ordered out of the bus, and a British officer accompanied by Italian policemen searched the vehicle for smuggled goods. When they approached my cubicle, I held my breath, terrified that the officer would order the driver to open the door.

Afterwards, the driver explained that I had been saved by his clever thinking. He had piled spare tires, his tool box, and several other heavy objects in front of the cubicle. It would have taken a long time and some muscle strain to open the door. The driver reasoned that the British officer would be too impatient to wait, especially since the pile of material strengthened the impression that the cubicle was vacant.

At the Ethiopian border station, matters went even more smoothly. The Ethiopian policemen, who received a paltry salary, gratefully accepted the tip that the driver offered them and did not bother with the passengers at all. But then, we developed some engine trouble and were detained for many long hours at a town near the border. The motor was silent, the tired passengers slept, and I had to be wary of each movement I made. The stop seemed to last for days. When we finally started moving again, it took me a long time to regain any feeling at all in my paralyzed limbs.

But at least we were now traveling in Ethiopian territory. Through a crack in the wall, I could see how beautiful and luxuriant this land was. The road wound between

mountains and was flanked on either side by forests, lakes, rivers, and streams. Below was a deep wooded gorge. At the bottom of this abyss, I could see a stream and a small village nestled on its bank. The earth was black and fertile but seemed neglected for the most part, uncultivated and overgrown with weeds. The small houses were circular with cone-shaped roofs and built of reeds or branches. The villages we passed seemed poor and were practically deserted. Only occasionally, there appeared a farmer tilling the soil with a wooden plough harnessed to a pair of oxen.

At the end of the third day, after a journey of about 1,000 kilometers, we arrived in Addis Ababa. After all the passengers alighted, the driver drove the bus to a forsaken alley. There he stopped and opened my cubbyhole. He had to help me up on my feet and guide my initial steps. I was like a child learning to walk. For days afterward, my joints ached and I was covered in bruises.

But I had arrived in Addis Ababa. I had broken the barrier.

20

Reprieve in Addis Ababa

Before the Italian conquest in 1936, there had been no roads, no telephones nor electricity in Addis Ababa. During the five years of their rule, the Italians tried to turn this small African backwater into a place suitable for the High Commissioner of their new empire. They paved some streets, installed electric streetlights, established a telephone network and began to build a modern section of large houses and tree-lined boulevards. They built public institutions such as hospitals, cinemas, and a fancy bathhouse, but they were driven out by the British before they could change the fundamental character of the town. In 1946, it was still not much more than a village – dirty streets, small and primitive houses, narrow alleys piled high with refuse.

The prettiest place by far was the palace of Emperor Haile Selassie, which had been built by the Ethiopians themselves. The palace was surrounded by hundreds of acres of parkland containing groves, flower gardens, and a

cage for a magnificent lion, which was the symbol of the Emperor's rule.

Several thousand Italians – remnants of the settlers who arrived under Mussolini – were still in the city in 1946 when I arrived. Most were technicians – mechanics, electricians, carpenters – who served the institutions that the Emperor inherited from the Italians. They were paid ample wages and provided with decent living conditions, but they were forbidden to leave the country and remained in their jobs under duress.

The local Jewish community in Addis Ababa consisted of about 70 Jews of Yemeni origin from Aden. They were mostly involved with commerce or silver-smithing and lived within their own small quarter of the town where there was even a synagogue.

The language spoken among most Europeans in Addis Ababa was Italian, and many Ethiopians also spoke the language. Most of the Italians were men whose families had remained behind in Italy. During the war, while cut off from Europe, many of these men took Ethiopian mistresses or married Ethiopian women who bore their children.

I spent my first night in Addis Ababa in the home of such a family – that of the Italian driver who had secreted me over the border. He and his Ethiopian wife showed me warm hospitality.

The next morning, I moved to the home of Dr. Guiseppe Levy who managed a large store in Addis Ababa. This was the same Dr. Levy who had befriended Binyamin on the bus from Asmara. An assimilated Jew from Italy with a doctorate in economics, Dr. Levy managed the business of an Italian firm in Ethiopia and Eritrea. He was both wealthy and respected. He had not been interested at all in his Jewish origins and was totally absorbed by his business until he happened to meet Binyamin and Yaakov. This accidental

meeting left a deep impression on Dr. Levy and laid the foundation for the kindness he showed me upon my arrival in Addis Ababa.

Dr. Levy had just arrived by plane from Asmara on the morning after my own arrival. After I contacted him, he invited me to stay with his family in their apartment above his store. I was given a spacious, lovely room all to myself. I felt like a king. For the first time since I had left the camp at Sembel, I slept in a proper bed.

The next day, I sent two cables to our supporters in the United States and South Africa. I followed these with detailed letters explaining the major features of our plan for the escape of our comrades from the detention camp at Sembel and asking for support and financial assistance. While awaiting a reply, I contacted the local Jewish community and began to investigate the possibility of bringing the escapees from Asmara to Ethiopia. Finally, I approached the Ethiopian governor of one of the border provinces, and he pledged his assistance. With the help of the Jewish community, I was able to secure lodgings for the "tunnel men" in an isolated villa outside Addis Ababa. I was full of hope and energy. I roamed the streets without apprehension, because I was not conspicuous at all among the thousands of white people in the city.

Two days after my arrival, I heard from Rahamim. Preparations at the camp had been completed. The big prison break would take place in a week. It was planned that some of the escapees would hide in the villa we had rented in Asmara. The others would travel toward the Ethiopian border that same night. I hired a guide who was familiar with the terrain and sent him to the border to meet the escapees on their arrival.

The break was executed on June 29, 1946. 54 prisoners successfully escaped from the detention camp at Sembel. The 23 who were to travel on to Ethiopia were captured be-

fore they reached the border. The rest, who had remained in Asmara, were eventually captured and returned to Sembel.

Later, I learned how the escape of the group bound for Ethiopia was foiled. Their exit from the tunnel was to coincide with the departure of a bus that was scheduled to drop off British soldiers returning from leave in the city. Dressed as British M.P.'s, our boys commandeered the empty bus, handcuffed the Italian driver, and began to drive to Ethiopia. Partway there, the bus developed engine trouble. The escapees were forced to abandon the vehicle and continued their journey on foot. They were nearly 100 kilometers from the border when they were caught at daybreak on July 1.

That very evening, Emperor Haile Selassie ordered the nationalization of all Italian property in Ethiopia and the expulsion of all Italian property owners from the country. The order had been prepared in the strictest secrecy and came as a complete surprise to the Italian population. It was a particular shock for my friend Dr. Levy, as the Emperor had paid him a personal visit at his shop just a few days before to thank him for his part in promoting the development of the Ethiopian economy.

My sleep was troubled that night in Dr. Levy's apartment. I tossed about on my bed thinking of my comrades en route to the Ethiopian border – I had not yet heard about their arrest. Then, just before sunrise, I heard a loud banging on the front door. Since I did not want to wake the other members of the household, I walked downstairs and opened the door. Facing me was a squad of armed Ethiopian soldiers. Their officer asked me whether the merchant Levy lived there; and before I had a chance to reply, the soldiers pushed me aside.

By now, Dr. Levy had awakened and come out of his room. The officer read him the government decree declaring

that his business was being confiscated as enemy property and ordering him to turn over an inventory of all the merchandise in his store. The officer forbade any member of the household to leave the premises and announced that the building was surrounded by soldiers. Then he turned to me and asked me to identify myself. Dr. Levy answered for me, saying that I was a stranger and his guest. When questioned about my nationality, I answered promptly – and without thinking clearly – that I was Swedish. I had heard that day that a group of Swedes had arrived in Ethiopia to fill high government positions in an advisory capacity. I suppose that is why that particular nationality popped into my head.

The officer's attitude toward me changed immediately to one of respect. He promised that as soon as he ascertained that my papers were in order, I would be free to leave.

But this was of little comfort. I had no documents whatsoever, let alone credentials proving Swedish nationality. Dr. Levy again came to my aid by saying that my papers were at the police station. He suggested that the officer go down to the store with him to list the merchandise, while I got dressed before accompanying him to the police station. The officer agreed, and the entire group went down to the store without me.

I knew that if I went to the police station, I would lose my freedom once again. The Ethiopians would certainly turn me over to the British. Eight months of toiling, suffering and anticipation were about to go to waste; but worst of all, all the contacts, plans, and arrangements we had made for the escapees would now be lost.

I dressed and waited. Rain poured down outside, reflecting the grimness of my thoughts. Dr. Levy managed to slip out of the store about an hour later for a brief moment. He led me by the arm to the edge of the balcony at the back of the house, pointed to the neighbor's yard, and said,

"Jump and run, my friend! There's no other way." Pressing my hand in farewell, he turned and rushed back downstairs.

The thought of escape had not occurred to me, as I had seen the armed sentries stationed along the front of the house. The large balcony jutted out to within a yard of the neighboring courtyard. For some reason, there were no soldiers posted along that side of the building.

The balcony was shared by a sewing room next door to my bedroom. A black woman, who was one of the store employees, sat working there at a sewing machine. The door was open between her room and the balcony. I feared that if she saw me jumping, she would raise the alarm to the soldiers below.

I took a cigarette from my pocket and entered her room through this door, asking her if she had a match. She said she had none. I thanked her and went out the way I came in, closing the door behind me. Then I jumped. I reasoned that even if she did get up to open the door, and did not see me on the balcony, she would suppose that I had returned to my room.

I landed in a puddle of water and got soaking wet, but it was raining hard anyway. I looked up. The woman was nowhere in sight. I ran across the yard and came out into an unguarded alleyway.

21

Again Imprisonment

The pouring rain had driven people into their homes and emptied the alley. I set out for the central post office, where I would be able to make a phone call. Passing not far from the store and the apartment, I saw armed sentries still stationed around the building.

From one of the phone booths, I contacted a friend who lived in the Jewish quarter and asked him to meet me in the post office building; because I did not want to go to him for fear of an encounter with the authorities. My friend arrived within minutes. I told him what had happened and asked for his help. He took me to his apartment, which was over a warehouse. As he was not an Italian national, his business was unaffected by the confiscation decree.

The warehouse in which I was to hide was a breeding ground for mice – it was an unpleasant reminder of the barn in Asmara. Dr. Levy came to visit me the following day. All his possessions, amounting to hundreds of thousands of lira, had been confiscated. Overnight he had become

penniless, like all the other wealthy Italians in the city. But while the others were held in custody until their expulsion from the country, Dr. Levy was allowed to return to his home because of his many connections with prominent government officials and his status as an unofficial adviser to Ethiopia's Minister of Commerce. Many of the ministers, in addition to the Emperor himself, had visited Dr. Levy at his home.

The doctor told me that, all that day, the officer and his soldiers had been busily taking inventory of the merchandise in the doctor's store. They had left without even returning to the second floor, seemingly having forgotten about me. Dr. Levy thought I could now safely leave my hiding place.

But the next day as I prepared to leave, Dr. Levy came back in a frantic state of mind. The officer had remembered me and had asked where I had gone. Dr. Levy told him that I had left the house after the officer failed to return to examine my credentials; because I had imagined this to be all right, especially since the guards posted around the house had made no attempt to detain me. But when the doctor was questioned about my name and residence, he began to stammer. He told the officer that I resided in a hotel whose name he could not recall, that he had met me only once, invited me to play ping-pong at his home, and then invited me to spend the night when the hour grew late. The officer seemed suspicious but had said nothing and left.

That very afternoon, the adjutant of the chief of police came to the doctor's house and told him that the authorities were convinced that he knew my whereabouts. The adjutant hinted that the police knew that I was no Swede and were aware of my true identity. My friend insisted on his ignorance. He promised to try to find me and relay the message that the police were searching for me.

Dr. Levy's face revealed his great anxiety, but I was obligated by the rules of the Irgun not to surrender no matter how great a threat this posed to others. Gently, I asked Dr. Levy to inform the police that he had been unable to locate me.

It was obvious that the police would begin to search for me in Jewish homes, so I decided to move. But where? Most of the Italians were themselves in trouble, and I could not stay in a hotel without documents.

I decided to go to an Ethiopian bar I had heard of where there were always women interested in earning some money. I arrived before noon. The bar was empty except for several young Ethiopian women who sat at a table smoking cigarettes and chattering away. They stared at me with unbounded curiosity. I sat down, ordered a cognac and took a package of American cigarettes from my pocket and lit one.

The young women began to whisper. After several minutes, one approached my table and addressed me in Italian: "Is the *signore* interested in something?"

I asked her if she spoke English, and she replied haltingly that she had many acquaintances among British officials in Addis Ababa. "Is the *signor*e British?"

"Yes," I said, "I come from Sanafe, a provincial city of Ethiopia, where I work as an engineer. I am now on holiday and am looking for a quiet place to rest for a few days."

The young woman's eyes lit up. "Would the *signore* be angry if I offered him to stay at my house?" she asked politely. I replied: "If I find complete rest as well as comfort and privacy, I will accept your offer."

We rose from the table. I paid the waiter for the cognac, which I had hardly touched, and we went out into the street.

Her apartment was in a nice part of the city in an old house. Entry to her flat was through a yard. I stopped at a distance from the building and watched her enter the yard

and open the door to her flat. After she had glanced in to make sure that no one was there, she waved to me. All these precautionary measures were very much to my liking.

I followed her in. She had one room containing a plain table, two chairs, a sofa, and a bed covered by a rug. It was all old and worn but clean and neat. Her clothes hung in a corner of the room on the wall behind a curtain. A door opened from the room into a clean bathroom. On a crate in another corner of her room was a lamp, a few dishes, spoons, cups, and the kitchen utensils.

"Is this good?" she asked me modestly.

"If I can be here alone and undisturbed, it will be satisfactory."

"*Bono*," she said.

"Do you know how to cook Italian meals?"

"Yes, I was a maid in the house of an Italian general during the occupation."

"Take this money, go and buy something for a meal, and return quickly."

"*Grazie*," said the woman and left.

When she returned, I told her that I had decided to stay and that she would not be short of anything while I was there, provided that she remembered that all I wanted was to live in peace and privacy.

She told me that she had been married to a high-ranking Ethiopian officer who had been killed in the war with the Italians. She was married at the age of 14 and had lived with her husband for only a few months. Later, when the Italians entered Addis Ababa, she had worked as a maid in the home of an officer until the Italians were expelled. Her parents were well-to-do but lived in a distant province, and she had no desire to return there. She had become accustomed to urban living, spoke Italian well and a little English. She had some money, did no work, and often passed her time in the bar with her friends.

In response to my every request, the Ethiopian woman curtsied and replied, "Yes, *signore*." At first, she set a place at the table for me alone. When I asked her where her plate was, she replied that she would eat later. Only when I insisted did she sit down at the table, repeating time and again: "*grazie, grazie*."

On the third day when I was preparing to leave, this modest, charming woman offered to accompany me wherever I went and be my wife. There was nothing out of the ordinary about this suggestion. Hundreds of Italians were married to local women. I thanked her but explained that my work did not allow me to travel with a wife.

During those three days, pressure had been mounting on Doctor Levy to turn me in. I had met with him the previous evening, and he reported that the chief of police had presented him with an ultimatum – he had to turn me in at once or be imprisoned in my place. The chief of police warned that he would tolerate no excuses. The authorities were convinced that Dr. Levy knew where I was hiding. Worse still, they knew that I was one of the four fugitives from the detention camp in Asmara.

In great distress, my friend explained that his entire fate rested upon the outcome of this matter. Since he was Jewish and not merely Italian, and since he was closely connected with the Emperor, he had prospects of saving his property, or part of it, and obtaining permission to remain in Ethiopia. He had a wife and children and could not sacrifice their future.

I understood his predicament. He had become a loyal friend of Zionism and had already helped me tremendously. Despite Irgun regulations, I was afraid that my failing to surrender to the authorities and exposing Dr. Levy to prison would endanger our entire operation. Dr. Levy knew every detail of our plan for the escape. He knew the location of the house in Asmara in which 24 of my comrades had

found shelter, and he knew of all our contacts. I could not let him become desperate and perhaps place my comrades in jeopardy. Dr. Levy was not used to the hardships of life in the underground. I had no doubt that if he were put under great pressure – and there were indications that such pressure would be brought to bear – he would not be able to resist and would reveal all he knew.

I told him that if this had happened in Eretz Israel, I could not have surrendered, I would have been subject to an Irgun court-martial. But considering the special situation, I was prepared to turn myself in. He wept profusely. This incident had become a personal tragedy for him. I thanked him for his aid, calmed him down, and we parted. I never regretted my decision. At the time, I did not know how the Ethiopian police would deal with me. But by taking this step, I had acquired a staunch friend for the Irgun who would later assist other fugitives from Asmara and who would endanger himself no less than our own men.

The central police station was in a large modern building in the new quarter of the city. Approaching the gate, I asked to see the chief of police. The officer on duty demanded documentation showing that I had an appointment, but I had nothing to offer. He made a motion with his head indicating that I should get lost.

It was confusing. Here I had come to surrender to those who were looking for me, and I was being driven away. I took out a scrap of paper and wrote in English that the man whom the chief had demanded from the "doctor" was at the entrance to the police station seeking an audience. I asked the policeman to deliver the note. He called another policeman, said something to him in Amharic, and gave him the note. After a few minutes, the second policeman returned and led me to the chief's office.

There was another man in the room, Chief of Detectives, Major Otto Waldi. I opened with an innocent question in

English: "The `doctor' told me that you wanted to see me. What do you want?"

They smiled and asked me for my documents. Then I told them the story I had already prepared. I was a Jewish refugee from Shanghai, a victim of the Japanese occupation. I had arrived in Ethiopia illegally and sought asylum in this state. After what had happened to Binyamin and Yaakov, who were still sitting in jail in a remote village awaiting almost inevitable extradition, I decided that I would definitely not admit to being a fugitive from the detention camp in Asmara.

They did not believe me. The Major said they knew me to be one of the escapees from Asmara. I continued to deny this. They threatened to torture me in order to elicit the truth. To this I replied that I had surrendered of my own free will and had thus placed my fate in their hands. They, of course, could do with me as they saw fit; but I believed that they were civilized people who treated their prisoners humanely and would not abuse a destitute refugee. I emphasized that the "doctor" knew no more than I had told him; that as soon as I had found out I was wanted, I surrendered voluntarily. I added that they should remember that I was a victim of the Japanese conquest just as they were victims of the Italian occupation.

My speech was in vain. They continued to pressure me to admit everything, but I persisted in my refusal until they became disgusted with my rhetoric and ordered me locked up.

I was brought to station number three, to the entrance of a dark cell full of dirty, stinking criminals. I refused to enter, informing the officer who was leading me that I was neither a criminal nor a felon and certainly did not belong in this cell for the local criminal population. After some discussion, he allowed me to bed down on the two benches in a corner of the hall.

When I surrendered to police, I had given my name as Alexander Skripsky. The Ethiopian clerk who wrote the name could not pronounce it and shortened it to "Rispi." This name accompanied me throughout all my future wanderings in Africa as well as in Europe during my years in the underground, until I arrived in Israel after the establishment of the State.

On my first evening as a resident of the police lock up in Addis Ababa, I found a policeman who was willing, for one shilling, to deliver a note to a representative of the Jewish community. In the note, I stated that I was a Jewish refugee imprisoned at police station number 3 and asked the community to contact and help me. I mentioned no names, of course, and did not refer to any past acquaintance so that if the note would fall into the hands of the detective bureau, it would provide no damaging evidence.

I promised the policeman an additional shilling, if he brought a written reply; and he brought one the next morning. Several hours later, I received a package containing food, cigarettes, and underwear.

My treatment at the station was exemplary. I was permitted to walk about in liberty in the yard and within the confines of the station. I made friends with all the policemen and the officer in charge who treated me with respect and friendship.

Scores of Italians were being brought to the station and locked up in the main cell with the dregs of the local population. On one of my visits to them, I was shocked to find that poor Dr. Levy had been brought in as well and thrown in among the common criminals. All his connections and all the promises he had received had done him no good in the end. After the inventory of his business had been completed, he was hauled off to jail.

How bizarre this all seemed! Dr. Levy, the millionaire, my savior and protector, who had such close connections

at the Emperor's court, was now imprisoned in conditions much worse than mine. And I, the escaped prisoner, the fugitive, was suddenly in a position to help him. I smuggled food, cigarettes, and a blanket into his cell. These were invaluable to him, as the Italians had not been permitted to bring anything with them at all.

On the third day of my detention, the Italians and I were taken to Akaki, the central prison of Addis Ababa, and locked up in a cell. In the middle of the night we were wakened and ordered to prepare to leave for Asmara. My spirits sank. Suddenly the chief of detectives, Major Waldi, who had interrogated me earlier, appeared at the door of the cell.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"You ought to know that better than I," I answered him.

"Return to your bunk and go to sleep," he told me. "You're staying here."

I did not wait for Major Waldi to repeat his order. I took leave once more of Dr. Levy and withdrew to my corner of the cell. The Italians were evacuated. The prison was silent.

I lay thinking about the fate of my friend. Only a hair's breadth had separated me from extradition to Eritrea. Major Waldi could have failed to recognize me among the crowd of Italians. He could have pretended not to notice me, contending later that I had been extradited by mistake. From whom then could my comrades have demanded justice? And what could have been done anyway after I had been turned over to the British?

I began to believe in my luck once again. If the Ethiopian authorities had not taken this opportunity to extradite me, then perhaps there was no intention of extraditing me at all. I intended to use this reprieve to its best advantage.

22

Akaki Prison

The Akaki prison was located outside the city near Addis Ababa airport, surrounded by a garden and a barbed wire fence. In the center was a large concrete, fortresslike building with watchtowers on each corner. Akaki was a maximum security prison for felons who had been condemned to death or to life imprisonment. The fortress overlooked several blockhouses with barred windows where hundreds of prisoners languished. Among these prisoners were professional assassins who had done their victims in with horrible cruelty.

During my months at Akaki, I would meet slave traders whose business flourished in the remote provinces of Ethiopia. I became well-acquainted with one of them. He did not see anything wrong with his livelihood, which he considered to be as worthy as any other, but more profitable. He was caught when one of his competitors turned him in.

I learned that slaves were purchased in their youth from poor families in the provinces and sold in neighboring countries in central Africa. Many of these enslaved provincials, who were treated without pity by the city dwellers, ended

up in prison if they managed to escape or were caught for petty theft as they struggled to survive. Another fellow I met in Akaki found himself thrown into the same cell as the man who once owned him. He was so good-natured that it did not even occur to him to bear a grudge against this merchant who had bought him just as one would buy a farm animal, and probably had not treated him any better.

Another of the former slaves I met was a mute. I was told that one of his masters had cut out his tongue as a punishment for impertinence.

One of the blockhouses in Akaki was set aside for privileged prisoners, most of them charged with white-collar crimes. It was divided into cells and was equipped with an infirmary, showers, and toilets. This was where I was housed. My companions were five Italians and about twenty-five well-educated Ethiopians. Some of these men had been civil servants who had embezzled state funds, some were merchants who dealt in illegal foreign currency, and others were political prisoners. Among the Italians, there were felons and even murderers, as I would later learn.

The political prisoners had opposed the government of Haile Selassie, claiming that he had ascended to the throne by force and was not actually of the royal dynasty but rather one of the tribal chieftains who had frequented the court. Rumor had it that he had poisoned the reigning queen before marrying her daughter and pronouncing himself Emperor in 1930. The other claimants to the throne revolted against him.

The Italians invaded Ethiopia in 1935, and the outbreak of World War II in 1939 found Haile Selassie in Jerusalem where the British granted him political asylum. After the British seized Ethiopia in 1941 from the Italians, the Emperor returned to his country and decided to get rid of all those who had revolted against him. Some of the rebels were

liquidated and some were jailed. One young princeling, who lived under house arrest in the Emperor's palace, had followers among the political prisoners in Akaki who hoped to see him eventually replace Haile Selassie on the throne.

One old and venerable Ethiopian prisoner was the leader of this faction. His room was near mine and we became friendly. The old man had been in prison for several years when we met. He told me that the Emperor had often tried to persuade him to swear allegiance to him so that he could be set free and appointed governor of an important district. But the old man had consistently refused. During my stay in the prison, he was invited to the royal court for a long talk with Haile Selassie; but on the following day, he returned and took up residence at Akaki again. Prisoners and policemen alike treated this man with great respect, and many of the policemen served as a liaison between him and his followers on the outside.

All through the day, the cells of the blockhouse where I was lodged were open, and the inmates were free to walk among the flower and vegetable beds of the garden. Our treatment by the Ethiopian police and prison guards was fair; the food they gave us was excellent. Prisoners worked at various maintenance jobs, but I was not assigned any work because I was still awaiting my sentence.

The prison warden was an Ethiopian officer with the rank of captain, an illiterate man but good-natured and respectful to those who wished to read and study in their free time. Books were allowed, but pencils or pens were forbidden. Any prisoner caught with writing implements in his possession was severely punished.

A number of Ethiopian prisoners asked me to teach them English. The warden approved the course of study, sent us textbooks and paper, but did not allow us to have pencils and would not be swayed. God only knows what the authorities imagined we would do with pencils if we had

them – murder each other or dig our way under the barbed wire fence! My students were, thus, obliged at great peril to smuggle pencils into their rooms and learn to write in secrecy. Their industry amazed me as did their enthusiasm. More students and more subjects were taken on. The warden procured elementary history and geography books for us. When I walked out into the compound, the Ethiopians would greet me with a deep bow and call me "*Maestro*." I let everyone believe that I was a teacher by profession.

The language common to us all was Italian, which I had managed to learn from the Italian prisoners. Most of the Ethiopians could chatter in Italian. They trusted and befriended me more than they did the Italian prisoners, whose colonial rule had left a legacy of bitterness. At first, the Ethiopians suspected me, too, and tried to ascertain my political views and opinions.

One prisoner in particular tried to test me. During one of our conversations, he offered me his friendship and assistance in whatever I needed. He hinted that he opposed the government of Haile Selassie, which, in his opinion, was not concerned about its citizens' welfare. He suggested that I could, perhaps, assist those who were contemplating a *coup d'etat*. Of course, I rejected this proposition with the greatest delicacy possible. I explained that I could not interfere in the internal affairs of a state where I had sought asylum.

On another occasion, he tried to learn my views on the Italian conquest of Ethiopia. He told me that the Italians had brought great improvements to the country which his own government had been incapable of making.

I replied that each nation must value its national independence above all else. Ethiopia was a rich land and its inhabitants were healthy and industrious. If they were educated, they would be able to advance by their own efforts in due time. I also said that I respected him, because

he had fought against the Italian conquerors, as he had told me, in order to liberate his country. My speech pleased him, and he no longer pestered me with provocative suggestions. Later I learned that all my conversations with him were fully reported to the Ethiopian central intelligence agency.

The problem of illiteracy was one of the most acute in renascent Ethiopia. While I was incarcerated at Akaki, the Emperor made a radio broadcast to his people asking them to devote themselves to study, to open schools and to send their children to be educated. There was a great shortage of teachers and educated people in the government administration, which was forced to bring in consultants from other nations.

In one of my conversations with the Ethiopian prisoner who tried to become my friend, I remarked that it was a pity that I was being held in prison in complete idleness at a time when teachers were so badly needed in Ethiopia. He listened and said it was really a pity. A few days later he approached me and suggested that I offer my services as a teacher in the school for juvenile delinquents that was close by our prison. There were several hundred children there whose education had been sadly neglected due to the shortage of teachers. I understood that this suggestion came from higher echelons. Such an arrangement would give me access to the outside, which was essential to any plan of escape.

A week later, the prison warden invited me to his office. He mentioned nothing about my conversation with the Ethiopian "friend", but merely asked whether I would like to do some work. He asked me how my lessons with the prisoners were progressing. I knew he was receiving regular reports of our studies, but I feigned ignorance and told him in my own words of our progress. Once more I asked for writing implements, adding that it would also be of great value to have a blackboard and chalk.

The warden assured me that he appreciated my efforts; but if he were to permit the formal opening of a school within the prison, none of the prisoners would want to work. On the other hand, he said, there were other places where I could teach without causing difficulties and complications. I understood his intent and replied that I would be willing to teach anywhere – even in a school for juvenile delinquents.

He had been waiting for this. He immediately suggested that I write a formal letter to the minister of education to offer my services. There is an Ethiopian proverb that says, *Ishi nega*, meaning "better tomorrow." This saying could have served as a motto for the Ethiopian bureaucrats of the time. The simplest administrative act took weeks; something more complex might take months and even years. Prisoners awaited trial for years on end and acquired wrinkles and gray hair as they waited to be sentenced after trial. Perhaps only those who had been condemned to death were grateful for the leaden feet of the bureaucracy, as the red tape added precious months to their lives.

Days and weeks passed while I languished in Akaki prison, awaiting a reply from the minister of education. In all this time, I had not been called for interrogation. Neither my sentence nor any formal charges were filed, even though I had admitted to unlawful entry into Ethiopia and could certainly have been charged, at least, with that.

Once prison life became routine, I enjoyed all the privileges of Akaki's "permanent residents," including Sunday visits. My Jewish friends visited me and brought me news and mail. One day, I learned from them that Binyamin and Yaakov, who had been imprisoned in a village near the Eritrean border, had been handed over to the British. The news utterly depressed me. The four of us had been out of Sembel for over nine months now. We had faced danger

and endured many deprivations. All their work, all their hopes, all their sacrifices had been for naught.

From my conversations with the political prisoners, I learned that Binyamin and Yaakov were victims of the political feud between Haile Selassie and his opponents. The British in Eritrea had arrested Ras Guksa, one of the staunchest opponents of the Emperor, on suspicion of collaboration with the Italians. Haile Selassie hated and feared Guksa. There were protracted negotiations between the Emperor and the British about extraditing this public enemy to Ethiopia. Apparently, the British wanted to retain him as a potential threat to Haile Selassie's regime.

When Binyamin and Yaakov fell into Ethiopian hands, and the British learned of this, they demanded the immediate extradition of the fugitives to Eritrea. The Ethiopians understood the value of their bargaining chip. They negotiated with the British for nearly a year until they agreed to exchange Ras Guksa for the two fugitives.

On the day when Binyamin and Yaakov were handed over, a special communique was issued by the Ethiopian government. It stated only that the infamous traitor Ras Guksa had been extradited and would stand trial for treason and collaboration with the Italians. The announcement did not reveal the terms for Guksa's return.

I worried about my own fate. I knew full well that Ethiopia was swarming with British intelligence agents. Information about me could reach them at any moment, if it had not already done so. They would exert pressure on the Ethiopian government to hand me over, just as they had done in the case of Binyamin and Yaakov.

Escape from Akaki seemed more and more urgent. Djibouti, which was then under French rule, seemed the logical destination.

I had selected one of the Italian prisoners to accompany me. He was sentenced to 15 years for murdering his superior

officer who had collaborated with the British during the war. Several days later, he was captured by the British and court-martialed.

He was a skilled mechanic and worked outside the prison in the government garages. Every morning, he went to work accompanied by a policeman. The Ethiopians appreciated his professional skill and allowed him total freedom of operation, enabling him to visit other garages in the city in search of spare parts. A policeman accompanied him on these visits also, but it was possible to get rid of the policeman at any time in return for a small amount of cash. Whenever he wanted to spend some free time in the city, he would tip the policeman and arrange to meet him later, so that they could return to the prison together.

This was the man I chose to be my partner in escape. I disclosed the details of my plan to him and invited him to join me. I offered to pay our travel expenses at least as far as Asmara.

My plan was to procure a good car which would stand the test of fast driving for many hours and an extra supply of fuel: this was his assignment. My friends in the city would prepare false papers for us and arrange for the car. Because of the freedom afforded me, it would not be difficult for me to slip away. For him it would be easier still.

My Italian partner was enthusiastic about the plan and immediately set about fulfilling his part. I relied upon him entirely. Every evening on his return from work, we exchanged information on the day's accomplishments, analyzed various contingencies, and decided on the next day's course of action.

The main difficulty was the great distance between Addis Ababa and the border – several hundred kilometers. We hoped that our escape would go unnoticed until roll call at nightfall. In any case, he did not usually return until then.

One day, a rumor circulated that three prisoners convicted of murder were to be executed in an electric chair, a modern innovation that had never been used before at Akaki.

The chair was installed in a small cabin erected in the outer yard of the camp. The three condemned men, each guilty of at least twenty vicious murders, had been sentenced to death long before. Their executions had been postponed pending the construction of the little cabin and its deadly furniture.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, the three were removed from the fortress and walked across the outer yard. Their hands and feet were in chains, and there were even chains around their necks. A large entourage of high government officials, including the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Justice, the Chief of Police, and the head of the detective bureau, came to witness this premiere. Other prisoners were not allowed to watch, but one of the policemen described the execution to us later in grisly detail.

When the first condemned man was seated in the chair and his hands and feet were tied to it, the Italian electrician threw the switch. An electric current ran through the chair, and the condemned man shook violently, writhing in agony. The electric current continued to course through the chair, and the man twisted and bobbed like a spring. This continued for 20 minutes, but the man did not die. When one of the high officials signalled for the electrician to cut off the current, the condemned man was all blue and his face was horrendously twisted. But he was still alive. It seems that the electric current was too weak.

This was the first and last attempt at "execution by modern methods" in Ethiopia during that period. The three

condemned men were taken outside the gate and shot in front of all the other prisoners.

By the time I learned the details about Binyamin and Yaakov's extradition, I was already deeply enmeshed in the plan for escape with the Italian mechanic. I was concerned that yet another "Ras Guksa" would fall into British hands, prompting the Ethiopians to offer me in exchange.

And then one day, as I was working in the outer room next to the warden's office, I heard his phone ring and overheard an incomprehensible conversation in Amharic in which the warden repeated my name several times. It occurred to me that the Ministry of Education had replied at last to my request to work on the outside as a teacher. But when the warden called me into his office a few minutes later, it was to tell me that he had been ordered by Major Otto Waldi to send me to the detective bureau immediately. I asked whether I should take my belongings, but he replied in the negative. I was relieved. A positive reply would have surely meant that they intended to send me back to Eritrea.

I left the prison accompanied by a policeman, walking along the road leading from Akaki to the city. We had not gone far when a car came toward us. It stopped and Major Waldi got out. He greeted me warmly, invited me to ride with him, and discharged the guard.

When he brought me to his office, I found a certain Professor Tamarat there, along with other representatives of the Jewish community. The professor was a leader among the Falasha Jews of Ethiopia who had been interested in the fate of my two comrades and had worked in vain for their release. He was highly respected by the authorities and was a confidant of the Emperor.

When I saw fellow Jews in the office of the chief of detectives, I understood that I was in no danger. Major

Waldi made an announcement in Amharic and Professor Tamarat translated it into Hebrew.

"We have decided to release you from prison and to enable you to leave our country. We know who you are and how you got here, although you have denied your identity. We have decided to release you immediately, because those who are interested in you do not know as yet that you are here. You must try to leave our country as soon as possible. We are anxious not to become embroiled in arguments with other countries because of you, so do not show yourself in the city. You have done well to deny your true identity. Continue to do so. But beware! If your identity should become known, your situation will be difficult. Let us know how much time you require to leave the country, and we shall grant you permission to stay here during that period. We shall be ready to assist you to leave our country by whatever means you choose."

I was overjoyed. I thanked the Major and promised to obey his instructions. I asked permission to remain in the city for 30 days, and this was granted immediately. We parted with a warm handshake and I was free. I went back to the prison to collect my few belongings.

When the prisoners heard that I was released, they all wished me well. The warden invited me to his office. I kept a few pounds in his safe. He took out my money from an envelope and prepared to return it to me. I wanted to give him a tip, but I did not know how to suggest this delicately. He himself relieved me of my embarrassment. He took my money and counted it up to the last pound note, which he set aside. Giving me the remaining bills, he asked if I wished to count the money. I declined and signed the register stating that I had received all my cash. We parted warmly.

One of my Jewish friends took me to his home, and the whole Jewish neighborhood rejoiced.

I was legally a free man – so long as I stayed out of British territory.

I left my Italian friend behind in Akaki prison. Years later, I learned that he had eventually been granted amnesty by the government, along with the other Italian prisoners. All of them returned to Italy.

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Under French Protection

Upon my release from Akaki, I promptly renewed my contact with the *Hebrew Committee for National Liberation* in the United States. First I cabled them; then I sent a letter summarizing all that had transpired, ending with a request for assistance in obtaining a visa to any place in the world that would offer me a safe haven. I also sent a letter to the villa in Asmara where my comrades, who had escaped through the tunnel, were still hiding.

Two days later, a reply came from the *Hebrew Committee* telling me that they would be able to get me travel documents. They simply needed photographs and particulars. I sent these off and began to count the days.

I did not pin all my hopes on the *Hebrew Committee*, as I knew that they were dealing with the plight of thousands of Jews who had been displaced by the war. From friends in Addis Ababa, I learned of Rabbi Yosef Moshe Said, who was head of the Jewish community in Djibouti in French Somaliland and influential with the local authorities.

I dispatched a messenger to ask him to come to Addis Ababa, stressing that it was a matter of life and death.

A few days later, the Rabbi arrived. When I saw how old he was, I was filled with remorse at having caused him to travel a long and weary journey of 48 hours on a slow, uncomfortable train. I asked his forgiveness for having importuned him.

The Rabbi listened intently to my saga without uttering a word. When I was done, he placed his hands upon my head and blessed me. But in answer to my direct question as to my chances of getting a permit to enter French Somaliland, he sighed and muttered, "Let us hope for the help of God."

This reply did little to encourage me. My remorse was now doubled for having inconvenienced this kind old man in vain. He departed for Djibouti the next day, leaving me with no alternative but to follow his advice and put my trust in God.

The High Holidays came and with them the bitter news of the capture of the fugitives who had been hiding in the villa in Asmara. My dear friend Rahamim Mizrahi, who had stayed behind to take care of our comrades, had been arrested with them.

Loneliness and depression overwhelmed me. Of all those who escaped from Sembel, only I remained free. I sought some justification for this, an answer to the question of whether I should have stayed with my comrades and shared their fate. Cold logic told me that if I had not gone to Ethiopia, Rahamim and the others would have been unable to maintain contact with the *Hebrew Committee*, which had been so helpful in covering the expenses of their life in hiding. But this thought did little to ease my conscience.

My own peril in Addis Ababa increased with the arrest of my comrades. After Rahamim was discovered, the British would reason that I too must be close by. When they failed to find me in Eritrea, they would know that I had fled to

Ethiopia, the only place that was accessible from Asmara. And then it would not take long for the British to renew their pressure on the Ethiopians for my extradition.

I checked daily at the main post office in Addis Ababa where I had rented a box. The employees at the post office came to recognize me. As soon as I would show my face, they would shake their heads sadly and say in Italian: "No letter from New York, signore. Not today."

I waited helplessly while the thirty days' grace given to me by the Ethiopian authorities expired. I was afraid to re-enter the detective bureau to renew my residency permit, lest I never be permitted to leave again. I turned to Professor Tamarat for help. He obtained a promise from Major Waldi to extend my visa for 20 days when I came to apply.

Nevertheless, my fear of the detective bureau stayed with me. I asked another friend to take my permit to be stamped, saying that I was ill. I arranged to meet him afterwards in a cafe. I figured that if something untoward should happen and the detectives came to arrest me, they would at least not find me at home. But my fears were groundless. My friend met me at the cafe with the stamped permit in hand.

Two more weeks passed, and the expected travel document promised by the Dominican Republic had still not arrived. In desperation, I went to the postmaster and showed him a cable informing me that the visa had been sent by registered mail. I demanded that my letter be searched for in all the post boxes, as it must have been misplaced. The postmaster complied with my demand, but the search proved fruitless.

My misery increased from day to day. My Jewish friends tried to comfort me by likening the letter to the Messiah. One must await him every day and each hour, even though he tarries.

I cabled the United States again, explaining that my

renewed residence permit was about to expire and that there was little hope of it being extended. I begged them to trace the missing document. I received a cable in reply. The *Hebrew Committee* had made inquiries, and they were convinced that the visa had been sent on schedule by registered mail. In the meantime, they had already applied for a document which would be sent within a few days. They sent me the receipt of payment for the first visa in the hope that it might be useful in convincing the Ethiopian authorities that I was not misleading them.

I received another wire the following day, this time from the Dominican consulate, confirming that I had been granted an entry visa to their country and that it had been sent to me by airmail.

Despite all these assurances, the 20 days expired. In shame I sent my friend to the detective bureau with my expired permit in hand and all the cables I had received. This time, Major Waldi granted a 10-day extension. This was a clear indication that I would not receive another.

I began to prepare to go underground. One of the Jewish merchants made a place available for me at his warehouse which was far from his home and the Jewish quarter. In the yard, there was a shack that had been partitioned into several rooms. There I dug in. An old Ethiopian watchman was placed at my disposal. The merchant was then beginning to build an additional wing to his warehouse. I was introduced as the engineer and foreman who, for the sake of convenience, would reside at the worksite.

Every morning, I went out to "oversee" the progress of the workmen. My past experience as a construction worker in Eretz Israel was useful in creating the illusion that I knew what I was doing. At times, I astounded myself by actually contributing a useful comment.

Years later, I met that same merchant in Israel. To my

surprise, he told me that the warehouse whose construction I had nominally supervised was still intact.

On the last day that my residence permit was valid – October 28, 1946 – I closed myself in my shack, not daring to be seen out of doors. Again it seemed that I would have to go underground, and I faced this grim prospect with scant pleasure.

And then my host ran into the yard waving a letter for me. My heart sank when I took it from him and saw the stamp on the envelope: French Somaliland. It could only be a letter from Rabbi Yosef Said with another suggestion that I have faith in the Lord. Slowly I tore the envelope open, expecting such a letter, when a small piece of paper fell to the ground. As I bent to retrieve it, a joyous sound burst from my throat. The piece of paper displayed a French seal and a few hand-written lines.

The envelope bore a *laissez-passer*, an entry visa to French Somaliland and a two-month residence permit for Djibouti. This was the doing of the old Rabbi whom I had regarded, with the arrogance of the young, as too doddering to be of any use to my cause.

I immediately set out for the detective bureau. I received a new identity card and exit visa. I then hurried over to a travel agency and booked a seat on the next plane for Djibouti.

That same day, I received 100 pounds from the Betar movement in South Africa, with a promise of more to come. The money was intended not for me personally but for all the men who had escaped from Sembel. I wired back that they should not send any additional funds, since my comrades had been caught and returned to the detention camp. I requested permission to use the money myself, as I was almost destitute.

On the first of November 1946, I bade my friends in Addis Ababa farewell and set off for the airport. It seemed

no less than a miracle as we flew over Akaki prison that all the documents in my pocket were legal. I looked down at the fortifications, at the prisoners in the yard, as tiny as ants, and thought to myself: "There but for the grace of God go I!"

We landed in Djibouti three hours later, and I was met by Rabbi Said's son. I presented my *laissez-passer* to the French immigration official, who gave it a fleeting glance and waved me through without even searching my belongings.

Djibouti at the time was a desolate and forlorn frontier town with tumbledown houses and dusty streets, situated at the edge of a volcanic desert on the shores of the Indian Ocean. The town was mostly populated by people of the Danquil tribe, with a sprinkling of French colonial officials and some other whites who operated as merchants. There was a small Jewish community.

There was a rare downpour on the night of my arrival, the only rainfall of that year. All my belongings were drenched. The following day the scorching sun came out and the skies were never cloudy again during the weeks I spent there.

Rabbi Said would not hear of my staying in a hotel, where I would have to partake of nonkosher food. Grateful for his hospitality, I lived in his home and dined at his table. During my entire stay in Djibouti, he refused any payment whatsoever. I tried repeatedly to thank him for his kindness as my benefactor, and especially for the entry permit to French Somaliland which had saved me from imprisonment; but he merely waved his hand and murmured, "With God's help."

I wired the *Hebrew Committee* in the United States, notifying them that I had arrived in Djibouti and reminding them that my visa for the Dominican Republic had still not arrived. I now knew that mail from the United States to Ethiopia passed through Cairo and Aden on its way.

It seemed to me that British censors must have illegally intercepted my mail.

The only way out now was aboard some ship that touched at Djibouti on its way from the Far East to Europe. I began to frequent the port offices. Each day, I scanned the lists of ships due to dock and all the details of their itineraries and noted down those that appeared promising. Then I began to visit travel agents as well as smugglers in an effort to somehow get out of Djibouti.

But ten days after my arrival, my theory proved false. I received a cable from my friends in Addis Ababa, notifying me that my visa had arrived and had been forwarded to me by airmail.

The envelope arrived on the next flight from Ethiopia. I examined it thoroughly. It had been postmarked in New York just ten days before its arrival in Addis Ababa. The letter had somehow been delayed for three months in transit to the post office in New York! This inefficiency, which had caused me so much anxiety, appalled me.

I applied to the French immigration department, presented my documents for the Dominican Republic, and requested a transit visa through France. Of course, I had no intention of actually traveling to the West Indies – I planned to go underground again as soon as I reached Europe, where I would be able to contact fellow members of the Irgun and continue my underground activities.

The French bureau chief, who also headed security services in Djibouti, received me graciously, making discreet inquiries about my origin and the circumstances of my reaching Djibouti. I dredged up the old story again that I was a Jewish refugee from Shanghai who had escaped the Japanese. I said that as a Jew I had wished to go to Eretz Israel, but I had not been able to steal across the border which was strictly guarded by the British. I had spent some time in Egypt; and having despaired of entering Eretz Israel,

I managed to reach Ethiopia with the aid of friends. I had hoped to be employed there as a teacher (this was close to the truth!); but since I had entered illegally, I was not able to obtain permission to work. I had asked the Rabbi of Djibouti for his help in my continued effort to reach the Dominican Republic, where I had been granted an entry visa.

The Frenchman listened to my long tale of woe without comment and pretended to believe me. He expressed his sympathy about the plight of the Jews, the slaughter of so many millions during the war, and the desperation of those who were now left wandering from country to country without finding a haven. He then proceeded to discuss Eretz Israel. With all my resolve to restrain myself, I could not refrain from speaking harshly against the British. The official smiled and finally asked me where I had obtained money for the inevitable expenses of my prolonged travels.

I replied that wherever I went, I had found Jews who helped me. He remarked: "Yes, this is one of the wonderful traits of your people. Wherever there is a Jewish home, other Jews are not homeless."

The discussion lasted almost two hours. When we returned to the issue of a transit visa through France, I was told that I must wait until authorization came from the Ministry of the Interior in Paris, since officials in Djibouti had no authority to issue entrance visas for France. My friendly official estimated that this could take two weeks or longer.

I was in no position to argue. Repressing my disappointment, I filled in the application form and departed.

When I cabled America about this latest obstacle, I received in reply the address of contacts in Paris who would be able to help me. I wired accordingly and received the reply that everything possible would be done. In the meantime, I was counseled to be patient.

A great deal of patience was required. The heat was stifling and my boredom in Djibouti was overpowering. My most pleasurable activity during the past year – reading – was denied me, because I could not find books in Djibouti in Russian, English, or even Italian. For want of anything else, I read the Hebrew Bible given to me by Rabbi Said. Sometimes I attended the dingy outdoor cinema that showed out-of-date films twice a week, all in French. It was impossible to walk because of the heat, and, besides, there was nowhere to go.

One day, several weeks after my arrival, I was called in to speak with the chief of security services, the same fellow who had spoken with me at length about the plight of the Jews. I entered his office with some trepidation, fearing the worst. Instead, I was told that a favorable reply had been received from Paris. He had my French transit visa in hand. I could not hide my joy. My French friend wished me a successful journey.

I rushed to the travel bureau but was disappointed to find that the number of bookings aboard any ships to France was very limited. I would have to wait my turn. The list was full for the next month. I returned to the chief of security and asked whether he could possibly expedite my departure. My visa for the Dominican Republic was only valid for three months. If I were detained in Djibouti for any length of time, I would be unable to make the next leg of my journey from France to the West Indies on time. I would probably have to face a long wait in France, as well, for ships to the Dominican Republic.

My friend promised to help and, indeed, two weeks later, I was invited to the shipping office and told that I had a reservation aboard a vessel that would arrive within a few days. I wanted to thank my benefactor for his help; but with typical French discretion, he shrugged off my gratitude.

His kindly behavior and the interest he displayed puz-

zled me, until I discovered months later that the man had known exactly who I was. As chief of the French security services in Djibouti, he had received full particulars regarding my identity, the details of my escape from the detention camp at Asmara, my wanderings prior to arriving in French Somaliland, even my past in Eretz Israel and the circumstances of my arrest. Later, when friends of the underground visited Djibouti in connection with the rescue of Aryeh Ben-Eliezer and Yitzhak Shamir, who had also escaped from Asmara, the Frenchman allowed an examination of the file he had on me. It was no less detailed than the files in the archives of the British CID in Jerusalem. This French official had himself been an activist in the underground during the German occupation and was sympathetic to our cause.

On January 27, 1947, I embarked on a French freighter that was traveling from Djibouti to Marseille. At going-away parties, wishes for my success were again sounded along with pleas not to forget the Jews of Djibouti on the day of liberation (by the end of 1949, the entire community had moved to Israel). There was a gala celebration in the synagogue, all the Jewish stores were closed, and the people wore their most festive garments. Many members of the Jewish community accompanied me to the port to see me off.

Aboard ship, I was assigned to fourth class together with some French soldiers who had completed their service in the colonies and a group of Jewish refugees who had somehow reached Shanghai during the war and were now bound for Europe with visas to all ends of the earth. I mingled with these Jews, although I did not disclose my identity. They were able to give me news about the Jewish community in Harbin, China, where I had been raised and educated. I heard familiar names and stories that recalled the days of my childhood. Without revealing too much, I tried to inquire about the fate of my family from whom I

had not heard since the outbreak of the war; but I was able to learn nothing, not even whether my mother and father were alive.

On the third day of our voyage, we arrived in Port Said in Egypt which was, at that time, under British control. I knew that the British would board the ship and feared that they might examine each passenger and that my identity as a fugitive would be discovered. Confident that I could elude them, since they could hardly conduct a thorough search of a 24,000 ton vessel, I prepared a secret hiding place for myself.

But, as fate would have it, a case of yellow fever was discovered on board and the ship was not permitted to dock at Port Said. Under quarantine, we sat at anchor at some distance from the shore.

After supplies were ferried aboard, we raised anchor and continued on to Marseille.

PART THREE

Europe


EUROPE AND MEDITERRANEAN STATES
NORTH SEA
SWEDEN
DENMARK
BALTIC SEA
IRELAND
UNITED KINGDOM
London
NETHERLANDS
ATLANTIC OCEAN
POLAND
U.S.S.R.
GERMANY
BELGIUM
Paris
LUXEMBURG
CZECHOSLOVAKIA
AZOV SEA
FRANCE
Vienna
AUSTRIA
HUNGARY
SWITZERLAND
RUMANIA
ITALY
BLACK SEA
YUGOSLAVIA
SPAIN
PORTUGAL
CORSICA
ADRIATIC SEA
BULGARIA
TURKEY
Rome
ALBANIA
SARDINIA
AEGIAN SEA
GREECE
SICILY
SYRIA
CRETE
CYPRUS
LEBANON
IRAQ
MOROCCO
ALGERIA
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Tel Aviv
TUNISIA
ISRAEL
JORDAN
SAUDI ARABIA
LIBYA
EGYPT

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Paris – Assignment Diaspora

On January 17, 1947, fourteen months and eight days after my escape from the detention camp at Sembel, I found myself in Paris. More than two years of my life had been wasted in Africa – about a year in detention camps and fourteen months in hiding, in prison, and in limbo in East African towns.

Although a year and a half had already passed since the war's end, Paris had by no means recovered. There were acute shortages of coal and electricity, food and clothing. It was a common sight to see children dressed in rags and wooden shoes. For the generation that has grown up thinking of Paris as the world capital of fashion, it is perhaps difficult to appreciate this – but in 1947 in Paris, a man or a woman with new clothes was a rarity. Shamed by the German occupation and taxed like all Europeans with postwar shortages, Parisians were a far cry from the chic and elegant stereotypes of today.

The city teemed with hundreds of thousands of allied

military personnel and refugees en route to new locations or awaiting repatriation. Thousands of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust rushed from bureau to bureau, seeking visas to all ends of the earth. Jewish organizations supplied guidance and dispensed various forms of aid.

France opened its borders to the human masses pouring in from all corners of Europe. Identity cards and temporary residence permits were readily obtainable. Every day, thousands of people lacking any documents whatsoever crossed from one European country to another; and many of these refugees wound up in France.

It was difficult to get used to the sudden transition between the outlaw life of a persecuted wanderer in the miserable villages of East Africa and that of a free man with an identity card and a residence permit in his pocket.

When I first walked around Paris, I would cross the street apprehensively at the sight of a gendarme. Once, when I jaywalked to do so, I found myself pursued by a policeman blowing his whistle and motioning for me to halt. Conditioned by my months as a fugitive, my heart froze with fear. How foolish I felt when the policeman politely saluted and, enlisting the translating service of a passerby, warned me that it was dangerous to cross in the middle of the road. I should always use the crosswalk!

My first contacts in Paris were with members of the Hebrew Committee for National Liberation: Sam Merlin, Hillel Kook, and Eri Jabotinsky, Ze'ev's son. These men had established a branch of the *Hebrew Committee* in France to advance their political and propaganda goals. Sam Merlin, a man of outstanding talent and unusual capacity for work, was head of all European operations.

Unlike the Irgun, the *Hebrew Committee* operated openly; and I had no trouble establishing contact with them. As the former Commander of the Jerusalem branch of the Irgun who had miraculously reappeared after two years

of incarceration and political exile, I was given a warm welcome by these men. Solicitously, they suggested that I rest for a few days, then catch up on the newspapers and look over what correspondence they had from the Irgun High Command in Eretz Israel.

But I did not want to rest. What I wanted was to return to action, to make up for the two years during which I had been cut off from all activity on behalf of our cause.

From the *Hebrew Committee*'s collection of clippings, I learned that 1946 had been a landmark year in the struggle for Jewish liberation. During the first half of the year, the rival underground forces in Eretz Israel actually united against the British. After the Season ended, an organization was formed called *Tenuat Hameri* (the United Resistance Movement) bringing together the Haganah, the Irgun, and LEHI. Each operated separately, but all operations had to be approved in advance by the Joint Command. The country was transformed into a battleground with attacks on railway stations, bridges, police stations, airports, radar stations and British aircraft resulting in massive destruction. During this time, the tempo of illegal immigration also increased. Thousands of survivors of the Holocaust sailed from European shores.

The British did not sit idly by. They intensified their war against Jewish "terrorists," conducting extensive searches for members of the underground forces. Detention camps held thousands of freedom fighters throughout the country. The military authorities set up roadblocks on major traffic arteries and interurban roads, searching all Jews and hauling thousands more in for questioning. On Saturday, June 29, 1946 (known as Black Saturday), British retaliation reached a climax. All heads of the Jewish Agency and *Vaad Leumi* – (National Council) were arrested and sent to the Latrun detention camp. Four thousand members of the Haganah and Palmach were also arrested and sent to a

special camp at Rafah on the Egyptian border. The Jewish Agency gave in to the British, and the Haganah ceased their operations against them. The Movement continued to function for a while longer; but at the end of July the United Resistance Movement came to an end.

The British were no longer content to transfer illegal immigrants from Eretz Israel to detention camps in Cyprus. Now they detained immigrant ships mid-ocean and towed them directly to Cyprus. At the same time, British agents increased their surveillance of Jewish institutions in Europe to repress immigration even before the ships could sail. The British sent their best agents to Italy, where they blew up several immigrant ships that were docked in the harbors. One of the ships that went up in flames was the Irgun's *Vida Providenzi*, purchased by the *Hebrew Committee*.

Britain exerted political pressure on all those allied European countries that permitted the concentration, transit and passage of refugees to Eretz Israel. British diplomats used their contacts and influence both overtly and covertly.

The center of all these activities was the British Embassy in Rome. For this reason, it was chosen as the first target of Irgun military operations in the Diaspora.

At 2:00 a.m. on October 31, 1946, a bomb affixed to the door of the Embassy exploded causing heavy damage. The front of the building collapsed and the adjacent rooms were destroyed. Unfortunately, one passerby was badly injured. All the windows in the embassy and in surrounding buildings were shattered. Broken glass and debris covered the sidewalks and the street.

The echo of the explosion was only equaled by the political reverberations of this event. By the next day, the entire world press printed detailed descriptions of the destruction of the British Embassy in Rome. The Irgun, meanwhile, made no announcement of its involvement.

At first, police suspected either neo-Fascists or Yugoslav

agents of the act of terrorism, and investigations turned in both these directions. But on the November 2, the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, Irgun headquarters in Europe announced that the bombing of the British Embassy was an action of the Irgun in the Diaspora. Word was sent by mail to De Gasperi, who headed the Italian government at the time, and to all the newspapers in Rome.

Up until this time, the Italian authorities had not hampered Irgun operations within their borders, believing that the Jewish underground had no interest in disturbing Italy's internal order. They knew that Zionists were busily recruiting young people and organizing "illegal" immigration, but they had simply ignored it. However, the attack on the British Embassy within the capital was an assault on Italy's prestige throughout the world. The police arrested several people, including Eli Tavin (Yaakov Farshtey) who had masterminded the operation.

The Italian people, on the other hand, applauded and called out words of encouragement to the Jews when scenes of the demolished Embassy building were flashed on cinema screens. Several months after the arrest, all the detainees were released for lack of evidence.

While I was wandering in Africa, Irgun branches had been activated throughout Europe.

At that time, Eli Tavin was in charge of the Irgun in the Diaspora. In Eretz Israel, he had been head of the Irgun's intelligence service. During the Season, he was kidnapped by the Haganah and chained to a bed for six months at Kibbutz Ein Harod. When Eli was finally released by the Haganah, the Irgun sent him abroad to head their foreign operations.

When Eli began his activities after the war, Betar branches had already been organized within the Jewish refugee camps by veterans of the Jewish Brigade. Betar and

the Irgun worked hand in hand to train fighters and settlers for Eretz Israel.

The first officers' course was established by Eli in Tricasa, southern Italy, with Jewish ex-partisans of the Russian army. After several months, Eli also managed to organize Irgun cells in Germany and Austria. Members of the Jewish Brigade who remained in Europe after their units were disbanded were joined by the graduates of the Irgun officers' courses in Tricasa and Ladispoli to form the nucleus of activities in the Diaspora.

A few days after my arrival in Paris, I decided to try to make contact with the Irgun. The difficulty was that, apart from a recommendation by Sam Merlin, I had no official identification from the High Command. Merlin was known as a member of the *Hebrew Committee for National Liberation* in the United States, but his connections with the Irgun were not yet known to the operatives in Europe.

He told me that among the known Irgun sympathizers in Paris, there was one from Eretz Israel who would probably be able to vouch for my legitimacy. I asked Merlin to spread the word that someone named Assaf (my alias in Jerusalem), who claimed to be the Commander of the Jerusalem district in 1944, had arrived in Paris and was interested in contacting Irgun activists in the Diaspora.

The man mentioned by Merlin was Yehoshua Hacohen, later a major in the Israeli army. Although he had served with the Jewish Brigade, Hacohen had retained his connections with the Irgun and fulfilled occasional tasks for them. When the war ended, he was ordered by the Irgun High Command to remain in Europe to help organize branches of the Irgun and Betar in the refugee camps.

When Merlin told Hacohen about "Assaf," he became suspicious. He knew that I had been arrested and exiled to Eritrea, and there had been no precedent for any of our

men escaping from the African camps to Paris. Nevertheless, after I correctly responded to a number of questions that Hacohen transmitted to me through Merlin, he finally agreed to meet with me. In the meantime, I contacted the Irgun High Command in Eretz Israel to let them know of my arrival.

I met with a group of young men in a cafe in Montparnasse. At this meeting, I learned much more about the activities of our agents and the possibilities for our operations in Europe. We agreed that each of these Irgun officers should return to the country where his operations were based and await additional instructions, and we scheduled another officers' meeting in Paris for the following month.

About a month after my arrival in Paris, Shmuel Katz arrived as a special envoy from Eretz Israel. I had not met him before and was impressed by his urbane manner. A South African educated in a traditionally English manner, Katz was always reserved in his speech and manners, a sharp contrast to most of us.

He had arrived in Eretz Israel in 1946, after having been at various times secretary of the World Zionist Revisionists and editor of a London Jewish weekly. A year later, he was appointed to the Irgun's High Command and became its spokesman in meetings with the foreign press.

Katz's South African passport was a tremendous asset to his services in the underground. With such a passport at that time, there were practically no restrictions on travel. From the time I met him until the establishment of the State, Shmuel spent most of his time traveling on Irgun business.

He brought me letters from Menachem Begin and Hayim Landau, another member of the High Command. The letters were hidden in the heels of a specially constructed pair of shoes. These caused me some difficulty when I tried to extricate their contents without the aid of

a shoemaker. Eventually, we improved on our "diplomatic pouch" – we discovered a Jewish shoemaker in Paris and, after checking his reliability, we came to an agreement about regular work. He would produce hollow heels in which we inserted typewritten messages on very thin paper. The owner of such a pair of shoes would wear them for a few days to give the heels a worn appearance before leaving on a trip.

The letters carried by Shmuel Katz in the heels of his shoes contained instructions for me. I was to remain in Europe as Commander of the Irgun in the Diaspora. My assignments fell into five general categories:

1. Political and propaganda activity, including negotiations with representatives of foreign countries.
2. Recruitment and training of young Jews within the framework of Irgun cells.
3. Fund-raising.
4. Purchasing arms and transporting them to Israel.
5. Planning attacks on British targets in the Diaspora in accordance with the High Command's decision to extend the war beyond Eretz Israel's frontiers.

I also received a special directive to establish a branch of the Irgun in Great Britain for the purpose of attacking the government on its home ground.

At first, financial support in Paris came mainly from the *Hebrew Committee for National Liberation*, which had developed a comprehensive propaganda operation in the United States and had raised substantial amounts of money for their work there.

Later, we communicated with the Jewish groups and organizations in various European countries through the Re-

visionist Party headquarters located in Paris and established contact with Jewish youth through the Betar organization.

A limited cooperation between the *Hebrew Committee*, the Revisionist Party and Betar, and efficient utilization of these organizations enabled us to initiate Irgun activities in many additional countries. Things ran smoothly, despite the fact that we spent part of our time and energy trying to iron out differences between the Revisionist Party and the *Hebrew Committee*. These two bodies never reached total agreement on tactical issues, causing considerable friction. As long as I was responsible for the Irgun's work in the Diaspora, I tried to bridge the gap between them; but in this area, I was less successful than in other aspects of my work.

Soon we had branches or contacts in more than twenty countries including Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Austria, Germany, Italy, France, Switzerland, England, Ireland, China, South Africa, the United States, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algiers. We also had contacts with individuals and groups of active sympathizers in Scandinavia and several Latin American countries.

25

England – Mission Impossible

The war of the underground in Eretz Israel was approaching its climax, just as I began my work in Paris. Every day, the world press printed news of daring attacks on British installations, and the world reacted both with shock and admiration.

The infamous General Barker then headed the British army contingent in Eretz Israel. He was an avowed anti-Semite and did little to conceal his hatred of Jews. His remarks revealed his animosity as he publicly expressed his "feelings of contempt and abhorrence" toward the Jewish community and spoke of "hitting the Jews where it hurts them most – in their pockets."

In February 1947, Barker was dismissed from his post; but as his parting shot before leaving the country, he signed death warrants for three members of the Irgun. Yehiel Dresner, Mordechai Elkahi, and Eliezer Kashani were arrested after three British officers and a sergeant were caught and whipped by Irgun agents in reprisal for the flogging of a

captured Jewish fighter by the British. Earlier, Barker had signed a death warrant for Dov Gruner, who was arrested and tried for participation in an Irgun attack on a police station in Ramat Gan.

The months of Spring and early Summer of 1947 were months of the gallows in Israel. In April, Gruner, Elkahi, Kashani, and Dresner were put to death secretly while Gruner's appeal was pending before the Privy Council in London. Relatives of the condemned men were not allowed to visit them. A rabbi was not called in to be with them during their last hours. Their bodies were transferred to Safed and interred there, while a general curfew was placed over the entire land.

Shortly afterwards, Meir Feinstein and Moshe Barazani, under death sentences in a Jerusalem prison, decided to blow themselves up together with their British executioners. Irgun members from the outside helped them smuggle in a hand grenade. But when Feinstein and Barazani learned that a rabbi would also be present at their hanging, they abandoned the plan and used the hand grenade instead to blow themselves up in their cell.

In July, three more Irgun men were hanged. Yaakov Weiss, Abshalom Habib, and Meir Nakar were caught after the Irgun attack on the Acre fortress. On May 4, the Irgun in Eretz Israel accomplished the impossible. They boldly engineered a prison break from the mighty crusader fortress at Acre, allowing some 250 prisoners – Jews and Arabs – to break out of prison, among them 41 Irgun and LEHI prisoners. Several Irgun men were killed and five were caught during the retreat.

The Jewish community in Eretz Israel was in turmoil, and the British government was losing its grip on the land. Everywhere and every day, men of the Irgun and LEHI attacked British installations.

Irgun headquarters directed our staff in Europe to attack

the British in any place we could. Because of all the death warrants he had signed, General Barker was declared a war criminal by the IZL and sentenced to death. Before this sentence could be carried out, however, he had left for England where the security measures were at an all-time high.

Propaganda in England was conducted by a group which published *The Jewish Struggle* edited by T. Preshel and by veterans of the Jewish Legion in England, headed by Major Weiser and David de Lange. Weiser and de Lange organized open-air meetings where they advocated support of the Irgun. They also published their own journal, *The Jewish Legion Bulletin*, which was almost entirely dedicated to the war of liberation waged by the Jewish underground against the British rule in Eretz Israel. In great measure, it was due to their propaganda that a sympathetic atmosphere was created in wide circles of English Jewry and that many gentiles began to regard our struggle in a favorable light. But this was not an adequate basis for supporting underground military activity in England.

After the bombing of the British Embassy in Rome, stringent security measures were adopted in all British embassies in Europe, as well as throughout England itself. All Jews carrying the British Mandatory passports who were in England at the time – students, businessmen, or tourists – were placed under strict surveillance. We knew that the British had compiled dossiers for all such passport holders residing in England, including full details of their past activities, their occupations, and their individual connections. Leaders of the local Revisionist Party would be the prime suspects, if any Irgun activity came to light.

There were individual English Jews who contacted us expressing their readiness to lend support, but they lacked any underground or military experience and were unsuitable for the sorts of jobs we needed to accomplish. It was

clear that any operations in England had to be spearheaded by an experienced agent of the Irgun.

We explored the possibility of bringing over an agent by legal means but soon realized that this was impossible. The people who could be counted on for underground activities in England would not qualify for an entrance visa, being too well-known by British Intelligence.

We looked into the possibility of bringing someone across the Channel with the assistance of French or Belgian smugglers. One of our agents was sent to investigate this possibility, even though we were aware that the British had taken precautions to guard against infiltration by sea.

And then one day, in the early months of 1947, a friend told us of a young Zionist who had been a fighter pilot in the South African Air Force, afterwards serving as an officer in the British Air Force. He seemed dependable and was eager to help the fight for freedom in Eretz Israel. The young man's name was Boris Senior.

I met him in a cafe, and I realized that he could not have been older than 25. I asked many questions about his past, his flight experience, his knowledge of the situation in Eretz Israel, and his willingness to take risks on behalf of our cause. The frankness and sincerity of his answers impressed me. I asked him if he would be ready to go to England after completing a short course and preparing himself for a dangerous assignment. He answered "Yes" without hesitation. What I actually wanted to accomplish, I explained, was to smuggle one of our Irgun agents from France into England. I wondered how he could help us in this undertaking.

Boris said that he had been in England during the war and knew it well. In his opinion, it would be possible to bring our agent over – by air!

I had secretly hoped that this dashing young pilot would come up with some such idea on his own. He said that he

would need a little time to work out a detailed plan, but his scheme was to acquire a small two-seater plane and fly our agent to England across the Channel. He himself was ready to be the pilot. We arranged to meet the next day to discuss particulars.

Boris would buy the plane in Britain, where he had no record of association with the Jewish underground. On the appointed day, he would take off on a flight listing France as his destination. Upon arrival on the continent, he would register legally, arrange for flights over his host country, and would set a certain date for his return to England. On the day of his scheduled return, he would take off after recording his destination with the airport authorities but would touch down briefly in a prearranged spot to pick up our agent. They would fly across the Channel to England, where Boris would land in another deserted field to let his passenger off. He would then continue alone to the registered destination, where he would file the documents for his return trip from the continent.

After checking various details, I approved the plan.

For our agent in England, we chose Yoram (Yoel Eilberg), who had just arrived from Eretz Israel. Yoram resembled the typical British Tommy and was cool under stress. His knowledge of English was a little weak, but after Shmuel Katz had coached him and taught him some current slang expressions, he was pronounced fit for the job.

We then began to work on the continental side of the plan, finding a suitable landing area about two hours' distance from Paris.

Boris sent us a letter from England, giving a detailed account of the progress of the operation.

During this time, a mine was found in the British Colonial Office in London. It became known that the mine had been laid by agents of LEHI, and it became evident to British authorities that Jewish terrorists had infiltrated the country

and were already working from within. Stringent security measures were adopted. All ports, airfields, and railway stations in England were placed under the direct supervision of Scotland Yard. Every stranger who set foot on British soil was thoroughly cross-examined. Our sympathizers, who were known in England as Betar and Revisionist activists, were prime suspects and immediately came under close surveillance.

Such was the prevailing atmosphere in England on the day Boris Senior landed in France to pick up Yoram.

On the morning of April 20, 1947, five young people set off in a private car on a picnic: a young Jewish Frenchman who was the driver, Yoram, Zippora Levy, Lee Stern and I. Two hours after our departure from Paris, we arrived at a deserted field with our tent, blankets, and wicker baskets of food.

We unloaded the baskets and busied ourselves near a clump of bushes at the edge of the field. After half an hour of laughter and talking, we saw a small plane circle above us and land nearby. As any naturally curious picnickers would, we went over to look at the plane and talk with the pilot. After a moment, the plane taxied forward and took off again flying west.

After lingering a while at the picnic, we packed up the car and were on our way back to Paris. Only the most observant bystander would have noticed that there were now only two young men and two young women in the car. Yoram was in the plane with Boris Senior en route to England.

A few hours later, a similar charade took place on a field in Kent. This time, instead of a clump of bushes, there was a thick wood at the edge of a field, and instead of a group of picnickers, there was a young couple in a car – the man was Ezer Weizmann and the young lady Deborah

Landman. The plane circled the field, touched down, and taxied toward the woods before taking off again minus a passenger.

Boris Senior proceeded to the airport at Lympe and registered his flight. By that time, Yoram was in the car traveling to London.

That evening, we celebrated the success of our operation in one of Paris' quieter restaurants. We had received a cable from London: "I am well. My influenza is gone and there are no symptoms. Kisses to all."

Yoram later reported from England that he had no great expectations of being able to do anything soon with the group of young people he had mobilized and was training. Their ability to act was severely limited because of the measures adopted by Scotland Yard. Members of the British contingent were followed at every step. Yoram found it difficult even to meet with them. He was forced to waste hours and invent all kinds of schemes for even the simplest contact. And then Yoram himself was arrested while returning from one of these meetings. The police found a forged identity card in his possession.

Thinking on his feet, Yoram argued convincingly that he was a German-Jewish refugee who had entered England illegally. Oddly enough, the detective bureau believed him. Apparently, they had never found out about his landing in a plane, or perhaps they did not want to publicize this fact for fear the country would panic at the thought of Jewish terrorists falling from the sky.

Yoram was sentenced to a short period in prison for illegal entry and then was sent back to one of the Jewish refugee camps in the British zone of Germany. Several days later, he escaped and crossed over to the American zone. A week later, we met in Paris.

There was no point in trying to fly him back to England.

Such an adventure is likely to succeed only once. Besides, we had already sold the plane, and by the time Yoram had returned to Paris, my own plans to enter England illegally were quite well advanced.

Forming a cell in England was one of our highest priorities, and I felt bound to assist personally in its establishment.

At the time, Robert Briscoe, later mayor of Dublin, visited us in Paris. Briscoe was a close friend of Eamon de Valera and had fought alongside the Irish leader in Eire's war of liberation. He was the only Jew in the Irish Parliament, and he was a man who commanded respect.

Briscoe was enthusiastic about the Jewish underground's struggle and did not conceal his sympathy for the Irgun. We spent hours with him in discussions about Eretz Israel and its future. Before he left Paris, I asked him to try to get me a visa for Ireland for the purpose of disseminating information and communicating with the Irish government. Briscoe promised to try to get the visa for me.

My plan was either to try to enter England through Ireland, passing from Eire to Northern Ireland and then to England, or else to approach smugglers and cross by boat directly to England.

Briscoe kept his word. About a month after his visit with us, he wrote me that the matter of my visa was arranged. I could obtain it at the Irish Consulate in Paris.

But my plan did not materialize, because my colleagues Eli, Sam Merlin, and Hillel Kook opposed it. We brought the matter before the Irgun High Command in Eretz Israel, and from there we received specific instructions that the plan was to be cancelled and that I was to remain in France.

26

Literature, Philanthropy and the Rhetoric of War

At the end of April 1947, Arthur Koestler, the Hungarian-born Jewish novelist, came to Paris. Eri Jabotinsky, who had befriended Koestler some years previously while Koestler was writing *Thieves In The Night*,[1] suggested that I meet with them both for a "noncommittal" discussion.

When Eri and I arrived at the appointed cafe, Koestler was already sitting there with a lady. Eri managed to whisper to me that the lady was the author's British wife, a gentile. I had not been told that she would be present, and was taken aback. Given the secrecy of our operations, was it prudent to meet with an Englishwoman? But it was too late to retreat. Eri introduced me as Binyamin and told me in Hebrew that there was nothing to fear. I could feel at ease with the Koestlers; they were trustworthy.

I was amazed at the vast contrast between Koestler and his wife. She was charming and delicate of feature, while Koestler seemed very much the East European anarchist.

He was a well-informed conversationalist, alert and

interested in everything. His novel about the Arab-Israeli conflict, *Thieves in the Night*, had been published the previous year. His knowledge of Eretz Israel was amazing. He had spent three years there in the mid-twenties as a journalist and had an insider's comprehensive view of the goings-on behind the scenes in the Zionist world. In the course of our conversation, he told me many things I had not heard before.

His first question for me was, "What will you drink?" He himself had a glass of cognac in front of him.

I responded automatically, "A glass of tea."

Koestler stared at me as though I had uttered an obscenity. "A glass of tea?" he repeated.

"Yes, a glass of tea – and a cake," I added.

"What kind of terrorist are you if you don't order cognac?" Perhaps you will, after all, have something stronger than tea."

I thanked him and said that I still had a long night ahead of me and could not indulge.

His disappointment was obvious.

Koestler then asked me for details of my escape from Eritrea. I was shocked that he even knew about it. He explained that Eri had already related the story to him, but he had not been able to imagine it properly without hearing all the details firsthand.

Instinctively I glanced at Koestler's wife.

"Don't worry," he said. "I give you my word that you are among friends. Believe me, my wife understands you much better than you understand the British."

Mrs. Koestler also added some warm words and asked for my trust. So I submitted to a cross-examination.

Here, Koestler the writer took over bombarding me with questions. He unearthed the minutest details about each event and every step. He demanded descriptions of people I had met, their voices, their behavior, their mannerisms.

He quizzed me about matters that I myself had already forgotten. The nature of his questioning convinced me that I had nothing to fear. I was sitting before a master who was gathering material for his next work.

When we rose from the table two hours later, I was completely drained. I had never been interrogated like that before. Koestler put all the policemen and detectives in my past to shame. He shook my hand warmly, saying that he hoped to spend yet another evening with me "to discuss your war." He then invited me to the home of Baron Guy de Rothschild.

I asked how he could invite me to someone else's home. Koestler explained that the Baron was his good friend and that he was received in the Rothschild home like a member of the family. He assured me that the Rothschilds would be happy to meet me and that I would feel at ease among them. But there was one condition. I must promise to drink something stronger than tea. I promised, and we parted amiably.

A few days later, as soon as the news of the liberation of Acre prisoners became public, my telephone rang. It was Koestler. He demanded that I come see him at once.

I said that I was busy and had no time. Perhaps we could make an appointment in the evening.

But Koestler would not take no for an answer. He had to see me at once, that very moment. He pleaded, "Have you not read the papers? I must see you!"

So I went. Koestler was in an exuberant mood, as he waited for me in his room. On his table were several half-empty bottles of cognac and some sandwiches.

He shook my hand excitedly.

"You don't appreciate what you've done!" he bellowed. "This is the mightiest operation in the history of all underground movements. Napoleon himself was unable to

conquer Acre, the fortress that had never been breached by anyone. And now your boys have broken through and captured it with one fell blow. This shall be the turning point. You have defeated the British Empire!"

He poured a glass of cognac and served me. "Let us drink to the conquerors of Acre and to your victory!"

As we parted, he told me that I was invited to the Rothschild home on the following evening. He reminded me that I had promised to drink with him there, adding that we would discuss "serious matters."

When I arrived at the Rothschild's house, Koestler and his wife were already sitting in the living room. There were also some other people whose names I do not recall. Koestler and Guy de Rothschild received me warmly and brought me into the salon.

Matters pertinent to Eretz Israel immediately became the chief topics of conversation. Questions began to rain down upon me. How did this or that event happen, and why did it happen? A debate ensued. Was the underground's war justifiable? What were the ultimate goals of our activities?

Two issues were foremost. First, what would be the "end"? How did we visualize the development of events and the conclusion of our war? And secondly, why did we not coordinate our activities with those of the Haganah? What were the chances of peace between the two antagonists?

These matters were well known to every schoolchild in Eretz Israel, but were apparently not understood by the society of the Rothschilds.

My reply to the first question was that we were determined to fight until the ouster of the British. This was a foregone conclusion. We would not give the British in Eretz Israel any respite. There would be no compromises.

To the second question, too, I gave our well-known reply: "We are prepared to join forces, we wish to do so,

and we are even ready to serve under the Haganah – but on one condition. They must participate in the battle or at least leave us to fight unhindered."

Rothschild was enthusiastic about the idea of "domestic peace." He announced his readiness to devote himself personally to achieving this end by going to Eretz Israel, America, or anywhere else to mediate between the parties and achieve a reconciliation. He spoke with great enthusiasm and emotion.

However, I realized that their zeal was naive and their goals were unrealistic. I was well aware of the efforts that had already been invested in trying to unite the two main factions of the underground, and I knew how abortive these efforts had been. I tried to explain to the Rothschilds why there was no unity and no peace among the Jews in Eretz Israel. Thanking my hosts for their wish to contribute to the achievement of unity, I stressed that no one was more interested in this than the Irgun. While, for the Rothschilds, peace in Israel was an academic question, for the members of our organization it was a matter of life and death.

I explained that we were prepared to forego all political benefits of a victory over the British – and that we had explained this to the Haganah many times. The Irgun was organized solely for the overthrow of British rule in Eretz Israel. Once the British were gone, we would live and fight under the command of the democratically elected government; but we had no interest in continuing with the Haganah's present agenda – futile diplomatic negotiations, endless propaganda, and testimony before numerous commissions of inquiry. For us, there was only one road to Israeli sovereignty. We would continue to fight, whatever price we had to pay.

After this long speech, I gazed around at my audience wondering if I had spoken too passionately.

Nevertheless, I concluded in a gentler tone. We wel-

comed every additional effort to make peace between us and the Haganah and were willing to give Baron de Rothschild the power of attorney to act as mediator between the two factions.

Despite my faulty English, my words seemed to have made an impression on my hosts. Guy de Rothschild announced that he intended to help achieve a reconciliation and invited me to visit him again in a few days.

Once more, about eight people sat in the elegant Rothschild salon, while the butler scurried about serving refreshments.

Arthur Koestler was the chief speaker at this next session. He spoke of the war of the underground in Eretz Israel, emphasizing that he himself was nonpartisan. The Jews were entitled to the land of Israel, he said, because this was the natural and most suitable solution. He did not regard the "terrorist" way as either natural or suitable; but he understood perfectly that these young men, whose patience had been exhausted, no longer trusted in peaceful solutions, seeing only one way to achieve their goal. He asserted that all those present felt at least this degree of understanding for the men of the underground.

Everyone nodded in assent. Then Koestler lauded the idealism, the sacrifice, and the courage of the fighting Jewish youth. He could not join in rhetoric that called these youths "gangsters," "criminals," and the like. After receiving the approval of the assembled company on this point as well, he presented a practical proposal.

Koestler thought that influential and famous world personalities should demonstrate their empathy for the Jewish fighters in some way. These brave youths could not be abandoned to the defamation of their enemies who were trying to slander them before the entire world.

"We should publish an international declaration stating

that men of the fighting underground of Eretz Israel are young idealists who have volunteered to serve their people in the way they see fit," suggested Koestler. "Men of distinction should sign such a declaration, in which only one point would be made: these young Jewish fighters are brave martyrs for a national cause."

Koestler suggested that a planning committee be formed then and there, including himself and the Baron. They would appeal to all men of renown throughout the world: scientists, artists, writers, statesmen, economists – even distinguished military commanders. All would be pressured to sign this declaration. The committee would also appeal to "concerned parties" – the British themselves – to do everything in their power to find a peaceful solution to the problem of Eretz Israel.

Koestler concluded and then waited for the reactions of others in the room. Most everyone accepted the idea in principle, but an argument erupted about how to implement the plan. What if, for instance, Einstein refused to sign? What if Jewish institutions opposed the idea? The group brought up other practical considerations as well.

Someone suggested that the committee should first consult those who were directly involved, whereupon every eye turned toward me. I had been sitting silently all along without participating in this discussion, hoping to remain on the sidelines.

What could I say? Obviously, such a positive worldwide declaration would be a moral victory for our ostracized, persecuted, and castigated young men; but I had to tell the assembled company that I did not see much practical value in their proposed declaration. It would only confirm the sympathies of those who were already sympathetic to our cause, but it would hold no weight with the British.

I spoke with some trepidation in such distinguished company, but I spoke from my heart. "We have lost faith

in these methods. Perhaps you will judge us as desperate men. The simple truth is that we see no recourse but war."

Nevertheless, before that night's gathering ended, I urged Koestler to compose the declaration and try to carry out his plan; but apparently my argument had been even more convincing than I had intended. Koestler sailed away a few days later. That was the last I heard about an international declaration of sympathy for the Jewish freedom fighters.

I continued to meet with Baron Guy de Rothschild even after Arthur Koestler left France. He was troubled because the dissension between the Haganah and the Irgun had increased.

In September 1947, Shmuel Katz again arrived in Paris; and together we visited the Rothschild home, dining *en famille*. The Baron told us that he had approached circles within the Jewish Agency and the Haganah demanding that they initiate practical steps toward peace between the rival camps. In those days, Rothschild stood at the head of the Haganah's fund-raising drive in France and could have exerted considerable pressure on Agency leaders; but he did not take advantage of his position. Influential French Jews did, however, congregate around him with the demand that an agreement be reached between the Haganah and the Irgun. The Baron sent letters to Eretz Israel, even appealing directly to Ben Gurion. Maurice Fischer, who was the Jewish Agency's representative in Paris and later became the first Israeli ambassador to France, arranged two meetings between Rothschild and Ben Gurion.

I do not know the direct consequences of Baron Rothschild's diplomatic efforts. However, at the beginning of 1948, a settlement was reached between the Haganah, the Irgun, and LEHI. The apparent reason for this agreement – which was, alas, only temporary – was that the war with

the Arabs had begun. But I have no doubt that Guy de Rothschild's efforts had some influence on the Agency's sudden willingness to enter into negotiations.

True to its ancestral traditions, the Rothschild family donated vast amounts to Jewish and non-Jewish institutions. We alone had asked nothing of him nor did we request to meet with him. It seems that Baron Rothschild appreciated this. For our part, we appreciated his peace-making efforts in Eretz Israel.

Regretfully, the Jewish leaders in Eretz Israel did not achieve harmonious relations with the underground movements.

27

The Scientific Council

Yirmiyahu Helpern, known to his friends as Irma, had been sent from Eretz Israel to head the Paris office of the *Hebrew Committee for National Liberation* after its head, Sam Merlin, returned to the United States.

One day in late November 1947, Irma told me that a delegation of prominent scientists was coming from the United States to France for a joint meeting on technical military innovations. At its head was Michael (Misha) Yardeni, a Jewish engineer whom Irma knew well. He thought that Misha was sympathetic to the Irgun underground and might be willing to assist in our war of liberation as much as his official status in France would allow.

When the delegation arrived, Irma went to meet Misha in the hotel and returned with the happy news that his hopes had been justified. The three of us subsequently met for several hours in the Bois de Boulogne. Misha was restless, short and broad-shouldered, with a quick mind and a friendly manner. He had joined a Zionist youth group in

Russia, the land of his birth. After the Bolshevik revolution, he decided to make his way to Eretz Israel with a group of young Zionist *chalutzim* (pioneers). Their plan was to cross the border from the Caucasus into Turkey. At the beginning of their trek, Misha injured his foot along the high mountain trails and had to be left behind. He was saved by a group of Ossetians, who took him to their village and nursed him. Eventually, he was able to join another group of *chalutzim*, and finally reached Eretz Israel. There he met Irma, and they became close friends.

In college, Misha excelled in mathematics; but his studies were interrupted when he was seriously injured by Arab attackers during the 1921 riots. After months of hospitalization and recovery, he went to Paris and enrolled at the Sorbonne. After a successful career in science in France, Misha escaped when the Nazis entered Paris and found his way to the U.S. He again built a successful career in industry, and eventually returned to Paris as the distinguished head of an American scientific delegation staying at the elegant Ritz Hotel in Place Vendome.

Our next meeting with Misha took place in his suite at the Ritz. When Irma asked him why he had not extended more active help to Eretz Israel, Misha was incensed. He told us how he had tried to help the Haganah in the United States, but they had not taken his overtures seriously. They had not even kept their appointments with him.

We discussed the situation in Eretz Israel – this was several days after the announcement of the U.N. partition plan – and the prospects of war with the Arab states. Misha asked how he could help.

Irma told Misha about his idea for a joint U.S.-French organization of Jewish scientists and engineers that would serve in an advisory capacity to the embattled *Yishuv* in Eretz Israel and the soldiers in the Diaspora. Through this plan, Jewish technological know-how could partly compensate

for Arab superiority in numbers. Irma convincingly argued that Misha was uniquely qualified to set up such a group.

Misha pledged to do everything in his power to help us but on one condition. He insisted that a representative of the Haganah also be a member of our technological "brain trust." "I don't want to deal with the problem of who is right," he told us. "What we do will be neither for the Haganah nor the Irgun, but rather for Eretz Israel."

The Haganah's representative in France at that time was a fellow named Weiss. Our personal relations were quite friendly, despite the discord between our organizations. I approached Weiss with Irma's idea, suggesting that we become partners in the "exploitation" of these scientists and engineers. I do not recall how much time passed; but at our next meeting, Weiss brought a positive reply from Jewish Agency leaders.

Because the Scientific Council was to be politically neutral, each of its members would know that he was collaborating with representatives of two bodies – the Haganah and the Irgun – and that his aid would be used by both groups according to their needs. Each body would be free to present special requests to the Council. For example, the Irgun needed a high powered broadcasting station, and we requested that one be assembled for us. The Haganah representative asked for help in acquiring some instruments that were difficult to obtain. Thus, we took pains to prevent rivalry among people whose mutual interest was to aid the Jewish community in Eretz Israel in its struggle for survival.

Misha was the catalyst in the formation of our Scientific Council, which was comprised of about a dozen of France's preeminent scientists. No less important than their intellectual distinction was their vast network of connections: a telephone call placed by one of them could accomplish what might have taken us months of sweat and toil.

Our meetings were held at 18 Avenue de Messine, the

elegant headquarters of the Hebrew Committee for National Liberation. Irma and I represented the Irgun, while Weiss was there to represent the interests of the Haganah. At our first meeting, Irma surveyed the political situation and morale in Eretz Israel. He had mastered French and spoke with both passion and eloquence. He warned the group of distinguished Frenchmen that there would soon be a bloody confrontation between the Arab states and the Jewish community. The Arabs held all the military advantages in sheer numbers, in equipment, in strategic locations, and in armed forces. The regular Arab armies had heavy armaments in abundance and were operating under the tutelage of ex-Nazi officers with the overt support of Great Britain. The Jews had nothing more than light armaments, a spirit of sacrifice, and a higher level of education.

Apparently, this introduction communicated a sense of urgency to these men. One of the scientists called out, "*Alors*!" as if to say: "If this is the case, then what are we waiting for?"

"Fortunately, we have one military advantage over the Arabs," continued Irma, pausing for dramatic effect. "We have no place to retreat to. We must win – or be exterminated!"

Everyone smiled wryly upon hearing of this "military advantage."

It was still necessary for Irma to convince the French scientists that helping us was also in the interest of their own country. He explained that the establishment of a Jewish state in the Middle East was terribly important to France. If the Jews were defeated, the French would remain alone in the Middle East to face the Moslem world. With this final reassurance, the men of the newly convened Scientific Council unanimously pledged their support. We then began the practical discussions of the aid that would be rendered.

Since it was obvious that we could not mobilize a

conventional army, we asked the members of the Council to develop military tools for us that would be simple, portable, and relatively inexpensive. With the pending Arab onslaught, we needed devices that could be made available immediately.

Someone at that first meeting suggested the use of "battle recordings." These are specially engineered phonograph records that authentically reproduce the sounds of artillery, aerial bombardment, machine gun fire, and hand grenade explosions – in short, all the mechanical sounds of war. Such recordings had apparently been used during World War II and had succeeded in confounding the enemy.

All of us approved of the suggestion. The Arabs would be fair game for such recordings which would suddenly "bombard" them some night while our military units actually mounted an attack in another sector.

A grand piano in the hall became an instant drafting board for our inventors. An hour later, they laid before us a complete plan for the new instrument. It would be small and efficient and could be assembled in short order.

Several days later, we listened to the "battle" record. There was such a loud thundering that a crowd gathered outside. A policeman appeared in the building to ask whether cannons were being fired and whether a permit had been obtained.

The Scientific Council helped us in other ways as well. When we were offered walkie-talkies and the like on the black market, we would take one as a sample and ask the Council's advice about its worth.

The Council proved of great use to us up until the last moment when Irgun operations in Paris were dissolved.

28

Contact with the Catholic Church

One would think that the Catholic Church would be the least likely collaborator with such a Jewish underground organization as Irgun Zvai Leumi. Nevertheless, Irma told me that he wanted to contact the Vatican for the purpose of negotiating a treaty of friendship between the Vatican and the Jewish community in Eretz Israel. I was surprised at the strange idea; but after I thought it over, I saw that it was politically logical. At any rate, I saw no harm in trying.

Irma secured introductions to two of France's well-known Catholic priests. They had been famous Maquis fighters during the war and both had refused appointments to high Church positions; but their influence was greater than that of any cardinal. One was a Jesuit and the other a Franciscan.

The Jesuit, Father Rique, was the prelate of Notre Dame Cathedral and one of the most popular orators in France. His sermons were broadcast on the radio, translated into many

languages, and published in pamphlets by the millions. Father Rique had direct connections with the Holy See in Rome. According to Irma, he had refused to accept titles bestowed by the Vatican for fear they would estrange him from the masses. He considered himself to be a "foot soldier" of the Catholic Church, yet at the same time served as personal religious tutor and father confessor to the Premier of France, Paul Ramadier.

Irma was invited to a gala state dinner at which Father Rique was presiding. On this occasion, they laid the groundwork for further personal contacts between them, which proved to be most useful.

In the beginning of 1948, Yaakov Amrami (Yoel), a member of the Irgun High Command, was in Paris organizing the shipment of armaments to Eretz Israel. Shortly after his arrival, he was caught by the police in one of our arms warehouses, along with Yaakov Lotan and Joe Cohen. The police discovered a large quantity of arms and ammunition, and all three men were arrested. This was a devastating blow for us, especially since the French government had mostly turned a blind eye to our operations.

We decided to seek the aid of Father Rique in freeing Yoel and the two others. Irma accompanied the priest to a Russian restaurant in Montparnasse called *Dominique*, where Irma – much truer to the stereotype of an underground fighter than I – consumed an entire bottle of vodka by himself. This was his first opportunity to indoctrinate Father Rique about the Irgun, our work in Europe, and our future plans. Irma concluded his speech with the tale of our imprisoned comrades. Father Rique listened intently and asked probing questions all the while.

Suddenly, he excused himself from the table and left to make a phone call. When he sat down again, he said that he had spoken to the Premier of France and had made a dinner

appointment at the latter's home "where various problems would be discussed."

Irma returned from this meeting confident that Father Rique would arrange for the release of our men. I myself was not as optimistic and continued our efforts through other channels. It is still not clear who our redeemer was, but the fact remains that Yoel and the others were released three weeks after their arrest without going to trial and without restrictions on travel.

In such cases, it is naturally difficult to determine which push on the button produced the desired result. At any rate, I recall that several days after their meeting, Irma phoned Father Rique, who told him that he had reason to believe that the three men would be released from prison soon.

A few days after their release, Irma again phoned Father Rique to thank him for his help. The priest declined to accept the credit, merely remarking that he recalled with pleasure the fine meal they had had together at *Dominique*; and that he never would forget the amount of "Russian spirits" Irma had consumed without coming to any harm.

Father Bonaventure, of the Franciscan Order, was perhaps less prominent than Father Rique, less imposing in his appearance and manner, but more a man of the people. He was younger and simpler than the ultra-sophisticated prelate of Notre Dame. Father Bonaventure sported five rows of colorful campaign ribbons on the front of his brown habit, decorations for his service during World War II. He also was a hero of the French underground.

Like Father Rique, the Franciscan had also declined titles offered by the Vatican but, nevertheless, was an important Catholic figure both in France and Rome. Irma met Father Bonaventure and laid before him his plan for a treaty of friendship between the Vatican and the future State of Israel.

Until then, the Vatican had been hostile to Jewish na-

tional aspirations. Representatives of the Holy See had actually joined in spreading anti-Zionist propaganda among the Moslems in Europe and the Middle East. The Vatican was carefully avoiding any friendly contact with the Jewish community lest they be suspected of pro-Zionism.

Irma argued for Jewish-Catholic solidarity based on the plight of the Christian minorities in Arab countries.

"The question is not," said Irma, "whether Judaism is loved or hated by the Vatican. Fate has bound up our communities in the Middle East for better or worse. The Christian minorities depend for their lives upon the existence of two states: one, a Jewish state within the territory of Eretz Israel, and the other, a Christian state in Lebanon. If these two states were to unite – or if there were at least economic, military, and political ties between them – then it would be possible to defend all the minorities in the region and to establish peace and harmony between ourselves and the Moslems.

The priest listened attentively.

"In the very near future," said Irma, "we shall face the Arab states in a decisive battle. The Arabs are supported by the British. One of their leaders is the Mufti, Haj Amin Al Husseini, a Moslem fanatic and a collaborator with Hitler during World War II. Let us suppose for a moment that the Arabs and the British succeed in annihilating the Jews of Eretz Israel. All Husseini's hatred will then turn upon the Christian 'infidel' in his land."

After duly impressing Father Bonaventure with the weight and passion of his argument, Irma pressed for a change in Vatican policy toward the Jews of Eretz Israel. He asked for diplomatic aid and support in those lands where we would be seeking to raise volunteers and arms to send them to the defense of the Jewish community in Eretz Israel.

"And what will become of the Holy sites under a Jewish administration?" asked the Father.

"If this question was not pertinent during years of fanatical Moslem rule, why should you be concerned about it under the protection of a Jewish State?"

Father Bonaventure cogitated for a while. "It is no easy matter to meet with the Holy Father in Rome. Do not delude yourself into thinking that I see him every Monday and Thursday. The path to his door is long – but we shall try...."

Irma, the consummate diplomat, said that if an audience could be obtained at the Vatican, he fervently hoped Father Bonaventure would accompany him to Rome as well as to Jerusalem.

At this, the priest's eyes lit up. "Do you hear the ring of those two words, Rome and Jerusalem?" He was silent for a moment. "This has been my life's dream. You are not a religious man, Monsieur Halprin. You cannot understand what a man like myself feels at the sound of the word `Jerusalem'!"

He then turned to practical matters. "We must meet with two personages. One is my friend, the President of France, the other is the Vatican's ambassador in France, his Excellency the Papal Nuncio."

Before the week had passed, Father Bonaventure notified Irma that the Papal Nuncio had agreed to grant him an audience in a few days. But a problem arose that none of us had anticipated.

"Do you know," Father Bonaventure asked Irma, "that according to custom you will be obliged to kiss His Excellency's hand or, at the very least, the ring on his hand? It cannot be otherwise."

Irma said that, even though he was not religious, such a gesture would be impossible for him.

"I knew that would be your reply," said the priest. "But you must consider the circumstances. I myself shall be there to introduce you to His Excellency. There will be great

confusion if, instead of kissing his hand, you say, `How do you do?' Such a scandal has never been visited on a Nuncio before. It will be a dishonor to the Church."

"Nevertheless," said Irma, "I cannot go through with it."

After a moment's hesitation, Father Bonaventure replied, "Well, do as you must. I'll introduce you and what will be, will be. God will help us!"

We received a detailed report from Irma about this meeting. In the waiting room of the Papal Nuncio sat Father Bonaventure, in his brown priestly habit, with the representative of the Irgun Zvai Leumi, Irma, in a dark blue suit. Former rulers of the Vatican and mythical heroes of the Church looked down upon them through heavy frames from walls decorated with sixteenth century tapestries. An enormous crystal chandelier hung from the magnificent ceiling. Heavy oak furnishings and Persian carpets completed the picture.

The Papal Nuncio's secretary politely invited them to accompany him up to the second floor, where they were ushered into a spacious room.

The Nuncio sat behind his desk. He was a stout man of about 60 years of age with small clever eyes and a wide brow. He was dressed in all the finery of his office.

When the Nuncio extended his hand, Irma merely pressed it, murmuring the conventional French words for meeting personages of high rank. Both Irma and the simple priest braced themselves for the Nuncio's reaction. But suddenly his features broke into an amused smile.

Father Bonaventure quickly knelt and kissed the Nuncio's hand. Both visitors were invited to sit down.

"You are from the Holy Land as I understand," said the Nuncio to Irma.

"Yes, your Excellency."

"And how does one feel when treading the holy ground

where once trod the Nazerene?" This sentence was pronounced in fluent Hebrew.

"How is it that Your Excellency speaks Hebrew?" asked Irma naively.

"At the Vatican," said the Nuncio, "all of us study the language of the Bible. This is required learning, just as Latin is required. I have mastered Hebrew, but speech is difficult for me. I lack experience." He returned to French.

"Explain one thing to me," he said to Irma. "Explain the one matter that I cannot comprehend at all. Why have you rejected Jesus Christ? Was he not of your people? How important your position would be in the world today if you had followed in his footsteps! He was no stranger in your midst nor of an alien religion...."

Irma remembered that Weizmann and Sokolov had failed precisely at such a moment in a theological debate with the Pope in Rome during an official interview. The Pope had received the mistaken impression from the Zionist leaders that they sought to establish a "Jewish Vatican" within Jerusalem.

"Forgive me, your Excellency," said Irma, "but I must ask your permission to withdraw from a debate with you on this subject. My sword is too short to be crossed with that of one of the greatest theological swordsmen. If I were a rabbi, I would gladly accept this invitation to duel; but in comparison with Your Excellency's knowledge, I am an ignoramus and must shamefacedly raise both my hands in surrender before you even remove your sword from its scabbard!"

The Nuncio broke into laughter. "Very well, you may speak and I am ready to listen. I am sympathetic to the Jews, for I am aware of the great spiritual values they have created. By the way," he suddenly recalled, "you simply must meet with one Jew, an ardent nationalist and Zionist whose religion is Catholic. He is of our priesthood, and is

on a mission to the holy city of Jerusalem. You have no idea how much trouble he is causing me. Only yesterday, the British ambassador called on me to complain bitterly about him. It seems that he is making extreme patriotic speeches and in his sermons he calls for the establishment of a Jewish State. The British ambassador claims that this priest's propaganda is causing much unpleasantness with the Arabs. He is an excellent man, erudite, and highly valued by the Vatican, but I don't know what to do with him. After all, we can't be hearing complaints from the British ambassador day after day. What do you think about this? What would you do in my place?" asked the Nuncio with laughter in his eyes.

Irma took advantage of this opportunity to change the subject by drawing a connection between the occasion of his audience and the question His Excellency had just put before him. "In my opinion, it is necessary to send reinforcements to that priest in Jerusalem. It is important to enable him to deliver his sermons not only in his name, but in the name of the Vatican as well. The British must be made to understand, and the Arabs should be apprised, that the Vatican openly supports the establishment of a Jewish State, since this is ultimately in the Vatican's best interest."

"And why, in your opinion, should the Vatican favor a Jewish State?" asked the Nuncio, stealing a glance at Father Bonaventure.

Here the priest intervened to explain Irma's theory concerning the fate of the Christian minorities in the Middle East.

"There is some logic in what you say," said the Nuncio. "But what do you actually want?"

Irma was delighted with this directness. "We want you to enable us to have an audience with the Holy Father at the Vatican and to pave the way for that interview by recommendation, explanation, and support."

The Nuncio said he needed time to consider this proposal.

When the Nuncio rose, indicating that the audience was at an end, he did not extend his hand for a kiss but simply said to Irma in Hebrew, "Peace upon you and your people, Israel!"

The Nuncio himself was forbidden to speak on the phone; but a week later, his secretary phoned Irma at Irgun headquarters. "The Nuncio is pleased with your visit. He wishes to inform you that he has sent your memorandum to the Holy Father in Rome, together with his personal recommendation to grant you an audience."

The Irgun would have sent Irma to Rome for an audience with the Pope were it not for the intervention of fate. The conflagration in Eretz Israel erupted into actual warfare, the Irgun in the Diaspora was transferring all of its men and arms to the front. Two weeks before the scheduled audience at the end of May 1948, most of the Irgun staff, including Irma, returned home to the fledgling State of Israel.

29

Strange Bedfellows

One evening in the winter of 1947, Avraham Stavsky (Abrasha), a member of the *Hebrew Committee for National Liberation*, was returning to his flat in Manhattan when he bumped into someone at the entrance. The man stopped in surprise and called to him by his familiar name, Abrasha. The stranger, who was Polish, recalled their acquaintance in Warsaw in 1938-39, when Abrasha was organizing clandestine Jewish immigration to Eretz Israel. The stranger had been a high-ranking official in Poland whose office dealt with exit visas. He had befriended Abrasha and aided him in his cause.

Abrasha invited him up to his apartment, and they began to reminisce over a glass of tea. In the course of their conversation, Abrasha revealed that he was still organizing Jewish immigration to Eretz Israel. Here the conversation swung to the underground's war with Britain. The guest expressed his great admiration for the Irgun, complimented its fighters, and said that they had made a strong impression on the Polish authorities in Warsaw. He disclosed that he was still in the service of his country, despite the change

in regime. He was in the United States on a government mission and would soon return to Warsaw. Personally, he would be glad to help the Jews in their war in Eretz Israel and was convinced that his government would also be pleased to do so. He advised Abrasha to suggest to the Irgun High Command that they contact representatives of the Polish government.

Abrasha took the hint, replying that he himself was not authorized to enter into any negotiations but that he would pass the word on to the Irgun's representatives in Europe.

Several days later, Abrasha was notified by his Polish benefactor of the presence of two men in Paris who would meet with representatives of the Irgun. They chose a password, and Abrasha himself traveled to Europe to apprise us of the situation. He stressed that though he himself despised the communists and did not trust them, he was confident that the man who had met him in New York could be trusted.

I had asked Abrasha to inform the Polish representatives that our conversations would be held in Russian, a language that was convenient for me and probably for them as well.

When Abrasha and I arrived at the cafe appointed for our meeting, the two men were already waiting. They did not look like diplomats or politicians, but rather like low-level secret agents. Their clothes were cheap and ill-made, shirts gray and crumpled, ties old and stained. One was lean and tall, the other of medium height, both black-haired. The tall one introduced himself as Vladimir, the other as Yanik. With some irony, I introduced myself as Ben Zion – their names were about as authentic as mine, and they knew it.

The one who called himself Vladimir spoke first. He said that he had heard much about the Irgun in Eretz Israel and was pleased to meet its representatives. Suddenly he asked, "Do you represent LEHI and the Haganah as well?"

So, he knew and wanted us to know that he was aware

of some of the subtleties of our situation. When I replied that no person could represent all three of those bodies at once, Vladimir relaxed but was taken aback when I asked if he was representing only the Polish authorities or the Russians as well. He replied explicitly that he had no connection with and no authority to speak for the USSR. He was representing only the Polish government.

This was merely a preliminary meeting to enable both sides to put out some feelers. We made a date for the next day in another cafe.

The next day, we got down to business. Vladimir announced that he was not authorized to carry on comprehensive political negotiations but could only clarify some principles on which negotiations might be based. If both sides could find a basis for serious and detailed negotiations, our representatives would be invited to Warsaw to continue talks with the proper authorities.

"What principles would be the basis of our negotiations?" I asked.

"That's simple," answered Vladimir. "You understand that nothing in the political world is given gratis. The question is, would you be prepared to pay the price, and what do you want for it?"

"It would be easy for me to tell you what we want, since I know what we need for our war; but regarding payment, let us be frank. Everyone tries to pay the lowest price. What would be the minimum required of us for the maximum we would receive?"

Vladimir grinned, then asked simply, "What do you want?"

I replied, "Arms, initially. At least a sufficient amount to equip one division. Bases for training and concentrating men in order to organize them and send them to Eretz Israel. A port in one of the countries of the 'popular democracies' from which to sail. Now, what do you want in return?"

Vladimir betrayed no emotion. My demands obviously did not surprise him. He commented that Poland had no port on the Mediterranean, but he hoped that this problem could be overcome by negotiations in Warsaw. As for the Polish demands upon us, they wanted military and political information on the British and American armed forces in the Middle East, important army installations, air fields, troop movements, naval strength, and similar information concerning the allied armies in the area of Eretz Israel.

I smiled and said to him, "You want us to become instrumental in preparing for World War III – a catastrophe which we Jews fear more than any other nation in the world?"

"And what sort of return did you think we would want? Money in payment for arms? Prayers for our welfare? Editorials in your newspapers?" He became angry.

"Gospodin Vladimir," I countered, "There seems to be a basic misunderstanding between us. We shall never agree to be agents of a foreign power, even if the information pertains only to the British with whom we are at war. We have amassed information on British installations, but it is for our use alone. No state in the world will receive information from us that will pave the way for World War III. If this is the only basis for our dialogue, it is a waste of time."

"Nevertheless, what is the payment you would offer for all that you demand? Did you not agree that politics is not philanthropy, that it's all based on `tit for tat'? Why, then, do you ask for so much without being ready to pay for it?"

"Our payment is our blood," I said quietly. "You have admired our war with the British. You are interested in our winning and driving them out of Eretz Israel. We are doing so with the blood of our finest youth, with the agony of our entire people. Isn't that payment enough for the arms and other material that you may give us? If, as I presume,

the expulsion of the British is in your interests, you can achieve your aims with some material, while we must spill our blood and bring destruction to our settlements before we win. Isn't it clear that your remuneration is infinitely more valuable than the value of the merchandise we seek?"

Vladimir fell silent, considering the situation. Suddenly he said, "Well, let us suppose you receive all you demand from us and we demand nothing in return. What assurance do we have that one day if we – or our ally, the USSR – are attacked, you won't turn on us with the very weapons we gave you?"

This made my blood boil. "What assurance do we have that you would not present double the amount of arms to the Arabs tomorrow and incite them against us? Is it possible to offer guarantees of this kind? Did the United States demand guarantees from Russia that the arms they sent her for the war against Hitler would not later be used against the United States? And if they had indeed received such guarantees, what would they be worth today? I know only one thing, that a nation fighting for its independence will be grateful to those who came to her aid in her time of need. You must trust our nation never to forget your help!"

Vladimir asked no more questions. He promised to inform Warsaw of our position and to notify us when he received a reply probably within a week. He would call the offices on Avenue de Messine and ask for Ben Zion.

Warsaw's response was an icy silence.

A curious political contact came from the Basque underground. It was the beginning of 1948. Two men appeared one day at our headquarters and introduced themselves as authorized representatives of the Basque underground of Spain. They wanted to speak with representatives of the Irgun Zvai Leumi to discuss "serious matters" and propose

practical plans. Eri Jabotinsky joined me for the meeting to serve as translator, as my French was still rudimentary.

The two men were middle-aged, serious, their manner indicating many years of hardship in the underground with little success.

They opened with compliments to the Irgun in Eretz Israel and admiration for the skill, heroism, and professional standards of our fighters. The Basques had decided to come to us for advice and assistance.

"What do you actually want?" I asked.

It came out that they wanted the Irgun to send some instructors to teach their comrades the ways of the military underground. In return, the Irgun would receive aid in our arms purchases. If the Irgun wished to smuggle any men or material across their borders, the Basques could help us. They also believed that Jews should be interested in bringing down the fascist regime in Spain, because if Basques ascended to power, their government would be an ally to Israel.

They spoke quietly, unemotionally, without melodrama. When one concluded his remarks, the other added some details; and when both of them finished speaking, they waited patiently for our response.

Fate had dealt unkindly with the Basques; but, despite all my sympathies for a foreign underground, I was obliged to refuse our help. I explained that although I, individually, shared their pain and admired their goals, our organization could not become involved in an internal matter in a foreign state. It was against our political principles to do so.

We had no wish to acquire additional enemies among foreign countries who had no direct connection with our war in Eretz Israel. Furthermore, we were not "guns for hire." We were not terrorist mercenaries. Our men were fighting solely to fulfill our national aspirations.

The Basques listened politely to Eri's translation of my

words. Their careworn faces betrayed no surprise. Finally, the elder said that he was very sorry about our refusal, but he understood and appreciated our reasoning.

We never saw them again.

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The French Connection

Without France's assistance and its tolerance toward all our activities within its territories, it is doubtful whether we could have succeeded in developing so extensive a network in the Diaspora in such a relatively short time.

Of course, France was actually pursuing its own political objectives in the Middle East by supporting us. We felt obliged, nonetheless, to refrain from assaulting the British on French soil. After the bombing of the British embassy in Rome, this unspoken promise was crucial to our relationship with the French. We were permitted to operate freely within France without our activities being scrutinized for strict adherence to the law. There was never a formal agreement between the Government of France and the Irgun. Rather we had a gentlemen's agreement that was maintained scrupulously by both sides.

A short time after I arrived in Paris from Djibouti, I

received a letter from a friend in Addis Ababa in which he informed me that a group of five men – Yaakov Meridor, Aryeh Ben-Eliezer, Reuven Franko, my friend Rahamim Mizrahi, all of the Irgun, and Yitzhak Yezernitzky (now Shamir, who became Prime Minister of Israel) of LEHI – had successfully escaped from the internment camp in Asmara. The composition of this group of fugitives excited us, for we knew that they would immeasurably strengthen our team and help to expand our work in the Diaspora.

The letter gave no details about where the men were hidden. I dispatched a letter to Addis Ababa requesting information and offering help. Meanwhile, we began to work with the French authorities to assure our comrades a safe haven in French territory.

This was granted with no difficulty. The authorities promised us that as soon as our comrades reached any country under French jurisdiction, they would be regarded as political refugees and would not be extradited.

We decided to send an emissary to Asmara, Theodore Ben Nahum, an American citizen who was on his way anyway to Africa and would meet our comrades to plan the necessary steps for their rescue.

Several weeks elapsed before Ben Nahum flew to Asmara. After his arrival, we learned that our comrades had already crossed the Ethiopian border from Eritrea and were in Addis Ababa. While our emissary was in Addis Ababa, he helped arrange the transport of Ben-Eliezer and Yezernitzky to Djibouti in French Somaliland in a freight car. However, the assurances we had received in Paris apparently were not communicated to the local French authorities; because when our comrades arrived in Djibouti, policemen were waiting for them and arrested them at once.

Now their fate was in the hands of the governor of French Somaliland. Ben-Eliezer and Yezernitzky learned that the governor was a personal friend of the British

consul in Djibouti. The governor yielded to the demand of the British consul that the two men be turned over to the authorities at the border of British Somaliland. After many efforts, Aryeh Ben-Eliezer succeeded in persuading the French officer, who was in charge of the escort party which was to escort them to the British border, to arrange a meeting with Djibouti's only attorney.

As a result, the attorney got in touch with the prosecutor general of French Somaliland, who demanded that the two prisoners be detained in Djibouti. He argued that they had entered French Somaliland illegally and had to stand trial there.

The governor, who was openly pro-British, disagreed with the prosecutor and insisted that the two men be expelled. But the prosecutor general and the attorney, both former members of the French underground and sympathetic to the Jewish freedom movement, were adamant. They convinced the governor that he would be acting in contravention of his office if he turned the two men over without a trial.

That same day, our comrades sent us a telegram from Djibouti with a brief account of these events. We applied to the appropriate French officials in Paris to countermand the authority of the governor in Djibouti and remove the threat of extradition. The governor received a specific order not to act at all in the matter of the two fugitives without prior approval from Paris. In this conflict with the British, we gained the upper hand.

The two men were tried and sentenced to several months of imprisonment for entering the country illegally. In fact, Ben-Eliezer himself pleaded for the maximum sentence for this offense. He reasoned that imprisonment in Djibouti would delay their extradition, giving authorities in Paris adequate time to intervene.

Meanwhile, we were planning to get Meridor and his

friends out of Addis Ababa. After our success in flying Yoram from France to England, we decided to try that method again. We sat over maps of Africa day and night with a group of pilots including Boris Senior. We measured distances and searched for landing and fueling areas. The problems were complex. The plane would have to fly thousands of miles with as few stops as possible.

We planned the flight to take place exclusively over French colonies in northern and central Africa. Chad was the French territory nearest Ethiopia. The plane could fly from the border to Addis Ababa to pick up our friends; and as soon as the plane returned to Chad, our comrades could surrender to the French authorities if necessary. We had received a pledge in Paris that the fugitives would not be turned over to the British.

The *American League for a Free Palestine* in the United States found and purchased a suitable plane in Canada, and arranged for a professional pilot to fly it to Paris.

All this time, Yaakov Meridor and his comrades were dispatching letters and telegrams from Addis Ababa urging haste as the ring of their pursuers was tightening. Their hiding place was not well concealed, and they were likely to be arrested at any time.

When the airplane arrived in France, we discovered, to our dismay, that it required a complete overhaul. We added reserve fuel tanks to enable it to travel the requisite long distances without stopping. We also needed to arrange all the papers for transit through the various French colonies.

When all these preparations were finished in a flurry of activity, we suffered a totally unexpected blow. At the last moment, a tax official discovered some flaw in the plane's documentation and forbade its departure. We thought that perhaps the plane had been discovered by the British, who sought to foil the plan by influencing this clerk. On the other hand, the bureaucratic glitch may have been a routine

piece of bad luck. At any rate, we were again forced to wire Addis Ababa about yet another delay.

By the time we managed to have the restriction lifted from the plane's departure, our contacts in Addis Ababa notified us that our three comrades had been arrested by the Ethiopian authorities and had been returned to the detention camp relocated now in Kenya. Our grave error was in focusing exclusively on the daring flight plan to the neglect of any other. Yaakov Meridor has never forgiven us for this failure.

Meanwhile Ben-Eliezer and Yezernitzky had concluded their period of imprisonment in Djibouti. We knew it would be dangerous for them to simply board a passenger ship to Europe. The British were dogging their every step and would remove them from any ship passing through the Suez Canal.

We confided our troubles to the French authorities. After some hesitation, they consented to take them aboard one of their naval ships and transport them ostensibly as French military prisoners.

A week later, on May 1, 1948, we stood on the military wharf at Toulon while a French aircraft carrier *Dixmude* entered the port. Ben-Eliezer and Yezernitzky stood waving to us gaily from its deck, among hundreds of uniformed French officers and sailors.

PART FOUR

Altalena


ALTALENA VOYAGE
NORTH SEA
SWEDEN
DENMARK
BALTIC SEA
IRELAND
UNITED KINGDOM
London
NETHERLANDS
ATLANTIC OCEAN
POLAND
U.S.S.R.
GERMANY
BELGIUM
Paris
LUXEMBURG
CZECHOSLOVAKIA
AZOV SEA
FRANCE
Vienna
SWITZERLAND
AUSTRIA
HUNGARY
RUMANIA
ITALY
BLACK SEA
Port de Bouc
Marseilles
YUGOSLAVIA
SPAIN
PORTUGAL
CORSICA
ADRIATIC SEA
BULGARIA
TURKEY
Rome
ALBANIA
SARDINIA
AEGIAN SEA
GREECE
SICILY
CRETE
SYRIA
CYPRUS
LEBANON
IRAQ
MOROCCO
ALGERIA
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
TUNISIA
Tel Aviv
ISRAEL
JORDAN
SAUDI ARABIA
LIBYA
EGYPT

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Altalena, the Ship of Hope

After World War II, Jewish survivors in Europe streamed to Eretz Israel in large numbers. From 1946 to 1948, prior to the establishment of the State, about sixty thousand reached their destination – most of them "illegally." They sailed on ships run by the Haganah, which devoted itself to the task of transporting Jews out of Europe's refugee camps to Eretz Israel. Another sixty thousand immigrants were intercepted by the British and detained in specially established camps on the island of Cyprus.

In the Fall of 1946, the *Hebrew Committee for National Liberation* purchased a 700-ton ship to transport some 600 "illegal" immigrants to Eretz Israel. The ship sailed from Port de Bouc on the French Mediterranean coast on February 28, 1947, under the name of *Ben Hecht*. About a week later, the ship was intercepted by British destroyers and the passengers were arrested and transported to a detention camp on Cyprus. This was the *Committee*'s only attempt to bring in refugees with only knapsacks on their backs.

The IZL saw its task differently. Its basic commitment was to bring shiploads of trained soldiers fully armed and equipped for the battles against the invading Arab armies. The *Altalena* was such a ship. In addition to the battalion of armed and equipped fighters, it carried weapons and ammunition to equip five more regiments. This was no "mad undertaking," as it was described by representatives of the Haganah in Paris. It was a thoroughly planned and organized operation, and it epitomized the mission of IZL in the Diaspora. If the Diaspora IZL had done no more than bring to fruition this goal it would have fulfilled its duty.

In the Summer of 1947, after a prolonged search, agents of the *Hebrew Committee* bought a surplus 4,500-ton U.S. Navy landing craft. The ship, classified as an LST, was designed to land tanks and men during amphibious invasions. The diesel-powered LST is a boxy ship with a shallow draft, about 100 feet wide and 300 feet long. It is capable of traveling over long distances at fairly high speeds. Below deck, there are cabins along each side of the hull; the middle two-thirds is an open space for holding tanks and other heavy equipment. The men and the vehicles can be off-loaded in shallow water directly from the hull via a ramp that swings down from the ship's bow. Hundreds of such ships were then available cheaply, leftovers from the Allies' North African and Normandy invasions.

The first task after the ship was purchased was to give her an appropriate name. It was obvious to all concerned that she should be named after Ze'ev Jabotinsky. Earlier, the *Hebrew Committee* had been severely criticized in Revisionist Party circles for not having honored Jabotinsky by naming their first ship after him.

The *Ben Hecht* had been named in honor of the American playwright who was a stalwart supporter of the *Hebrew Committee* in America and the Jewish underground in Eretz Israel. No doubt that he deserved to be honored

in any project connected with illegal immigration. But the *Hebrew Committee* should have first acknowledged the debt of all Zionists and Jews the world over to the memory of Jabotinsky, who devoted his life to the struggle for the establishment of the Jewish State and who, during the last few years of his life, urged massive evacuation of the Jews from East Europe.

This time it was clear that the name of the ship should honor Jabotinsky. Yet to name the ship openly the Zeev Jabotinsky was too dangerous, as it would attract the attention of our enemies. We knew that British Intelligence was active in the sabotage of ships acquired for illegal immigration to Eretz Israel. We did not want to see any more Jews diverted to Cyprus where they would languish, unable to aid the cause that was so dear to their hearts. We needed to find a name that would be understood by the friends of Zion while remaining obscure to the rest of the world.

I do not know who first conceived the idea of naming the ship *Altalena*, which was Jabotinsky's pen name at the start of his journalistic career in the early 1900's. This name became the banner for our project to carry trained soldiers and badly needed weapons to the fighters in Eretz Israel. It became a symbol of the idealism and dedication to our cause.

Abrasha Stavsky, who was working for the *Hebrew Committee* in the U.S., formed the Three Star Line shipping company as a cover for the *Altalena*. In the months to come, Abrasha became the executive officer of both the shipping company and the ship, responsible for the payroll, provisions, and overall management. An old Revisionist activist, Abrasha was falsely accused in 1933 of murdering Chaim Arlozoroff, head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency. He was tried by the British and was acquitted for

lack of evidence. Later, he became active in rescuing Jews from Nazi Europe.

Abrasha ran advertisements in the daily newspapers for seamen of all ranks to man a merchant ship. Monroe Fein came from Chicago to become the future captain of the *Altalena* and the moving spirit of the ship – a man beloved by his entire crew. Fein had commanded an LST as a U.S. Navy officer in the Pacific during World War II. He was an excellent seaman, intrepid, and, to top it all, a Jewish patriot. Fein's humility, his engaging manner and wonderful self-assurance won the hearts of all who came in contact with him. To his crew, he was both captain and friend. To us, he was brother and comrade. We could not have found an abler captain for our ship. Among the officers and sailors who signed on as crew, there were a number of non-Jews; some of whom remained with the ship until the bitter end, fulfilling their duties until the last moment at great risk to their own lives.

Financial difficulties and the necessary technical arrangements kept the *Altalena* in American waters for many long months. Her purchase virtually emptied the coffers of the *Hebrew Committee*. After the crew was hired and the ship was outfitted, there was no money left to sail her to Europe. To raise the necessary funds, the *Altalena* worked as a tramp freighter flying a Panamanian flag.

But political events did not wait upon our financial readiness. On November 29, 1947, the United Nations voted for the partition of Palestine between the Jews and the Arabs. The British had failed in their administration of the Mandate. In humiliation and defeat, they prepared to withdraw.

As soon as the partition plan was announced, a wave of Arab attacks hit the Jewish communities in Eretz Israel. Early in 1948, the "Arab Liberation Army" (consisting mostly of Syrian and Iraqi units) invaded the country, directing its

attacks not only on the Jewish settlements but also against the vehicles transporting men and supplies on the roads connecting the main centers of the Jewish population.

The British openly helped the Arabs by supplying neighboring Arab states with arms while blockading the coast to prevent the entry of arms and fighters to reinforce the Jews. In addition, under the guise of maintaining law and order, the British often disarmed Haganah units just before Arab attacks. In January 1948, the U.S. declared an embargo on all arms to the Middle East; which only served to deprive the Jews of sorely needed weapons, while the Arabs were continually supplied by the British arms flowing through Jordan and Iraq.

At the beginning of 1948, we found ourselves in terrible financial straits, which was agonizing in light of all the opportunities for buying weapons. We could have filled the *Altalena*'s hold to capacity with arms for Eretz Israel were it not for the acute lack of funds.

We berated representatives of the Jewish Agency many times for their lack of vision in failing to utilize all the possibilities that were then available. Fully aware of the responsibility I assume by making this statement, I can say unequivocally that had we had access to the millions of dollars that passed through the hands of the Jewish Agency, the Haganah would not have been forced to go into battle during the War of Independence with the paucity of weapons at their disposal. There was no reason to deprive the Haganah of arms and equipment needed to fight the Arabs. At the time, it was possible to buy arms in unlimited quantities, and there were various means of transporting them to Israel, including airlift. The only impediment was financial – and this was not a difficulty that the Jewish Agency faced.

In my role as a commander of the Irgun in the Diaspora, I had notified representatives of the Jewish Agency on

several occasions of various sources for major purchases of arms that we ourselves were unable to make for lack of funds. I reported these matters to Maurice Fischer, who was the representative of the Jewish Agency in Paris, and to Baron Guy de Rothschild at one of our meetings.

The Jewish Agency failed to act, because they did not believe that the *Yishuv* would one day be forced to take up arms for the establishment of the State of Israel. Despite all evidence to the contrary, they always ignored this eventuality. Even during the period between November 1947 and May 1948, when Eretz Israel was already in the grip of war, many Jewish Agency leaders deluded themselves into believing that the United Nations would implement the plan to partition the country into two states, preventing an invasion of Eretz Israel by neighboring Arab states. I suppose they thought that the U.N. would enforce its decisions by virtue of its authority in the world community, or perhaps by means of a multinational military force especially mobilized for this purpose. Small wonder, then, that acquisition of arms had low priority in the Jewish Agency's plans.

We had a completely different outlook on the future of Eretz Israel after the final departure of the British.

At the end of January 1948, I received a personal letter from Menachem Begin containing a heartrending cry to speed help to the front-line fighters facing an enemy determined to drive all the Jews of Israel into the sea.

Begin realized that we had only 100 days or so in which to prepare ourselves. After the final departure of the British, the Arabs would expand their attack on all fronts. Unlike the Jews in Eretz Israel, the Arabs were not hampered in arming themselves. Begin emphasized to me that this was an historic opportunity that might not recur for generations – an opportunity to establish a Jewish State. We could not rely on the Haganah's supplies of arms. They did not have

enough weapons for their own men, and what they had was outdated or in ill repair. The fate of the Jewish community and of Israel itself depended in large measure on help from the Diaspora and on the speed with which it arrived. Begin concluded his letter with an urgent demand to stop all other activity and devote ourselves wholly to mobilizing immediate help for the front. If we could not send weapons, we should at least transfer funds, because there were still channels for arms purchase in Eretz Israel itself.

Though we in France were empty-handed, this letter placed a heavy burden of responsibility upon us for the fate of the war waged by our men at home. My initial decision was to ask the *Hebrew Committee* to sell the *Altalena*, which was still stuck in the United States, and to transfer all proceeds immediately to Eretz Israel. I explained my reasoning in a letter to Peter Bergson (Hillel Kook), who was then in the U.S. The ship was standing idle due to lack of funds. Several thousand dollars would be needed to activate her. We did not have the money nor did we know when we would. Meanwhile, the situation in Eretz Israel was so desperate and help so vital that any delay might affect the outcome of the war. If we could send some tens of thousands of dollars from the sale of the ship, we could radically alter the situation. If we later succeeded in mobilizing additional funds, we could buy other ships to replace the *Altalena*.

Many of our friends across the sea saw the logic of my argument. Nevertheless, the *Hebrew Committee* chose not to sell the ship, as they owed a great deal on her, and the money raised would not be sufficient to offset the investment already made. Finally in March 1948, the *Hebrew Committee* raised enough money to bring the *Altalena* to Europe. As soon as she arrived in Genoa, Irgun soldiers replaced most of the hired crew and were put under the command of Eliezer Menaker, who was a member of

the Italian branch of the Irgun and had naval training. Eliezer knew the Italian contingent well and personally chose the ablest men for his crew. The discharged sailors from America received their pay and returned home.

Thanks to the alertness of the crew, several attempts at sabotage were averted when the *Altalena*'s presence became known to British Intelligence and Arab agents in the Mediterranean. However, our main problem was still unsolved. We still lacked the funds necessary to prepare the *Altalena* to sail for Eretz Israel.

Despite this fact, it was decided to prepare the ship for sailing at the beginning of May with the maximum number of arms and men. By May 15th, when the British would have departed and the Arabs were expected to invade in full force, the *Altalena* would reach Eretz Israel loaded with military supplies. Our trained soldiers from the Diaspora would go directly from the ship into the army.

We had two months in which to muster men, arms, and funds. To save on the huge expense of maintaining an idle ship, we decided to send the *Altalena* on commercial voyages around the Mediterranean.

Abrasha, that jack of all trades, became a merchant trader. Within a week, he obtained an order to transport a large cargo to Casablanca and from there to go on to Italian and French ports. It was not easy to convince our crew of Zionist zealots to become merchant seamen in the Mediterranean. They were well aware of the impending crisis at the front and had no desire to serve a commercial venture, but there was no choice. The situation was explained to them and they accepted it.

Monroe Fein accepted it as well. He had left the United States for the express purpose of bringing arms and soldiers to an embattled Eretz Israel. Shipping merchandise between Africa and Europe had not been on his agenda; but, like

the others, he understood the difficulty of our situation and did what was necessary.

I remember my first meeting with him one evening in Paris, when he was invited to discuss the commercial shipping plans for the *Altalena*. He said simply, "If you decide that we have no choice, there is nothing more to discuss. I am sure that you care even more than I do about the *Altalena* fulfilling her task. So if you think it is necessary to use the ship for transporting merchandise, I am at your service. I won't desert my post."

From that moment, Fein won my respect; and he never disappointed me. Later on, he would risk his own life to save mine.

The *Altalena* sailed to Casablanca and back, but we were still insolvent; so we sent her on trading voyages again and again. Only in May, with the declaration of the Jewish State, could we announce to the crew that our commercial enterprise was over. We finally had funds enough to prepare the ship for her mission.

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The Alchemy of Fundraising: Turning Jewels into Guns

In all countries where the Irgun had established branches, there were already local organizations that raised funds which partly covered the expenses of our operations in the Diaspora. By the Summer of 1947, we had established our own fund-raising cadre in Paris headed by Marek Kahn and Yehoshua Halperin. Their work progressed rapidly; and within months, we could cover all the expenses of the Irgun staff and its branches in Europe. By the end of 1947, we were even able to send some funds to the High Command in Eretz Israel, finance some arms purchases on our own and work on enlarging our organizations throughout the world.

But in the Spring of 1948, our fund-raising capacity was no longer equal to the task before us. We wanted to acquire the full quantity of arms and manpower that the *Altalena*

was capable of carrying, and for this we needed hundreds of thousands of additional dollars – immediately.

The Revisionist Movement in the United States was then engaged in developing ties with some of the highest military circles that determined the country's political strategies. Our representatives reported the temper and opinions of these people in high places. If a Jewish State was to gain U.S. support in the Middle East, they told us, it would have to be as militarily powerful as possible. The U.S. wanted a strong and secure base in the Middle East for the democratic world. It was clear that it had no intention of sending American soldiers to implement the U.N. partition decision, nor would it support sending other armies to Eretz Israel.

The irresistible conclusion was that the United States would not interfere and would not allow others to intervene, if we conquered the whole of Eretz Israel. It was there for the taking. Whoever conquered Eretz Israel by force would rule it.

Clearly, all our energy, connections and efforts needed to be directed solely toward acquiring arms and speeding them to Eretz Israel. The single task of the Irgun in the Diaspora would be to supply the front.

Intensified fund-raising was the first step. We devoted whole months to raising funds from all over the globe and transferring them by the speediest and safest channels to Europe, where they could be converted to arms.

After receiving Menachem Begin's urgent emotional appeal for funds in January 1948, I had his letter reprinted exactly as it was written and sent copies to all our branches in the Diaspora. Precisely because of its confidential nature, this letter had an immense moral and psychological impact. The response was tremendous from all branches of the Revisionist Movement, Betar and the Irgun. Letters and

telegrams began to arrive, pledging help for the war in Eretz Israel.

In Latin America, Dr. I. Mirelman, a staunch supporter of the fighting underground, organized a group of friends and sympathizers who raised $120,000 within a two-month period.

Shmuel Katz was dispatched to America by the Irgun High Command to expedite the transfer of funds to Israel, but political difficulties hampered our activities. The American Jewish establishment still opposed Irgun activities and advised the community not to support our cause. To make matters worse, the Revisionist Movement and the *Hebrew Committee* in the U.S. were squabbling among themselves, and the fund-raising effort suffered as a result.

But it was in China that the most heartening surprise awaited us.

The Russian Jewish communities in China were established at the turn of the century by those seeking a better life away from the persecutions of the Tsarist government. During the years after the revolution between 1918-20, those fleeing the ravages of civil war and the Soviet persecutions swelled the numbers of the Jewish population in China. From the beginning, there was a strong Zionist movement among the local Jews.

In 1929, Alexander Gurvich, a Russian Jewish emigre, arrived in Harbin from Europe and established a branch of the Zionist Revisionist Movement. The city became the center of the Revisionist Movement with a strong youth organization, Betar, and a monthly journal of Zionist political thought in Russian called *Hadegel*. Major Betar branches also existed in Tientsin and Shanghai, and smaller branches were organized in other cities.

Many of China's Betar members immigrated to Eretz Israel. My late brother, Yaakov (Yasha), was in the first group of Zionists that left China in 1931; and then in 1932, came

Mordechai Olmert who arrived after having completed his studies in agriculture in Holland.

In March 1948, Olmert was sent as a special emissary from Eretz Israel to the Far East via Paris, where I briefed him on our plans for the *Altalena*. He was a graduate of Betar in China and one of its founders. We hoped that he would be able to raise several thousand dollars from within the Jewish community in China. Within a month, he succeeded in raising $100,000 and had only visited the two cities of Shanghai and Tientsin, with a combined Jewish population of no more than 10,000 souls! The community in China contributed the largest amount per capita ever donated by any Jewish community in the Diaspora. One must not forget that the Jewish Agency had already sent its own emissary there to collect for the Haganah and had also raised a considerable sum.

Members of the Chinese community who are now in Israel enjoy reminiscing about Olmert's fund-raising meetings. His untiring efforts and enthusiasm were contagious. There were even instances at these meetings in which the women, who appeared bedecked and bejewelled, took off their jewelry on the spot and donated it to the war effort.

Olmert was not only the most successful fund-raiser but the cheapest to maintain. While in China, his family covered all his personal expenses, and he did not spend a penny of the money he raised except for the travel expenses to and from China.

Enthusiasm flashed through the Diaspora like an electric current. From South Africa to England, from the United States to Tunis, entire communities rose to the occasion. No community refused us. Thousands of Jews felt that a financial contribution was, at that moment, the only way in which they could participate in the struggle of their brothers fighting for the birth and survival of a Jewish State.

33

Assembling an Arsenal

The political atmosphere in the Winter of 1948 was charged with fear of another world war, this time between Russia and the West. Although we of the Irgun in the Diaspora were totally absorbed in our organizational and political activities, we also prayed that a new world crisis would not erupt into open warfare. Dedication to a cause requires single-mindedness both of purpose and perspective. We feared World War III insofar as it would interfere with the liberation of Eretz Israel. We lived and breathed politics, political influence, and intrigue.

By May 1948, we had the necessary funds to load the *Altalena* and send her on her way. All the money was concentrated in a special Swiss bank account under the names of three people, one of whom was Abrasha Stavsky. All of them had valid passports and could have access to the money without complications.

Meanwhile, the date set for the ship's departure had already passed. The beginning of May found the *Altalena*

still docked in southern France waiting for its crew and its cargo. True, the money was already in our hands, but it took some time to convert it into "iron"[1] and to arrange transportation of the men from all the different countries to the port of embarkation.

Yaakov Meridor arrived in Paris in April 1948, together with five other detainees who had escaped from the camp in Kenya. The six reached Paris a week after their daring escape which has been described in Meridor's book, *Long Is the Road to Freedom.*[2]

Meridor conceived the idea of organizing a flying squadron to accompany and protect the *Altalena* on her way to Eretz Israel and later to become part of the future Israeli air force.

We succeeded in mobilizing a dozen volunteer pilots who had served in the various Allied forces during World War II and were competent and experienced. Among them were fighter pilots, heavy and medium bomber pilots, and reconnaissance pilots. We began to buy planes. Our experts, Yehiel Ratushnik, Alexander Rafaeli and Meir Zilberstein, were sent to various destinations, and the airplanes began to arrive only after the *Altalena*'s departure. They were eventually turned over to the representatives of the Israeli government.

Some of the arms destined for the *Altalena* were acquired illegally by the Irgun from all parts of Europe, France, Britain, Belgium, Sweden, and Spain, and were brought into France by devious means. A great many were secondhand, some even obsolete, but all these arms were familiar to the men of the Jewish underground in Israel. They took anything that they could get, as long as it fired.

Nathan Germant and Yaakov Hillel were in charge of the operation to acquire arms. They and their staff scouted through Europe, like hunting dogs, in pursuit of private sources or governments that would sell us guns and military

hardware. More than one confidence man tried to cheat us; but most of the time, our men managed to avoid the traps of crooked dealers.

Housed in the offices of the *Hebrew Committee* on Avenue de Messine, the Irgun buzzed like a bee-hive in those months before the launching of the *Altalena*.

As soon as we had begun to inquire about arms purchases and to offer cash, merchants of military hardware converged on our offices with propositions. It was not easy to sort out the dozens of offers, to check their authenticity, and to get rid of pests and scoundrels. At one point, we even had an offer from someone claiming to be the agent of a British Member of Parliament who was sympathetic to our cause; but the negotiations were so fraught with danger and suspicion on both sides that, in the end, it came to nothing.

We generally examined each offer in detail. Each time an agreement was reached with the vendor on the terms of sale, Germant's staff took over from there. They traveled to the arms depot, sorted the hardware, and packed and shipped it to Marseille.

Irgun staff officer, Yaakov Amrami (Yoel), came to Paris from Eretz Israel in January 1948 on a special assignment to organize arms shipments. We were not quite certain then if and when the *Altalena* would sail, but it was imperative to ship the weapons already on hand immediately to Eretz Israel. Yoel had names of scores of immigrants who formerly had been detained by the British on Cyprus and who, on their arrival in Eretz Israel, had declared to Customs that they were expecting their belongings from Europe. Yoel planned to send suitcases and crates full of arms to these immigrants as their "personal goods." Sympathetic customs officials at the port of Tel Aviv had undertaken to release the luggage without inspection.

In his capacity as arms buyer, Yoel ran around Europe following up contacts with recommended arms suppliers. In every country he visited, he faced serious personal dangers. Complicated problems sprang up like mushrooms and had to be solved on the spot without any possibility of consulting the staff in Paris.

The Irgun emissaries encountered salesmen of all sorts and political leanings including professional smugglers, communists, and anarchists. They also encountered British agents who wanted to discover our financial sources and methods of transferring the arms we acquired. This was the greatest danger that threatened our emissaries.

The biggest problem in every illegal transaction – particularly when dealing in arms – is taking delivery of the merchandise and transporting it to its final destination. There is always the danger when paying in advance of not receiving the goods, and yet all such dealers are reluctant to hand over their wares before being paid. In either case, neither party could have recourse to the police.

Our general instructions to our men were that, in every case, the seller should be required to deliver the arms to an appointed place, and from there the arms would be transported on our own responsibility. Money would change hands at the point of delivery. However, not all sellers were willing to endanger themselves by transporting the arms to the meeting point without some real assurances that they would indeed be paid. Nevertheless, as the old Russian proverb has it, "if you are afraid of wolves, do not go to the forest." Risk was a normal part of our day-to-day lives in the underground.

In most instances, we were able to avoid being swindled, but not always. In one transaction, we lost 375,000 francs (about 1,500 U.S. dollars) because of the naivete of our agent who became so excited about a promising deal that his judgment was impaired.

In this instance, a French-speaking man came to our office, introduced himself as a Jew and a sympathizer, and told us of an armory in the French provinces. The weapons were left over from the French underground, and their custodian was willing to sell us the lot. The inventory of hardware included rifles, machine guns, automatic rifles, grenades, and large quantities of ammunition. All this could be ours for 375,000 francs. The Frenchman wanted an additional 50,000 francs for his own services as intermediary.

I met the man and did not like him, but his proposition was attractive. My colleagues and I decided to send one of our men to the armory to see for himself. The money was hidden on the person of our agent, but he was warned not to show it until he saw the arms and they were loaded onto our truck.

Our agent accompanied the Frenchman to a remote town and was asked to wait until the latter had contacted the custodian of the arms. Soon he returned to say that all was ready, except that the keeper of the arms refused to allow strangers into his yard before receiving the money. As assurance, the Frenchman led our agent to an isolated yard where there was, indeed, a small house. The owner was standing by the gate and exchanged greetings with our man and the intermediary.

Our agent was reluctant to hand over the money, but neither did he want the deal to fall through. All the while, the Frenchman kept assuring and reassuring our man. He, himself, as a Jew, would not mislead a fellow-Jew. He was taking a chance as well in his role as middleman. In fact, he intended to go to Eretz Israel and fight with us. He insisted that the deal was above suspicion and, if concluded, it would lead to other arms transactions.

Our man was seduced by all this talk. He handed over the 425,000 francs and waited at the corner in a small cafe for the signal to bring the truck into the yard.

The Frenchman never returned. Our comrade waited for hours with a growing sense of shame at having been so easily duped.

On another occasion, one of the engineers of our Scientific Council in France – the body of experts who gave us technical advice – told us that he had learned of a Spanish general stationed in North Africa who could supply us with arms from Spanish anarchists. He had spun fabulous tales around the general, who had fought in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the Republican Army. If we wished to meet the general, a wire would be sent and he would come to Paris immediately. We agreed.

Several days later, the man appeared in our office. After hearing of his heroism during that war and his skill in guerilla tactics, we were surprised by the modest mien and pleasant speech of this man who gave more the impression of being a kindly squire than a warrior.

After negotiations, two of our men were assigned to travel to a deserted town in the French Pyrenees to discuss what the anarchists had and what they were willing to sell. Our men found the staff headquarters of the Spanish anarchists in a ramshackle house in a quiet mountain village in France. This anarchist organization was the only political body still waging the war against Franco. The entire world had turned its back on their struggle, and they were fighting without encouragement or support. Still they were managing to steal into Spain for almost daily armed attacks against the fascist government.

A crippled old man came to the door. In ignorance, our agents asked for the commander of the Spanish anarchists for whom they had a letter from the general. The old man smiled at this request, pointing to a slogan that hung on the wall: *No God, No Master*. "We serve no presidents nor

commanders. Each of us in our organization is president, policeman, and judge unto himself."

Nonetheless, his face betrayed his pleasure as he read the general's letter.

"My old friend, the general, writes that I can deal openly with you as comrades. How can I be of service?"

The Irgun men explained that they had come to buy arms.

"We've heard much about your organization," said the old man who, it turned out, had been wounded in the Spanish Civil War and was, in fact, the leader. "All of us follow events in Palestine with great interest." He complimented the capabilities of our fighters and inquired about our prospects.

He assured us that the anarchists had arms for sale – particularly rifles, machine guns, and automatic weapons – which were ill-suited for guerilla warfare. He would be honored to sell them to underground fighters who were also striving to liberate their people. The old man explained that their warehouseman had gone to Spain for a few days, but our men could return at a signal from the general to make the final arrangements for the sale.

Our men returned to Paris in an optimistic mood, certain of the trustworthiness of these Spaniards. Two weeks later, the general notified us that the *senor* who had received our men at the Spanish border was expecting us.

This time we were not disappointed. On the following day, we received a telegram at headquarters: "Come immediately. Much work."

Our people arrived to pack and send the arms to the port. We were astounded to learn what had been obtained – rifles, machine guns, automatic weapons, and an enormous quantity of ammunition. Everything was in beautiful condition. The most pleasant surprise was the price – 1,000

francs (then about four dollars) per rifle, 15,000 francs (60 dollars) per machine gun, 30,000 francs (120 dollars) per heavy automatic weapon. Such prices were unheard of. They were about one-tenth of what we had been paying in the European market.

The anarchists explained that they were not dealers in arms and were liquidating their armories out of necessity. If they chanced to sell the weapons to another fighting underground, they felt obliged to sell them at reasonable prices to their "brothers in arms."

The Spaniards even helped our agents crate the weapons in special packing cases for transfer to the port by freight train and waited to receive their payment in Paris when the transaction was concluded.

There will, undoubtedly, be readers who may be surprised that we, who have been characterized as fascists by Israeli socialists, were received with such a display of friendship by fighting Spanish anarchists. We of the Irgun were not surprised at all. Unencumbered by the political bias of the Jewish establishment, these Spaniards regarded us as freedom fighters like themselves.

Among our arms suppliers were French communists, members of the Maquis, and other underground fighters. None of them hesitated to sell their arms to us. There were even some who emptied their armories and refused to accept payment.

One Frenchman gave a gift to the Irgun of the gun with which he had killed a German soldier to avenge the murder of his family. He gave this gift to express his identification with the Irgun's struggle to liberate our nation.

We would not have had any compunction about buying weapons even from Franco's men, if such an opportunity had presented itself. We did not regard our arms deals with French communists as a means to "clear" our name, nor would we have regarded arms deals with real fascists as

besmirching it. The end was all that mattered to us – filling the hold of the *Altalena* and bringing armed reinforcements to an Eretz Israel fighting for its very survival.

One of our great boons at this time was an offer of Czech arms involving the exchange of millions of dollars. We did not have the means to make this purchase ourselves, but Shmuel Klinger of the Revisionist Movement passed the information on to the Jewish Agency. Thank God that the Agency in this instance chose to act! When the deal was concluded, and these Czech rifles were brought to Israel, they changed the situation on the battlefield. More's the pity that the Jewish Agency procrastinated. The purchase was made when Arab knives were already at Jewish throats.

Though wide in scope, our illegal traffic in arms did not suffice to fill the hold of the *Altalena*. Most of our arms finally came to us legally from the government of France through the efforts of Shmuel Ariel. This political secret has been well kept, and only many years later have the parties involved permitted its disclosure.

Ariel was sent to France from Eretz Israel in 1946 as an emissary of the Irgun. His main task was to forge political ties with French leaders to mobilize their help for the Jewish underground.

Ariel's activities were not known even among Irgun activists in the Diaspora. It was only later that we realized what a great success he scored for the Irgun in the highest echelons of French government and society. No others who have attained political goals on behalf of the fighting underground in Eretz Israel can boast of such spectacular success as that achieved through Ariel's connections with the French. He was instrumental in getting visas for all those who had escaped from Eritrea and Kenya to France, as well as residence permits for those of us fugitives working for the Jewish underground in France. The French authorities were well aware of the true identity of each of us who had taken

asylum there. Not only did they refrain from questioning how we had entered France, but they permitted all of us to continue our activities in the Jewish underground without interference.

Ariel reached the peak of his political achievements during the last months of Irgun activities in the Diaspora, when French authorities agreed to give us a vast quantity of arms to send to Eretz Israel aboard the *Altalena*.

To this day, there is a widely held belief that all the *Altalena*'s arms were illicitly purchased from various underground sources in Europe. Perhaps we have been given too much credit for our success in assembling all the weapons and loading them without any interference from the French government, despite the "illegality" of our actions. But the truth of the matter is that most of the weapons and ammunition on board the *Altalena* were the fruit of Ariel's good political connections with the French authorities. The bulk of what was loaded at Port de Bouc, where *Altalena* was anchored, was fully approved at the highest levels of the French government.

France's sympathy with our war of national liberation was as overt as the political climate would allow. Frenchmen did not hide their satisfaction with the exploits of the Jewish underground fighters against the British, and many stated explicitly that they would not be sorry if the British were expelled from Eretz Israel. French leaders had been outraged by British intrigues against them in Syria and Lebanon and were still smarting from the humiliation of being ousted from these countries when the British sided with the Arabs against France. Overt sympathy gradually gave way to actual – though covert – assistance.

Ariel's negotiations on our behalf had to undergo several stages: first, mustering friends to support our war; later, convincing them that the assistance they would render was compatible with their own interests; and, finally, practical

discussions on the requested aid and its delivery. When this last stage was reached, my comrades and I were asked to submit a list of required weapons. We had this list ready and waiting.

We itemized all the weapons we needed most urgently to equip one infantry division. Later, we would also ask for heavy arms, such as cannons and tanks, without which we would find it difficult to withstand the regular armies of the Arab states.

In March 1948, Ariel was notified by his French contacts that our request for arms had been approved including 5,000 rifles, 250 machine guns, and 5,000,000 rounds of ammunition. All the guns were new and modern and in their original factory packing, including British-made Enfield rifles and Bren machine guns.

The Irgun leadership in Eretz Israel had been skeptical about our reports of a prospective accord with France, and Ariel had been criticized by many for traveling in such high social circles in Paris. But vindication came when we sent a special agent to Eretz Israel with an itemized list of the arms we were to receive from the French government at Port de Bouc.

Ariel reported to us regularly on his progress and consulted with us as he went along. On our own initiative and without waiting for approval from Eretz Israel, we told him to open official negotiations with the French government in the name of the Irgun. During my time in the underground, one lesson was drummed into my head that when the time comes for action, one must act. There is no room or time for politeness and procrastination when thousands of lives are at stake. One must bear responsibility for one's actions, knowing that inaction might cost the war.

In reality, we had nothing to offer the French in return for their arms. We could only promise them that these arms would be used to liberate our country from the tyranny of

British rule and to defend ourselves from the invading Arab armies. Our avowed aim was to establish an independent Jewish State in the land of Israel. If the fulfillment of this aim also harmed the prestige of France's traditional enemy, then we could only be grateful for this confluence of goals.

We were, naturally, warned to keep the entire matter a secret from the world press. The French authorities depended on us not to compromise them in the eyes of the world, particularly as the fate of Eretz Israel was nominally in the hands of the United Nations. Indeed, we kept the secret for many years. No one divulged it, even during the stormy debate in Israel following the debacle of the *Altalena*, although the disclosure of the details of the French arms accord would have gone far toward protecting the honor of the Irgun.

If the French arms had been given to us immediately after we received official authorization for them, we could have transported them to Israel in time for the decisive battles at the fronts; and we could possibly have won a total victory. The Czech arms deal had not yet been concluded by the Jewish Agency. Our men in Eretz Israel fought with a paucity of vintage underground weapons of the Haganah, the Irgun, and LEHI. Old Sten guns were the choice items of our arsenal. Unfortunately, our political gains floundered on bureaucratic red tape and the frequent crises within the French government at that time.

So it was that many days passed between the date of the authorization for the arms and their actual delivery. In those decisive hours, the Jewish people declared the establishment of their State and had to fight for its very existence with an insufficient supply of obsolete weapons. Every rifle mattered, every revolver, every grenade.

34

The Logistics of Mobilization

The beginning of May found the *Altalena* still docked in southern France waiting for her crew and cargo. Even though we had raised the needed funds and concluded our preparations, we still awaited the delivery of the French government arsenal.

Logistics of modern warfare dictate that seven or eight men must be fully occupied in order to supply the needs of each front-line soldier. Had we followed this formula, we would have to have had 7,000 men to prepare the embarkation of the contingent of 940 that finally sailed aboard the *Altalena*. In fact, our field staff numbered less than fifty. Each member of this limited staff had to wear many hats, performing a multiplicity of administrative roles. It is amazing that no one collapsed under the immense strain.

The Irgun in the Diaspora had no regular secretarial staff, despite an overwhelming amount of paperwork that was essential for planning and organizing our operations. Secretarial functions were fulfilled by women members

of the Irgun from Eretz Israel who had volunteered to work in Paris. Other women served as couriers and in other technical capacities.[1] Despite the apparent glamor of such assignments, the reality was that the demands and difficulties of these jobs required the utmost in devotion and personal sacrifice.

Working conditions for all of us were far from ideal. We had no headquarters or offices to call our own; and even though the *Hebrew Committee for National Liberation* gave us space at their accommodations on the Avenue de Messine, many of our operations had to be planned elsewhere for security reasons. Despite the friendly and tolerant attitude at the highest levels of the French government, this tolerance was strictly unofficial. We had to protect the secrecy of our activities and documents for the sake of political discretion as well as security.

For example, we had to protect the secrecy of our lists of Irgun members in the Diaspora, the correspondence between our Paris office and headquarters in Eretz Israel, and the addresses of the various people and organizations from whom we hoped to acquire arms. Such clandestine records and activities were secreted in the apartments of our Paris staff or in the homes of trusted friends. Irgun staff members dealing with these matters had to work under crowded and awkward conditions, and our pay was minimal. Until 1948, we received the daily subsistence allowance for a single person living in Paris of about 1,000 francs (four dollars). This was increased slightly when we convinced headquarters that this did not cover the minimal costs of food and shelter.

By May 1948, a year after my arrival in Paris, there were seven members of the Irgun's High Command in the Diaspora: Yaakov Meridor, Aryeh Ben-Eliezer, Shmuel Katz, Yerucham Livni, Yaakov Amrami (Yoel), Eli Tavin, and I. Meridor and Ben-Eliezer returned to Eretz Israel shortly

thereafter. Shmuel Katz was a roving ambassador, shuttling between Eretz Israel and England, the United States, South Africa, Switzerland, and France. His was probably the most tiring of jobs, but he had a South African passport and with it the advantage of not being chained to one place. Livni also roamed over Europe organizing courses, instructing officers, and supervising professional training. At the time Yoel was based in Italy where he was acquiring arms. Eli and I focused on the practical details for launching the *Altalena* with her shipment of men and arms.

Livni was the chief Irgun training officer in the Diaspora. He had been the first operations officer of the Irgun in Eretz Israel, was captured by the British, and imprisoned in the Acre Prison, the impregnable Crusader fortress. While there, he helped mastermind the ingenious and meticulously planned break from Acre in May 1947, which captured the admiration of the entire world. Three months after his escape, Livni was sent to Paris to supervise the military training of all branches of the Irgun in the Diaspora.

Livni was always on the move. Although he arrived in France with a British Mandatory passport – which was next to useless in those days – he soon replaced it with a refugee identity card. This lent him enough mobility to supervise training exercises all over Europe.

Training Irgun soldiers in the Diaspora presented tremendous difficulties. In Eretz Israel, soldiers of the underground were at least among their own people. The British occupiers were a minority, and fortunately, informers among the Jews were a minority as well. By contrast, in Eastern Europe, only small numbers of Jews had survived the Holocaust, and the virulent anti-Semitism there had survived nearly unscathed. Our officers and trainees in the Irgun were in constant jeopardy.

A special officers' course was organized in France, and Eli and I served as instructors. The course was run as a

summer camp – like the Betar camps in Eastern Europe – in a dense forest 100 kilometers from Paris. The men lived in tents, cooked for themselves, carried buckets of water from a nearby stream, and practiced the use of firearms.

One of the strongest and most active of the Irgun branches in the Diaspora was in Rumania, headed by Abba Klurman, who was fondly called Abkeh by one and all.

Abkeh had been a member of the Irgun prior to the war. When Hitler invaded Eastern Europe, he was one of the organizers of the Polish partisans who fought the Nazis. He excelled among his comrades and became a commander of several partisan units. After the armistice, he removed his uniform and set forth on foot to Italy with the aim of immigrating to Eretz Israel. In Italy, he contacted other members of the Irgun.

When our staff decided to send a commander to organize a branch in Rumania, we felt that Abkeh was the most qualified and reliable candidate. His job was to find hundreds of Jews throughout Eastern Europe who were seeking contact with us, and then organizing and training fighting units to be sent to Eretz Israel. Abkeh understood the importance of his task and performed admirably. He organized hundreds of young men and succeeded in bringing most of them to ports of embarkation en route to Eretz Israel.

The first rank-and-file training courses were organized by Abkeh in the country estates of pre-war Rumanian aristocrats who were killed or forced into exile by the communists. Scattered about the countryside and isolated from populated areas, these villas stood empty. The men would steal in at night, carrying all their supplies and equipment. Thus, entire training courses were conducted for weeks on end by these squatters, with Irgun guards stationed at the nearest crossroads for security.

Three months after Abkeh's arrival in Rumania, 200 Jewish youths had completed courses in these villas, with additional youths drawn from Kishinev in Bessarabia (Moravian Republic), then under Russian control. Communication with our forces in Rumania was difficult. We could not visit because of the hostility of the Rumanian government and were unable to verify the readiness of our units there. The staff in Paris had to settle for secret communications with him.

Abkeh's absolute hatred of communism dominated his activities behind the Iron Curtain; therefore, he did not believe in promoting contact with representatives of any communist regime. His aim was simply to save the remnant of the Jews that could be salvaged. With his assistant, Menachem Ackerman (who gained notoriety through his book, *In the Shadow of Moscow*[2]), Abkeh strove untiringly to free the Jews from the Soviet stranglehold. Eventually, he had to flee Rumania, as he had become a target of the secret police. He arrived in Eretz Israel in 1949.

The most colorful of all the IZL's staff in Paris was undoubtedly Colonel Jackson, although most of those acquainted with him realized that his name was not Jackson but Benzion Chomsky, and that the title of colonel was not his rank in the IZL but one with which he was lovingly dubbed by our men.

Jackson joined us shortly after I arrived in Paris following my escape from Eritrea. I was told about this strange man who had been pestering our people for a meeting with IZL personnel in order to enlist. He was an ex-Eretz Israeli and spoke Hebrew well. I agreed to set up a meeting. Before me sat a middle-aged, bald and closely-shaven man whose face displayed a strong and resolute will.

"I was told that you're interested in helping us," I said by way of opening the conversation.

"Wrong," he replied. "I'm not 'interested'... I'm 'obliged' and not 'interested', and not 'to help' but rather 'to serve'," he informed me emphatically.

I began to probe into his past, his business affairs, his connections and his reasons for enlisting particularly in the IZL and not, for instance, in the Haganah.

The man spoke sparingly. He produced a pack of various papers, photos and newspaper clippings and placed them before me. First, he showed me his identity card to establish his true name. Then he displayed an old photo of a large group of people.

"There's Ze'ev Jabotinsky!" I remarked in surprise.

"Yes, and who's that?" Jackson asked as he pointed to one of the figures.

Hesitatingly I asked, "You?"

"Correct. This is a picture of the first prisoners of Acre, defenders of Jerusalem in 1920. I was one of them."

The man placed before me yet another document typed in English and headed, "British-Canadian Delegation of Mobilization, New York Branch, September 5, 1918." This confirmed that he had been active in organizing the American group which served in the Jewish Legion during World War I.

"Will that do?" he asked.

"Enough," I admitted.

"No, it isn't enough. Now listen to the rest," he insisted. "I served as an officer in British Intelligence."

"That's hardly a good reference for working with us," I remarked.

"I'm aware of that. That's why I'm telling you about it. I served in British Intelligence during World War II when I was put in charge of the search for Nazi war criminals and for relatives of their victims, under the aegis of UNRRA."

"And now, I'll tell you something else," he continued. "I'm an admirer of the British nation and an Anglophile,

but I crave Jewish independence and a Jewish state no less than you do. You asked about the Haganah, and my reply is: I'm not a politician and I'm not interested in politics. I'm a soldier and no more than that. You are waging war now. I see this war as just and inevitable, and I've come to enlist in it. Now make up your mind."

The decision was not easy at all. His love for the British and his service in Intelligence could not inspire confidence; but his past, his frankness and his sincerity allayed my doubts.

My answer was that we were an underground organization which had to be cautious in recruiting. We would contact him shortly.

He agreed and urged me to come to dinner at his home in order to meet his family. I was reluctant to promise because of my irregular life style, but he persisted until I agreed to come. He scribbled his address and pressed it into my palm: 72 Champs-Elysees, Metro George V – the center of Paris!

"Don't be impressed by my address. When you see my apartment, you'll understand," he said.

I left the meeting with some misgivings. This man is either entirely trustworthy or extremely dangerous.

When I arrived at his home, Chomsky introduced me to his wife, a good-looking woman who was much younger than he, and his seventeen-year old daughter, Betty, a delicate and shy high school student.

The modestly furnished apartment consisted of one room and a nook which they called a kitchen. Obviously, they were not millionaires. I spent the entire evening with them, and Chomsky won my full confidence.

None of us was ever sorry that the Chomsky family had joined us. He became totally dedicated to his job in our fiscal department. He met with hundreds of people, organized them into groups, invited them to meetings, cajoled them

and demanded contributions from them; and he was almost never refused.

His small apartment was placed at our disposal as well. The staff met there, letters were written, posters printed, appointments kept; and our young men who came to Paris from various places, ate and slept there when there was no other place available. Often arms were brought there – samples which were offered for sale to us. The telephone in the apartment served as a switchboard connecting us with our men abroad, especially as our work expanded.

Colonel Jackson, as he became known to all of us, was not an easy man to get along with. He was decisive, authoritative, inspiring respect and confidence. He never threatened nor pressured but persuaded by the magnetism of his personality and appearance, and at times, he used other methods of persuasion as well. Quite often, the people he contacted were in for a surprise.

Once we purchased several million francs worth of arms, but our treasury was short about a half million francs. Jackson promised to send the arms dealers the balance, but time was running out. The sellers were reluctant to wait, and we were anxious to acquire the stock which was a good buy.

Jackson approached a wealthy Jewish merchant who had contributed previously to the IZL. Jackson knew him well, but the time was not propitious for this appeal. The merchant was in a black mood, perhaps feeling that he had contributed enough (to other organizations as well) and wanted to rid himself of the frequent appeals. In any case, he refused to give more money. He argued that he was always being asked to donate but that he had never seen the arms that were purchased, and he did not know how his money was being spent.

Jackson did not pursue the matter. He said his *au revoir* and left.

He got the necessary sum of five hundred thousand francs from other Jews and the arms deal was concluded, but Jackson was not satisfied with that. He agreed that a donor who contributed goodly sums was entitled to know what was done with his money, and he set out to prove to the reluctant contributor that funds were not being wasted.

One afternoon, a large canvas-covered truck entered the merchant's yard and parked at his door. The driver disappeared immediately. The merchant went out to investigate the mysterious truck; and when he lifted the canvas, he was startled to find it full of rifles, machine guns, boxes of ammunition, grenades and the like. He then recalled Jackson's visit a few days earlier and understood it all. He was seized with fear.

He grabbed five hundred thousand francs and began running about the city in search of Jackson or some other representative of the IZL. He approached one of our sympathizers and asked him to notify the IZL men that he wished to be relieved of a half million francs and of the truck in front of his door.

In the meantime, we were advised to cease activities in Paris that very day because the police had been informed that a very large truck loaded with arms had entered Paris, and they were searching for it. It was not until late that night that our men appeared in the merchant's yard, retrieved the truck, received the half million francs accompanied by words of gratitude and good wishes. This was Jackson's style in dealing with some of his "clients."

In addition to our branches in Europe, there were active branches of the Irgun in North Africa, and primarily in Tunis. Itzhak Tobiana (known as Amnon), a native Tunisian, became our emissary there. Within a few months, Amnon established branches in several cities and activated hundreds of youths with the help of friends under the leader-

ship of Eliyahu Luzon, Chairman of the Zionist-Revisionist Movement in North Africa, They conducted propaganda, organized military courses, bought arms, collected funds, and sent fighters for the *Altalena*. After they reached Eretz Israel, Irgun soldiers from North Africa excelled in many ways. Many fell heroically in the battles of 1948.

A unit of volunteers (who were discharged from Allied armies) called MAHAL (Volunteers from the Diaspora) was planned as a supplement to the Irgun men trained in Europe. By the beginning of 1948, we had opened special recruitment offices for MAHAL in every country that had a branch of the Irgun or Betar. Irma Halperin was head of the special group appointed to establish these recruiting offices which would enlist volunteers, classify them by their skills and ability to serve, and develop a detailed and accurate blueprint for the composition of the MAHAL division. Later, in 1948, such an organization was formed by the Israeli Defense Forces.

The volunteers of course, were a diverse group. We expected soldiers and officers from about ten countries, all products of different military systems and trained in different ways. We wrestled with the logistics of placing ex-British soldiers in the same units as veterans of the Polish or Russian army. The language problems alone were enough to make our heads spin.

We decided, in principle, to establish territorial units according to the origin of the volunteers. Only the top command would work uniformly in accordance with the methods adopted in Eretz Israel, which were, ironically, those of the British army.

Unlike our other operations, recruitment for MAHAL was handled openly and staffed by people who were not necessarily members of the Irgun. Jewish veterans were invited to "aid their Jewish brothers in Eretz Israel." This

slogan in itself divulged no Irgun secrets, and the authorities in the various countries involved could hardly regard such aid as compromising the allegiance of their citizens.

The only criterion for accepting a volunteer was his former military training and experience; although we also required willingness to eventually immigrate to Eretz Israel.

The separation between Irgun and recruitment staff was considered necessary because of the provocateurs and foreign agents who would be attracted to the operation. We expected infiltration by British agents, as well as others whose governments wanted to learn more about the plans of the Irgun. Indeed, there immediately appeared several men whom we suspected to be foreign spies. The separation of functions prevented these agents from penetrating our secret underground operation.

The foreign volunteers were not told about our plans for the *Altalena*, including the quantities and types of arms she would be carrying, her location, or the date of departure. Men of MAHAL were to be rounded up during the very last days prior to departure, sent to a transit camp adjacent to the port, and marched aboard at the very last moment. We had nothing to fear from foreign agents after arriving in Eretz Israel, because they would be scattered to various locations controlled by the fledgling Israeli army.

During MAHAL recruitment, we were approached by a man who said he had been a Jewish officer in the Austrian army prior to Germany's annexation of his country. He had escaped to France, where he had served as a Major in the French army. He had heard about our recruitment campaign and wished to volunteer. He said that he had good connections in French army circles and could provide us with inside information from the Secret Service.

Though he had the build and bearing of a professional soldier and his story was plausible, I felt sure that the man

had not come to us of his own accord. What I suspected was that the French authorities had sent him to follow the operations of the MAHAL division at close hand. For this precise reason, we decided not to turn him away. Because the French were so tolerant of our activities, we expected no trouble from that quarter. If they wanted to spy on us – well, we could see no great harm in it.

We suggested that he serve on the MAHAL planning staff. After all, we had to make use of all the expertise at our disposal, even though we suspected him of being a double agent. His task was to draw up an operational plan: the number of men required, the categories of personnel, the cadre of officers, the proper equipment, and so on. He agreed and went to work energetically. Spy or not, he proved to be quite helpful.

When we were conducting negotiations with agents of the Polish government, our Austrian officer prepared a list of the types and quantities of arms we required to equip a fighting division. Of course, he had no idea why we needed such a list, and we were not about to let him find out.

True to his word, he occasionally brought us news of goings-on in the French Secret Service. These bulletins, which contained no information of substance or importance, confirmed our suspicions about his working for the French.

By going along with this harmless charade, we were able to deter the French from using other means of surveillance that would have been less palatable to us. We paid him 30,000 francs (120 dollars) per month and were pleased that, for this relatively small sum, we were able to satisfy the curiosity of the establishment on whose good graces we depended.

Our recruitment officers operated for a few weeks in Belgium, France, England, Germany, and several other countries. Hundreds of officers and men from various armies enlisted.

Our original plan was to mobilize an entire division consisting of Irgun soldiers from the Diaspora and additional volunteers from among veterans of the Allied armies – a total of about 5,000 men completely equipped with arms and transport.

The *Altalena*'s departure was scheduled for the first of May. But by mid-April, it became clear to us that assembling an entire division before then would be technically impossible. The Irgun High Command in Eretz Israel was urging us to transport our arms to the front without delay. Together we reached a compromise solution. We would reduce our goal to 1,000 men who already had undergone Irgun training. We knew that we would be able to mobilize this many men quickly without further delaying the *Altalena*'s departure. It was a compromise that we made with a great deal of regret, but we had no other choice.

Within the limitations imposed by this compromise, Irgun trainees were naturally to be given preference over MAHAL recruits. And so our large-scale recruitment efforts came to a halt. Time had run out for us. Only a handful of MAHAL volunteers were taken on board the *Altalena*. They were mostly from English-speaking countries and had arrived immediately prior to the ship's departure. We were loathe to send them back.

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Irgun Soldiers from the Diaspora

The great majority of those who sailed on the *Altalena* came from Italy, Austria, and Germany – about 200 people from each of these countries and mostly survivors of concentration camps. After liberation by the Allied armies, they were kept in the UNRRA displaced persons camps awaiting opportunities for permanent resettlement; but few doors were open to them. Their very survival through the worst nightmare in the history of the civilized world meant that these men were fighters of extreme resilience and courage. After what they had been through, after what they had witnessed, they were willing to fight for the creation of a Jewish homeland.

The Italian branch of the Irgun was the oldest unit in the Diaspora and the best organized. Its members came as a disciplined unit, properly outfitted in khaki uniforms, provided with backpacks and field equipment. The men had passed a medical examination by a committee of doctors drawn from our sympathizers in Italy. Fifteen candidates

were disqualified from sailing aboard the *Altalena*, but subsequently, they were sent to Israel on immigrant boats.

The first commander of the Italian unit was Yaakov Lotan (Dan), a veteran of the Jewish Brigade that had fought with the British army during World War II. Dan was instructed by the Irgun staff to remain in Italy after the war ended. He set a high standard of devotion and idealism to the men under his command. Later, he was transferred to France, and David Listenberg (Yehezkiel) took over the command in Italy. Yehezkiel was the one to march the Italian unit aboard the *Altalena*. Their second in command was Yehiel Kadishai, also of the Jewish Brigade.

The Italian branch paid all their own daily expenses through the sale of their UNRRA food packages, which were issued regularly to refugees through the Joint Distribution Committee. Our men were able to amass thousands of dollars from their sales; and in each branch of the Irgun, this money was kept in a fund allocated for use by local members.

The entire Italian contingent traveled by train from Milan to Marseilles, where a special camp was set up for them. Reuven Franko, one of the fugitives who had accompanied Yaakov Meridor in his daring escape from Kenya, greeted the contingent at the Italian-French border. Reuven had French visas for all the men.

Our Austrian branch suffered setbacks before its men succeeded in making their way to the assembly point in Marseilles.

When Yehoshua Hacohen, commander of the Austrian Irgun unit, applied to the French consul in occupied Austria for French visas, he received a blunt refusal. Meanwhile, the group bound for Marseilles had gathered in Linz and was forced to remain there until the matter was straightened out. Yehoshua notified Paris immediately, and one of our

sympathizers, Mme. Weide, left Paris immediately for a talk with the Consul. Mme. Weide was a French citizen who headed an organization for exiles and refugees in Paris; but despite her knowledge of regulations and her weighty arguments, she failed to sway the Consul.

She then telephoned the authorities in Paris responsible for transit visas and explained that 250 Jews, awaiting their release from the displaced persons camps en route to Eretz Israel, were being detained in Austria because of the Consul's obstinacy. It was a Friday afternoon, when all the offices at the consulate had already officially closed for the weekend. Mme. Weide's urgent appeal was so persuasive that the authorities promised the Consul's full cooperation. If the group in Austria applied that same evening, she was told, visas would be issued immediately.

When the Irgun representatives arrived at the Consulate at the appointed time, the Consul confirmed that he was ready to issue the visas. He was astounded to find that our men had only slips of paper on which UNRRA had certified that they were refugees who resided in camps. These scanty documents included no photographs nor any other official stamps or verification. Nevertheless, the Consul followed his instructions from Paris. He had no choice this time.

Since it was after working hours, the Consulate was empty; and there were no clerks to help with all the technical work of signing and stamping hundreds of documents and filling in the necessary personal data on each one. Ever willing to lend a helping hand, our men offered their clerical assistance to the Consul.

Several of the refugees sat down at desks and set about the necessary paperwork under the supervision of the Consul. In the course of the work, it turned out that there were thirty more travelers than there were UNRRA identity papers. Since it was too late to have recourse to any official

procedure, the Consul gave in to our men's suggestion that he issue a "collective visa" for the thirty extra men.

Such bureaucrats love protocol; but out of desperation, the Consul agreed to this proposal. Wearily, he asked for the names of the thirty men. Not even daring to look him in the eye, the self-appointed head of the Irgun "clerks" explained that there was no time to ferret out the names. Would the Consul please grant the visa to thirty men who would temporarily remain nameless? Throwing up his hands, the Consul agreed even to this. By this time, he was ready to agree to anything and signed the collective visa for thirty men named John Doe.

The Consul himself accompanied the men to the railroad station, where they boarded special coaches sporting Israeli flags. Two hundred and fifty Irgun men stood up and sang "Hatikva" as the train left the station.

The train journey through Austria turned into a day of festivity for the Jewish communities along the way. Word of the Irgun contingent traveled faster than the train. At each stop where Jews lived, crowds greeted the passengers with gifts of fruit and provisions. The accumulated food sufficed for the entire trip to Marseilles.

With the departure of the British from Eretz Israel, it made sense to liquidate the underground in the Diaspora and, to concentrate all our men and property in Israel. The war with the Arabs was so desperate that it became imperative to send all our strength to the front.

And yet, we were still uncertain as to whether the British would return through some political or military back door. Some held the view that the British had left the country confident that the Jewish community would not survive the onslaught of the Arabs. Jewish Agency leaders would then ask the British to return as protectors.

This was not as far-fetched as it sounded. There were

those in the Jewish Agency who stubbornly clung to the notion that the Jewish nation could only be established through the authority of an outside world power and that the British, because of the original intent of the Balfour Declaration, were destined to play this historic role for the Jews.

We reasoned that the British might well return either through the machinations of the Jewish Agency or a re-assertion of power by the British themselves. Our war with them was not necessarily over. This in itself seemed a valid argument for not liquidating all the resources of the underground in the Diaspora.

Another consideration – although it was quite distasteful to us – was the possibility that our forces would be unable to hold back the Arab invaders. The Jews in the Diaspora would then have to be ready for a counter-offensive with their entire strength and all the means at their disposal. In such an event, our underground cells remaining in the Diaspora would constitute the nuclei of fighting units for a new war of liberation.

I must stress that in our hearts we thought this a most unlikely outcome. We had faith that we would not be defeated and that we would deliver a crushing blow to the enemy. We saw this war as an extraordinary opportunity to win Israel in its entirety and to establish a secure and viable state. Yet, in every war, fighters are obliged to prepare contingency plans for retreat and counter-offensive in case of failure in the first round.

These considerations led us to a temporary postponement of the complete liquidation of our underground organization in the Diaspora, even though the general aim was still to transfer all forces to Eretz Israel for the immediate war against the Arabs. We ordered the men to leave their arms behind just in case we would need the arms in the

future and also not to endanger the passage of our men across Europe.

Two hundred ingenious members of the German group, headed by Dov Shilansky (speaker of Israel's Knesset since 1988) and Bezalel Singer, did manage to bring their weapons along. They rented special coaches on the train for their trip. When they saw that they were to travel unsupervised, they decided to try their luck and loaded the crates of arms and ammunition into the coaches together with their suitcases and knapsacks. They did this upon their own initiative. Those responsible would certainly have been punished if something had gone wrong.

At this time, food was scarce throughout war-ravaged Europe. The men prepared several bottles of good cognac and sandwiches; and when they arrived at the border, they invited the customs officials to partake of this fare. The officials drank, ate, and enjoyed the lively company of the men; and as hoped, they did not bother to examine the coaches. Despite the clever strategies of our soldiers, it also seemed that an aura of beneficence surrounded Jews immigrating to Eretz Israel; because all over Europe, the authorities looked the other way.

Even our unit from Czechoslovakia, which was already ruled by a communist regime, encountered no difficulties in leaving the country. Irgun's Czech branch, headed by one of our ablest local commanders, Zvi Epstein, sent the *Altalena* about 75 men, all of whom had received several months of military training in the Carpathian mountains.

When the unit was ready to leave, our men applied to the Czech foreign office for visas and explained that the purpose of their trip was immigration to Eretz Israel. They were received warmly and given full assistance. In accordance with lists presented by our representative, the

Czech authorities issued special travel documents including exit visas from the country.

The Czechs laid down one explicit condition that these documents would irrevocably invalidate Czech citizenship. A recipient of such a document who might change his mind about immigrating to Israel would nevertheless have lost his Czech citizenship forever. All of the men accepted this condition without reservations.

The Czech border guards and customs officials accorded our men sympathy and kindness after being apprised of their destination. Difficulties arose, however, when the group had to pass through Germany on their way to France. Transit across Germany required a special visa issued by the military government of the Allies which, of course, included Britain. The governing body located in Prague had refused to issue the transit visas on the strength of the objections of its British representative.

We were in a quandary as to how to rescue this group from Czechoslovakia. Someone suggested that we charter two or three airplanes to transport the men over Germany without transit visas. Our Paris staff began to work on this angle; but then, at the last moment, the matter was resolved by the American representative on the Allied committee in Prague. Without even trying to persuade his British counterpart, the American went to the central office with the men's identity papers and validated the necessary documents by his own hand. This act of humanitarian generosity and understanding saved the day for our group.

Aaron Green came from the U.S. He had never been even remotely connected with Judaism or Zionism; but constant references to the underground's war with the British which had captured the imagination of the American press, reminded Aaron that he was born Jewish. Gradually feelings of identification with his fighting brothers in Eretz

Israel began to move him, and he became a true patriot. Eventually he gave up his job and started working for the *Hebrew Committee* in New York. When the *Altalena* arrived in Marseilles, Aaron was on board. From Marseilles, he went on to Paris. He was also on board when it sailed from Port de Bouc for Eretz Israel.

Joe Cohen had also been an assimilated Jew. Like Aaron Green, he was inspired by newspaper accounts of the heroic battles in Eretz Israel. Joe had been an American super-commando during World War II and had been sent to the Pacific to fight the Japanese. His regiment fought in some of the most difficult and dangerous battles, and few of the men remained alive after they had cleared the dozens of islands in the Pacific Ocean of Japanese resistance. Joe was one of the fortunate ones who survived after being seriously wounded. When he recovered, he went right back to the front and fought again until the war ended. When he came home, he vowed that he would never fight again but would devote his future to raising a family in a peaceful home. He opened a small store in his home town and became a businessman.

Then came the war in Eretz Israel to disturb his tranquility. He dropped everything and volunteered for the War of Independence. He joined the Irgun and, together with Aaron Green, was Abrasha's right-hand man on the *Altalena*. He arrived in Israel on the *Altalena* and volunteered for a fighting unit in Jerusalem. In August 1948, he fell in action.

Our men streamed in from their respective countries – fifteen in all – to southern France, leaving behind a few activists to keep the flame alive until we would no longer need men and arms in the Diaspora to support Israeli soldiers. Some volunteers appeared virtually at the last moment; others had to fly to Marseilles upon their arrival

in Paris in order to board on time. There was a total of 940 volunteers of whom 120 were women.

When we realized that we would not be able to round up more than this number by the time the anchor was raised, we proposed to representatives of the Haganah in Paris that they send two or three thousand of the refugees under their care to Eretz Israel aboard our ship. At that time, there were several thousand immigrants concentrated in Haganah camps in southern France and Italy awaiting transportation. We knew that there would be no ships in the next few weeks and that these people would remain immobile for some time to come. Keeping thousands of idle, restless people in close quarters was both difficult and expensive, and a waste of manpower in light of the tremendous needs in Israel. And yet, after a delay of several weeks, the Haganah representatives refused to let their people sail aboard the *Altalena*.

The official reason for their refusal was that the *Altalena* was too well known to the British agents, but obviously, if we had had several thousand Haganah immigrants aboard the ship, it would have been impossible for Ben Gurion to claim later that the Irgun was using the *Altalena* to stage a putsch against his government.

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Final Preparations

In the final ten hectic days before the *Altalena*'s departure, it was necessary to assemble the Irgun volunteers from throughout the world, process them through transit camps, transport our cache of arms to Port de Bouc, round up all equipment and provisions that had been purchased or donated, and complete the final arrangements by attending to thousands of minute details. Yet with all this back-breaking work, our staff was enthusiastic and high-spirited. No one collapsed and no one dodged responsibility, but I doubt whether we could have kept up that pace much longer.

David Danon (Rami) was in charge of our Marseilles transit camps, aided by the brothers Louis and Bernard Vogel. Rami had been my friend in Eretz Israel, but had left to study medicine abroad. In Israel's hour of need, he abandoned his university studies and volunteered to help. He was responsible for the housing, medical care, food, and

personal problem-solving for 940 volunteer soldiers. Poor Rami lost many pounds during the last two weeks before departure. His tired, deathly pale face, red sunken eyes, and unshaven stubble made Rami himself resemble someone who had just emerged from a forced labor camp after a ten-year sentence. Eventually, he completed his studies and became a prominent professor of medicine in Israel.

Yaakov Hillel, who was stationed in the South of France, was in charge of packing, storing, and transporting our arms to the port. He had arrived from Kenya after his escape from the Gilgil prison near Nairobi, healthy and energetic; but in the frenzy of our work, he became frighteningly thin. His normally full, resonant voice was reduced to a hoarse whisper; his clothes hung sacklike around his frame. He would suddenly fall asleep in the midst of a conversation like an old man.

There were many others – regular staff members and volunteers – all working tirelessly, around the clock, with no sleep and no complaints.

Eli Tavin was in charge of all problems dealing with people. Irgun staff and volunteers would turn to him with every conceivable difficulty, and he had to be ready to find a solution on the spot.

From an organizational standpoint, Eli headed Irgun's "personnel empire" in the Diaspora. It was up to him to process the men for rank and technical assignment, allot the limited space aboard the *Altalena*, provide visas, arrange for their transportation, prepare the transit camp, and coordinate everything so that the men would all arrive on time.

In the earlier stages of the operation, he toured the various countries that were contributing Irgun volunteers in order to instruct the local branches about all the details of their travel arrangements. The High Command in the

Diaspora had decided that only those men who had basic military training would be allowed to board the ship. Eli had to classify each man on every list and set a quota for each branch of the armed forces.

Adept at disguises and *chutzpah*, he traveled from Czechoslovakia to Vienna with a false passport as a Greek merchant and then proceeded from Vienna to the American zone in Austria with the passport of an Austrian gentile who was blond, tall, and 22 years old (Eli was dark, medium height, and 30 years of age.) The Russians, at least, were not sticklers for details. Eli traveled from Vienna through the Russian zone on a sleeping coach, leaving his passport on a ledge nearby. When the Russian officials entered his coach, they found the "Austrian citizen" facing the wall deep in sleep. They were too polite to wake him and contented themselves with examining the passport. The number of stamps from various countries attested to the fact that the owner of the passport had undergone the authorities' monthly checks since its issue, and the officials were satisfied. They affixed their own stamps and proceeded on their way.

Once Eli had to enter an American military installation in Nuremberg, Germany. At the gate stood an orderly who examined entry permits. The best Eli had been able to do was to borrow the permit of a female American clerk who worked in that zone. Noticing that other clerks approached the gate, took out their permits, and merely waved them in front of the military policeman, Eli tried the same strategy. The policeman saluted and let him in; but as luck would have it, an officer standing near the gate decided to examine the permit a little more closely. Eli had no choice but to remove his thumb from the girl's picture. When the officer demanded an explanation, Eli fished in his pockets as if looking for his permit; joking all the while at his mistake in exchanging permits with a woman. He managed to extricate

himself by phoning the owner of the permit, who succeeded in minimizing the incident in order to obviate troubles for both of them.

Eli was known among us as the ablest of all conspirators. He even succeeded in hiding his identity from British Intelligence, which was keenly interested in all our operations. Thus, when officers of Scotland Yard presented the list of Eretz Israeli terrorists who might endanger the life of Princess Elizabeth on her visit to Paris, Eli's name was not on the list. He was the only one of us who roamed about freely at the time.

Eli managed the enormously complex business of the Irgun on street corners, in coffee houses, public parks, and subway stations. He would literally run from meeting to meeting, remembering all the appointed times and places without writing anything down.

His main mode of communication with his associates was by telephone. He would make long distance calls to five or six countries, each conversation from a different phone to avoid detection. At other times, he would spend whole nights by the telephone waiting for a call. No one knew when he slept and when he rose, but he always seemed alert and vigorous. None of us ever heard him complain of fatigue which afflicted all of us in those days.

Just as he was unrelenting with himself, Eli knew how to squeeze every ounce of strength out of those who were assigned to work for him. He did not consider anyone's comfort when there was a task to be done, demanding performance without excuses from his men – and woe be to those who were negligent!

Early in May 1948, a man came to us, introduced himself as a physician, showed us his diplomas and asked to join the fighting underground. He announced his intention of serving as a physician in Eretz Israel. He required no salary;

he would provide for himself and for his family during his absence. If he could not serve as a physician, he would volunteer as a soldier. He had been in the French Underground and was familiar with arms. We offered him the job of *Altalena*'s physician and he accepted without hesitation. This was our Dr. Lazarev.

He began to prepare for the trip almost at once. He came to our office each morning and worked diligently and meticulously in organizing a group of physicians and pharmacists to collect medical supplies. We turned over one of the rooms of the *Hebrew Committee* on Avenue de Messine to him, and it was soon filled with crates, boxes, bottles and other medical paraphernalia.

Dr. Lazarev set up a hospital wing aboard the ship with a perfect, fully-equipped surgery. Medicines and drugs donated by our generous sympathizers were loaded onto the ship in quantities sufficient to equip several additional hospitals in Israel. We even got penicillin, which was rare in those days.

In order to supervise the final preparations properly, we set up an executive staff consisting of Meridor, Ben-Eliezer (until they left for Israel), Tavin, Katz and me. Those of us who were not away from Paris on assignment met daily. We summarized our problems and drew up guidelines for the next day. These sessions resulted in greater coordination among us and meant that major decisions were made by consensus. This also meant that we could share the responsibility for our policy decisions.

Our last task before sailing was to set up a powerful broadcasting station in France so that those of the High Command who stayed behind could remain in communication with the ship. The station was constructed on one of the old estates in one of the suburbs of Paris belonging to an American citizen and sympathizer. Our Scientific Council

in Paris was assigned the job of setting up the station for us and seeing to it that it worked.

I have never been able to ascertain why, in the end, our radio contact failed. When I was leaving Paris on my way to the ship, the transmitter was already functioning at the villa, broadcasting towers were in place, and all that was needed was a field test. The station was expected to communicate with the ship and, if possible, with Israel as well.

At the end of May, about two weeks before the *Altalena* sailed, we sent Natan Germant to Israel to arrange the technical details involved in landing on the shores of the homeland.

We still did not know where the ship would dock and unload the huge cargo of arms and equipment. The political situation in Israel at that time was extremely complex.

In mid-December 1947, after the British announced their departure date as May 15, and the *Yishuv* faced the imminent threat of an Arab attack. As a result, the Jewish Agency and the Irgun began initial talks on the need to join forces. The negotiations dragged on for months, complicated by the Agency's ambivalence about proclaiming a Jewish State, their blind reliance on the U.N., and residual subservience to the British.

Ben Gurion and some Haganah leaders were fiercely opposed to these negotiations and tried to abort them. Irgun leaders were urging the establishment of a provisional government by the Jewish Agency on or before May 15. They offered to disband Irgun forces throughout whatever territory was claimed by the government and to place Irgun manpower and resources at the disposal of the new government. Menachem Begin reserved the right to establish a provisional government, only if the Jewish Agency failed

to act. Ben Gurion flatly refused the offer still viewing the Irgun as a threat to his government.

However, other factions in the Agency were interested in forging an operational agreement between the Irgun and the Haganah. On March 8, 1948, such an agreement was signed, although its implementation was subject to approval by the Zionist General Council, the governing body of the World Zionist Organization. Ben Gurion and his faction in the Agency opposed this agreement and delayed its approval by the Council until May 1, 1948. The agreement was not made public, even after its approval.

It is important to understand that the *Altalena* was exclusively an Irgun operation under control of the High Command in Israel and led by Menachem Begin; but our goals were national, not partisan. First and foremost, we wanted to bring reinforcements of men and materiel to the embattled Israeli fighters struggling against the Arab invaders.

Another factor, which complicated our plans and put us in a very precarious position, was the U.N. cease-fire proposal that was announced on June 2 even though the date when these terms would go into effect was still under negotiation. We learned about this date only after we sailed.

The High Command in Paris discussed the main problem presented by the cease-fire after its terms were announced. Could the ship evade the U.N. blockade, an attack by the Egyptians or by the British on behalf of the U.N.?

We did not know how secure the country's ports were. We actually considered the possibility that the ports of Haifa and Tel Aviv might be bombed from the air. Germant was detailed to investigate the docking facilities in Israel, not only in the main ports but at any of the deserted beaches that could be approached at night. Fein told Germant what the physical requirements were for landing.

Germant returned to France the day before we were scheduled to sail. He followed us to the port from Paris, informing us that the necessary arrangements were being made in Israel and that the High Command was in contact with the Provisional Government to determine our point of debarkation. There were several possible locations, and we would be informed by radio broadcast from our transmitter in the French countryside. Germant remained with us on the *Altalena*.

Meanwhile, the French press was full of details of bitter battles raging on all of Israel's fronts. A few days prior to sailing, we read that an Arab army had succeeded in conquering Netanya, thus breaking through our front and splitting the Jewish enclave into two large pockets, each totally surrounded by the enemy. Tortured by anxiety, we could not obtain confirmation or denial.

We feared that the number of places under Jewish control would be reduced, especially along the coast and that we would not be able to find a suitable place to anchor. We considered the possibility of landing in the area between Nahariya and Rosh Hanikra, or north of Migdal Gad (now Ashdod). We even thought of landing in territory held by the enemy, creating a bridgehead at the point of debarkation, and breaking through to our lines. We were sure that we could at least create bedlam and panic in the enemy ranks and thus assist our forces in the area to open a major offensive. We kept this plan as a contingency depending on the situation at the front and coordination with our command in Israel.

From a military standpoint, our men and equipment were quite adequate for landing in enemy territory and holding their own for some time. We had enough food to maintain ourselves for two months; and we had filled all the ship's containers with drinking water, which would suffice

for at least two weeks after landing. We even had a stock of cigarettes and matches for several months.

We had to be prepared to stay out at sea for a long period, if it turned out that we could not reach the shore safely. Since this was a realistic possibility, we took this into account when preparing our supplies.

All the equipment, except for the weapons, was assembled at the port a few days before our scheduled departure. The stevedores loaded everything quickly. Even the half-tracks did not arouse suspicion, as they accepted our explanation that these were tractors.

On the night of June 9, the French arms arrived. It is a night that I shall never forget.

All routine work on the dock was suspended, and the workers were sent home. At sundown, only Irgun men bearing special entry and exit passes and representatives of the French authorities were allowed to enter.

As darkness fell, Ariel, Captain Fein, Stavsky, and I stood on the deck in total silence. In the distance, we saw the headlights of a military jeep approaching. As it parked near the ship's ramp, an officer in full military dress hailed us.

"Who is Monsieur Ariel?" he asked; and when Ariel identified himself, the officer saluted and announced that his area commander had sent him to deliver to Monsieur Ariel the quantity of arms on his list. He asked for instructions as to where to unload the arms which would be delivered at once.

Ariel thanked him and introduced all of us. When the formalities were over, we asked that the arms be brought to the dock at the very spot where we stood near the ramp. The officer saluted, climbed into his jeep, and vanished in the darkness.

Twenty anxious minutes passed before we again dis-

cerned lights. This time, it was a convoy approaching in a seemingly endless column. Tens of military trucks advanced, one after another, headed by the officer in his jeep.

When the first truck pulled up in front of us, a group of helmeted French soldiers jumped out and began unloading the crates of arms. As the crates appeared to be very heavy, I requested the officer's permission to send our men to help the soldiers; but he turned this offer down and assured us that they would manage alone.

Truck after truck approached and halted. Each time another group of soldiers jumped out and stacked the crates on the dock by the mooring. Such was the quantity of arms that the unloading went on until two o'clock in the morning. The officer got Ariel's signature on the receipt for the arms, saluted, and then disappeared with his entire convoy. In our exhaustion and in our elation, the whole event seemed no less than a miracle.

A few hours later, the stevedores returned to work and began to carry our crates aboard. I do not know whether the longshoremen – many of whom were North Africans – had their suspicions about these unusually heavy crates being loaded onto a ship bound for Israel.

The morning the crates were being loaded, we read a report in one of the French papers of a Jewish ship docked at Port de Bouc, loading arms to be transported to Israel. There had already been trouble brewing among the large Moslem population on the southern coast of France, especially in Marseilles, against the Jewish immigrants who were temporarily housed in camps in the area. While our soldiers were still in these camps, we had heard rumors of a planned night attack by the Moslems on our people. We stationed guards at the periphery of the camps and were prepared to give the attackers a rousing reception. At the same time, we had also taken the precaution of

informing the local police of the rumors, in order to stay on the government's good side. There was no attack, and we transferred our men to Port de Bouc without disturbance.

As the news broke, Arab agents became very active in the area. They approached the stevedores with political rhetoric and threats, urging them to strike.

The stevedores, thus intimidated, employed a ruse that is well-known in all ports. While using a crane to load our cargo, they let one crate fall onto the pier. It smashed open and rifles spilled out everywhere.

As soon as this happened, the stevedores stopped work, protesting to the port authorities that illegal arms were being loaded onto the ship. Meanwhile members of our crew came out and collected the rifles from the broken crate; but there was no one to continue the mechanized loading.

We were successful in convincing the French authorities not to investigate the nature of our cargo. With a reinforcement of a few dozen youngsters from our camp, we continued loading the crates by hand, with some mechanical aid provided by the ship's one operable crane. The work was tedious. The boys worked steadily in shifts all that day and the next night. On the morning of June 11, nothing remained on the loading platform.

At that juncture, it suited us that the port was completely deserted because of the strike. Once the loading was finished, our men from the camps arrived. In the uncharacteristic quiet, 940 soldiers of the Irgun boarded the *Altalena*.

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On the High Seas

Sailing of *Altalena* on June 11, 1948, will forever remain for me the crowning event of my work in the Diaspora. It was also the last lap in my return home after three-and-a-half years of imprisonment and exile.

Eli used the ship's loudspeaker to conduct the embarkation and board the men and women by country of origin. Dusk was falling when an exhausted Eli completed his task. He was to remain behind for a while to tidy up our affairs. We took leave of him and waved farewell to those on the pier who had come to see us off. The captain ordered the crew to weigh anchor. In the twilight, the ship began to drift away in the wake of the harbor pilot's launch. Suddenly, we caught sight of someone in the launch waving to us. Eli had boarded the launch to accompany us a little further toward the Promised Land.

Soon the shores of France disappeared, and we were on the high seas.

Our first desire was to sleep, sleep, sleep; to relax from the terrible tension of all the preceding days, to forget everything for a few hours; to rest; to close our eyes.

But that night, we had much to do and did not lie down to sleep until long after midnight.

All arrangements had been made in advance. The unit commanders had visited the ship before the men boarded and assigned the berths. Dr. Lazarev checked conditions at the infirmary and determined the division of labor among his aides, a special group from among the men was appointed as a police unit headed by Joe Cohen. Natan Germant, who was in charge of the arsenal, had made his own arrangements. Space had been assigned for personal baggage. The kitchen had received reinforcements for preparing the evening meal, and so on and so forth.

Nevertheless, there were mishaps – something missing here, some obstruction there, some previously planned arrangement proving unworkable. Abrasha Stavsky, who was appointed the ship's purser, ran about carrying misplaced bags, moving crates, arguing with the chief cook, and handling hundreds of unforeseen details. It was as though he had forgotten that he had not slept for nights on end and that he had been on his feet for some twenty hours. The other heads of departments, the captain, and the sailors were also busy working out unexpected problems.

That night, we heard a BBC radio broadcast containing two news items that had special significance for us. There was an announcement that the truce in Israel had gone into effect that very day of June 11. The battles had stopped on all fronts. One condition of the cease-fire was a ban on the import of arms or men of military age to the shores of Israel.

We also heard on the BBC broadcast that an Irgun ship had sailed from Port de Bouc in the direction of Israel, loaded with great quantities of arms and hundreds of young

men. We had not expected this international announcement of our secret mission.

That night, and every night thereafter, we tried to make contact by wireless with our command in Israel. There was no response to our calls. To our horror, we also failed to make radio contact with our broadcasting station in France. Only then did we realize that the greatest flaw in all our preparations was the lack of a communication back-up in the event of a loss of radio contact. In our feverish haste to sail, we had neglected this basic contingency.

We learned much later that Shmuel Katz, who had remained in Paris, had received an urgent cable from Israel instructing him to stop the ship from sailing. He was distraught at this strange request but could not comply as he no longer had any contact with us. Therefore, he advised the IZL High Command to contact us directly; but their transmitter was not sufficiently powerful, and their efforts were of no avail. So, we continued to sail cut off from our command in Israel and from the staff in Paris.

In the months of organizing the *Altalena* project, we had not been concerned with the physical danger inherent in this operation. We had spoken of the possibility of an attack upon us, but we had not spent enough time preparing for this possibility. Now with all the world apprised of our movements, the probability of an attack stared us brutally in the face.

Abrasha and I closeted ourselves in the captain's quarters, and for the first time began to ask ourselves some hard questions. What if we are bombed? What if we run into a mine in our path? What if we are torpedoed? We sat together for long hours that first night, assailed by doubts. Should we have undertaken this perilous project? Was it right to endanger so many lives when we had made no adequate provisions for their protection?

After our long night of soul-searching, we decided that,

despite all the hazards of the *Altalena* venture, we would have failed our fighting brothers had we not attempted it. We regarded the war in Israel as a life-and-death struggle for the 600,000 men, women and children of the *Yishuv*. We knew that they were fighting with a terrible shortage of guns and that the quantity of equipment and arms aboard the *Altalena* could change the course of the war. In such a situation, we decided that when people at the front were waiting for our help and were likely to fail without it, it was our duty to help them under any conditions – even if the risk was high.

It was our conviction that the vast quantities of arms we were bringing to Israel would determine the outcome of the war. Of what significance was the *Altalena* with its 1,000 people, when the fate of the entire Jewish population in Israel was in the balance?

Despite the fact that we had little defense against a possible attack by air, sea, or submarine, we decided to prepare as best we could. We installed tripods along the deck on both sides and put 24 Bren guns and some Browning machine guns (our heaviest arms) beside them. We knew these guns were not adequate as anti-aircraft weapons, but we hoped that machine-gun fire would at least deter low-flying aircraft. This constituted our total anti-aircraft defense system.

We had no heavy weapons at all on board, although we could have had if we had agreed to wait about two more weeks before sailing. We had planned to suggest to the High Command in Israel that the *Altalena* make a second voyage to Europe and return with a substantial load of heavy weapons and armored vehicles.

Another precautionary measure we took was to steer a zigzag course, asking Captain Fein to avoid the regular channels used by merchant ships in the Mediterranean.

We kept the Bren guns near the tripods but unmounted

to provide some camouflage during daylight hours. We had a regular watch on the ship's bridge to sound a warning in case of danger. When any dot appeared on the horizon, an alert was sounded, and everyone except the anti-aircraft personnel went below.

The day after our departure from France, we began military drills on deck.

A special group of 120 men, which we called the Fifth Squadron, was formed from among the volunteers to serve as a commando unit to perform special combat missions in Israel. The nucleus of this group was the unit of men from America and Britain – about 40 men most of whom were veteran fighters from World War II. The Fifth Squadron was headed by Pinchas. Besides being an ex-British Infantry captain, Pinchas had been one of the founders of the English-speaking contingent of Irgun soldiers for the *Altalena*. He arrived in Paris several weeks before our departure and had taken part in the preparations.

Two lieutenants were the training officers for the Fifth Squadron. Avraham was an experienced veteran of the British army, a parachutist and a commando who had been dropped into occupied France during the war to operate behind enemy lines. Gerry was a former American Marine who had been trained for forays in the Pacific islands held by the Japanese. Gerry Salaman was a typical combat man – a short, stocky pugilist, at his peak after three years of active combat against the Japanese. He was also blessed with a mild disposition and was a great favorite among the men, famous on board for his unchallenged prowess as a boxer.

The Squadron trained intensively from morning till night. They climbed the rigging, leaped down, vaulted over all sorts of obstacles, ran, and crawled. In a few short days, they were consolidated into a fighting unit and assigned as the ship's guard.

During their second phase of training, the Squadron worked on landing tactics. Had we been forced to land on Israel's shores in enemy-held territory, this unit would have served as the vanguard assuring the safe landing of the entire force.

We "published" an oral newspaper twice daily, relaying news from Israel and the world at large that we were able to pick up from various radio transmitters. We had a microphone in the command room with loudspeakers installed all over the ship and broadcast in Hebrew and Yiddish. By means of our public address system, we were also able to relay instructions, orders, lectures, and alarm signals.

The volunteers manned various posts in the kitchen and storerooms and served as military police to maintain order. The *ad-hoc* police took over a cabin for the detention of the few who broke disciplinary rules.

A special group headed by Germant was in charge of the weapons. Almost all the guns were coated with a thick layer of grease to guard them from dampness in the ship's hold, then were packed in crates. The Bren guns for aerial defense, 30 or 40 rifles, and other weapons needed for training were under the constant eye of those volunteers charged with their care, storage and issue.

On our second day out, a young man from the French unit appeared in the command room and announced that he wanted to be married. We were taken aback by this extraordinary request. We found a young rabbi among the United States contingent; but he refused to marry the couple because he was not acquainted with their past and could not ascertain whether they were both truly single. Besides, he had no proof that the woman was of Jewish descent, and this was normally required under the Halachic laws of Judaism.

On their part, the couple were firm in their resolve to wed on the *Altalena*. They did not know what awaited them in Israel, which was in a state of war; and it was doubtful whether they would find time to perform their nuptials once they got there.

We saw their point and decided to perform a civil ceremony. The Seamen's Regulations vested Captain Fein with the authority to perform various rites pertaining to the personal status of his passengers, including marriages.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, the entire battalion was invited on deck. I officiated, clad in clean khaki clothes. The Captain wore his dress uniform and was the "rabbi." He blessed the couple in a brief address, wished them a life of bliss, and pronounced them lawfully wedded as husband and wife. The couple received a typewritten certificate signed by witnesses and the captain.

After the ceremony, a modest feast was served on deck. We brought up several bottles of wine and rusks from the galley, and we danced to the strains of music from accordions, guitars, mouth organs, balalaikas, and violins.

The sailors doubled up in sleeping quarters and vacated a cabin for the young couple.

Late that night, when the festivities had ended, Abrasha, the captain, and I sat in the radio room trying to contact the High Command in Israel. We had almost given up when, through the static, we heard a young woman's voice calling our code names. We practically jumped from our chairs. Pressing close to the receiver, I recognized the voice of Yael, Menachem Begin's personal secretary. For several long minutes, she called our names with great emotion, then she said in English: "Listen to me: Keep away! Keep away!"

She repeated this message several times. Then her voice faded, and we heard only static again. We tried repeatedly

to tune in to the same frequency, but our efforts were in vain. We remained seated at the radio with the last two words of Yael's message reverberating in our ears.

The only plausible explanation we could imagine was that the High Command had learned of some grave danger awaiting us, if we approached the shores of Israel. Such a hazard had weighed on our minds from the first day, but now we had tangible confirmation of our worst fears.

On the following day, we sat by the receiver for hours, hoping to renew our contact with Israel; but it was evident that their signal was too weak to reach us. It must have been only by chance that we had been able to hear Yael's words of warning during the night.

If we could have communicated with the High Command directly, we would have been able to clarify Menachem's instruction to keep away; but those isolated words, as doleful as they sounded, did not carry sufficient weight to scrap the entire operation. We knew that by now all the countries along our route were apprised that the *Altalena* was an Irgun ship bringing arms and men to Israel. Because of the U.N. cease-fire, our entry into any port would have immediately led to an international incident and certain detention.

We felt that we had no choice but to carry on, even without contact. Looking back now, I am sure that there was a part of me that wished to ignore the warning, because I hoped it was not true. After all our months of work and hope and sweat and danger, it was almost unbearable to contemplate the thought of the *Altalena*'s precious cargo never reaching the shores of Israel.

I told Fein to continue en route to Israel with all possible speed. As we approached her shores, I reasoned that we would be able to renew contact with our Command, ascertain the precise situation, where and if there was danger,

and what to do next.

The *Altalena* could sail along at 14 knots. Her engines were in excellent working order, the sea was amazingly calm, and we sailed without any problem. Each day and night at the times that had been designated in the original plan, we sat glued to our radio; but the call from Israel never came. We continued to make for the shores of the homeland without knowing what was in store.

We decided that if we had not succeeded in making contact with Israel by the last day of our voyage, we would open the ammunition boxes and fully equip all the men for combat. The Fifth Squadron could then practice a real landing in hostile territory.

We waited, keeping our guns crated as long as possible. Unloading packed cargo is immeasurably easier and safer than having to handle 5,000 rifles, 250 Bren guns, 250 Spandau machine guns and other weapons one at a time. Fortunately, we were not required to open the crates.

On June 19, our eighth morning out, while we were at a distance of 220 miles from the shore, we raised a signal from our command's transmitter in Israel. Suddenly they could hear us, and we could hear them. We carried on our conversation in code. Such was my concern about precision in this decisive moment that I insisted on decoding each transmittal personally.

We informed the High Command of our location and advised them that we could arrive that very evening. We asked for directions and inquired about security on the coast. When we demanded to know where we were to drop anchor, the reply was, "Advance to Kfar Vitkin. We will direct you to the exact spot by our prearranged signals with a red lantern."

Kfar Vitkin!

When I decoded the words "Kfar Vitkin," I thought I had erred and began over again. Again, I came up with the

same words. I was not mistaken. I knew well enough that Kfar Vitkin was the stronghold of the Haganah.

If Begin was ordering us to anchor at Kfar Vitkin – the lion's den of the Irgun's political adversaries in Israel – then an agreement must have been negotiated between us. This was a clear sign of cooperation in the *Altalena*'s landing – a sign of internal harmony, of brotherhood. Beside myself with joy, I relayed the good news to Abrasha and explained it to Fein who was unschooled in the complexities of internal politics in Israel.

For the first time since the beginning of the voyage, we were heartened and our outlook brightened considerably. Finally, we were bringing our venture to a successful conclusion. We had traversed a dangerous route and were coming home. In a few hours we would see the shore! In truth, I had not entertained many hopes of a safe landing, especially after that warning from Israel to "keep away!"

At noon, we received a message from Israel saying that in two hours time, an Israeli Air Force plane would fly over and guide us ashore. The operator reported the plane's distinguishing markings so that we would not fire on it. We notified our "anti-aircraft" crew, and the information about the plane spread quickly. Everyone was delirious with joy. A few months later, I learned that Israel Galili, who was Deputy Minister of Defense under Ben Gurion and Chief of the Haganah, and Yaakov Meridor were supposed to be aboard the plane to greet us.

When the plane failed to appear at the appointed hour, we demanded an explanation and were told that technical reasons seemed to have caused a delay.

The sun was setting when the shores of Israel appeared on the horizon. It was June 20, 1948. Our Zionist volunteers from all over the world – soldiers, exiles, concentration camp survivors, people who had lost so much and had so much to gain – all clung to the deck railings and strained

their eyes. The promise that was as old as the history of man was suddenly to be fulfilled. There was Israel. We had reached the Promised Land.

Darkness fell, and we sailed closer to shore and looked for signals by the red lantern. At the first glimmer of red lights, we edged even closer; but as outlines of buildings and patterns of light emerged, it was clear that this place was not Kfar Vitkin. Examining his charts, the Captain explained to me that our zigzag course had apparently misled us to the shore south of Tel Aviv. The red lights we had seen were the wrong ones. We stood on the deck of the *Altalena* facing a city shrouded in darkness, not knowing precisely where we were.

We lowered a boat and sent Germant ashore to identify our location. As his launch neared the shore, we heard shots. Some anxious minutes later, he informed us by walkie-talkie that coast guardsmen had opened fire when they saw a boat approaching. Germant and his crew had identified themselves as loyal Jews, and no one was hurt. Speaking with the guardsmen, he confirmed that we were indeed facing Tel Aviv. Kfar Vitkin lay some 25 miles to the north.

Already late for our appointed contact, we immediately turned north and sped toward Kfar Vitkin.

It was long after midnight when we found Kfar Vitkin and saw the signals of the red lanterns. We could make out a crowd of people on the beach from a distance. From among the many voices, we recognized that of Menachem Begin raised in greeting; but there was no feasible place to land. A few meters of jetty extended from the shore which was suitable perhaps for fishing boats, but there was no place to land the *Altalena*.

We could not fathom why the necessary steps had not been taken in Israel so that we could land and unload quickly. The waves were a meter high, and there was no point in trying to unload the heavy crates in such seas.

Thus, in sight of our goal but unable to reach it, we rode on the swell for what seemed like hours.

Then I heard Menachem Begin calling my underground from the beach with the aid of a megaphone: "Binyamin, sail back to sea for a few hours! Daylight is nearing. Return to us in the evening, right after dark."

The look I exchanged with Fein told me that he shared my feeling of dread. Something was gravely wrong. Still, without a word, he heeded my instruction to weigh anchor; and we headed out to sea once more.

38

Betrayal

We turned away from Kfar Vitkin at about four o'clock in the morning. We divided the seventeen hours remaining till sundown we divided into two: eight-and-a-half hours out to sea and eight-and-a-half hours to sail back to shore. The moment when we turned the *Altalena* around again and began to make headway towards land, a heavy depression seemed to lift from us all. We did not harbor any resentment about Menachem's orders. After all, this was an illegal landing during an international cease-fire. We expected to have to unload our cargo covertly in darkness. If we found fault with anyone, it was with ourselves for getting lost and arriving late the previous night. If we had been on time, we would not have had to put out to sea again.

Our Irgun soldiers were itching to disembark. Their belongings had been packed and at the ready behind the crates of arms since the previous day. The sequence for debarkation had long since been established. After the soldiers, the crates of arms would be ferried ashore. The other

equipment and the thousands of valises and other packages belonging to the volunteers would be unloaded last.

We maintained radio contact with our High Command all day, keeping them informed of our progress. No news and no special bulletins were broadcast.

At nine in the evening, we reached the small jetty at Kfar Vitkin. A motorboat set out from the shore to meet us. As it approached, we saw that it was carrying Menachem Begin.

The heavy gates in the *Altalena*'s bow were opened, a ramp was lowered, and Menachem walked aboard. A spontaneous cry of "Long live Begin!" burst forth from hundreds of throats as the crowd milled around him, drunk with excitement. Their cheers continued until Menachem returned to shore.

We immediately began to unload. First, several sick men were removed from the sick bay, and then the soldiers began to go ashore by units with their commanders leading the way. All their belongings remained in the ship's hold. Only a guard-unit of a few dozen men from the Fifth Squadron remained aboard ship.

Next we began to unload the cargo. The one launch and two life boats at our disposal began to ferry the heavy crates of armaments to the shore. One of these boats carried Fein, Abrasha, and me.

On the beach, khaki-clad men ran about shouting orders; groups marched in all directions; motors revved up. Men were unloading the heavy crates of arms and ammunition with a kind of fanatical ecstasy.

It seemed odd to me that I knew only a few of these "stevedores" from bygone days. How much things had changed in three and a half years! I wondered how many of my comrades had already given their lives in the war.

Milling around among the young men carrying crates were men of the Palmach – obviously kibbutzniks – who

had ostensibly volunteered to help unload the *Altalena*. Menachem introduced them to me, reporting that they had promised to bring a few more boats at dawn to accelerate the slow pace of transferring the arms.

These Palmach men asked if they could board the ship. I agreed and went with them willingly. Passing along the stacks of crates in the hold, they saw the vast arsenal we had brought. They inquired about the precise numbers of everything in the crates, complimented us, and then left with the promise in the morning to help us. We never saw them again. To this day, I am not sure whether or not they had really planned to help us.

In the morning, instead of the Palmach men, we received information trickling in about some military movements in the vicinity of the *Altalena*'s mooring. First, a young man arrived and told us how he had been arrested near Netanya, interrogated about his destination, his unit, and so on. Another young man reported that a car containing Irgun men had been detained on the Netanya road. New messengers told us of a concentration of Israeli soldiers surrounding the debarkation area.

All these stories sounded very strange to me. I knew that Yaakov Meridor had been posted to the Israeli Army General Staff to supervise the transfer of Irgun battalions to the command of the Israeli Army, and that most of the Irgun men had already been inducted and sent to the various fronts. I also knew that we had arrived in Kfar Vitkin upon the orders of the Irgun High Command for the sole purpose of unloading the *Altalena* and that this was being done in accordance with orders from the Israeli Army.

I asked Menachem what the meaning of these conflicting rumors was. He merely smiled and said that it was nothing. He had demanded that twenty percent of the arms we were bringing be sent to Jerusalem. Ben Gurion had not yet replied, but negotiations about the matter would soon draw

to a close. He calmed me and said that there was nothing serious about all the rumors and that we would soon "come to an arrangement" with the government.

And then, in the hours before noon, we received an ultimatum demanding that we turn over all the arms on the Altalena within ten minutes or else "units of the Israeli Defense Forces would employ all the weapons at their disposal to effect this order." The note was signed by Dan Even, the area commander.

I was stunned. "Units of the Israeli Defense Forces would employ all their weapons ...?" Against whom? Why? Had we not come to add to this army's strength, to increase "all the weapons at their disposal" by adding our own weapons as well? I could not fathom the meaning of these threats.

Menachem again tried to calm me. "Don't worry, it will all be straightened out. Yaakov Meridor has already gone to contact the area commander and ask him for an explanation. He will take care of it all."

I returned to the ship. The unloading continued very slowly. The men were tired, and the heat was intense.

As I boarded the *Altalena*, a United Nations airplane appeared overhead, flew low over our ship, circled several times and then disappeared.

A short time later, two Israeli corvettes appeared. They stopped some distance west of our ship, positioned to bar our way to the open sea. Meanwhile, we were informed by our men on shore that Israeli soldiers now surrounded the beachhead. No one could come or go freely.

Several more hours passed in growing suspicion and confusion. In the early evening, while it was still light, we got word that Menachem wanted all the Irgun men in the area to assemble. He was going to update everyone about the details of our negotiations with the government and its promise to help us unload the ship. I returned to the beach

where the men stood in formation as Menachem prepared to speak.

Before his first words reached us, explosions shattered the silence – the rattle of machine guns, the firing of rifles, explosions of mortar shells. Bullets whistled from all directions; mortars burst around us with a deafening report. Menachem shouted for us all to disperse and take cover.

My attention was riveted on the ship. We had thousands of bombs, mortars, and hand grenades still on board. If only one spark from the attack fell in the wrong place, the *Altalena* could blow sky-high.

We held a quick consultation and decided that Meridor would remain on the beach with the men, while Menachem, Abrasha, Merlin, several others, and I would board the ship and sail her to Tel Aviv.

We ran to the launch as bullets whizzed past our ears. As we jumped into the launch, we saw that the *Altalena* was already moving away from the shore. Fein had, apparently on his own initiative, decided to pull the ship away from the rain of bullets and mortars.

We chased after the ship in our launch and gained on her. But before we reached the *Altalena*, we heard a volley of shots from the direction of the two Israeli corvettes that lay between the *Altalena* and the open sea. Fein followed our progress from the captain's bridge. Suddenly, we saw the *Altalena* spin around, taking a defensive position between the two gunboats and ourselves. We realized then that the Israelis had fired on us. If the *Altalena*'s hull had not provided a shield, we might have been killed.

As we pulled alongside her, a rope ladder was lowered down to us and we all climbed aboard. The launch was pulled aboard, and the shooting ceased.

In several minutes, we made radio contact with the corvettes. Their captains ordered us to proceed toward Tel Aviv, and we answered that we would comply. As we

adjusted our course, the two military vessels flanked us on the side of the open sea. Then suddenly they issued new orders to change direction and head out to sea. What could this mean? There was no reason to take us further from Israel's shore unless our "bodyguards" were planning to do away with us.

We decided not to obey this new order and proceeded instead toward Tel Aviv. The corvettes pursued us, but we were faster than they. We soon left them in our wake.

It was already dark when Tel Aviv loomed up on the horizon. We slowed our speed, and we chose a point opposite Frishman Street to drop anchor. We did not want to enter the port, because for all we knew, mines could have been laid there or some other deadly trap.

When the corvettes caught up with us, they fired off a few more rounds; but the fire stopped as soon as we dropped anchor.

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Up in Flames

The *Altalena* stood about 150 meters off the beach at the end of Frishman Street with its bow stuck in a sandbar. The corvettes had turned and left. The night was ominously calm.

Menachem wanted to go ashore and into the city to settle this matter of corvettes and arms allocations. I was adamant that he stay on board. Who knew what harm might befall him in the dark night of Tel Aviv? I was afraid that army guards on shore would open fire on our launch without identifying its occupants. If I had not insisted so stubbornly that Begin stay on board, perhaps the events of the following day would never have taken place. Perhaps Menachem would have found a peaceful solution. On the other hand, perhaps I saved his life that evening.

At daybreak on June 23, the city was calm; the beach was deserted. But as the light grew brighter, we noticed movement among the houses on the shore. Army units soon

appeared along the beach, on rooftops, and in balconies. Placing a loudspeaker on deck, we appealed to those on shore not to attack us. We were not out to make war. Our ship was immobilized on a sandbar; we were a helpless target.

Still sticking to our program of delivering arms for Israel's war, we lowered our launch and began loading it with crates of weapons. Perhaps this was naive on our part, in light of the hostility that had already been demonstrated by those we hoped to serve. We truly believed that the political differences between us would be ironed out later.

Several Irgun men who had boarded our ship at Kfar Vitkin got into the launch and went ashore. They piled the crates of weapons on the beach and returned for another load. Again the launch was filled with arms and sent to shore.

Then suddenly, a hail of bullets rained down from the houses on the beach. I saw that two men in the launch had been hit. It landed, the wounded were carried out, and the launch was abandoned as its occupants sought cover.

We had no way to reach the shore, as the launch was the only one of our boats that was usable. The bullets continued to rain down, and we saw in horror that several people on deck had been hit. We were suddenly in the midst of war. Yet it was not Arabs or British firing upon us, spilling our blood, but our fellow Jews.

The barrage of fire continued on and on. We heard the cries of our companions as they were hit and fell. Merlin was among the wounded. The blood from his leg leaked through his bandages and spread out on the mattress where he lay.

At his side was Abrasha, struck down by a bullet that had penetrated the bone above his knee. He was drenched in sweat, moaning quietly. Nearby him was an Italian-

American who clung to life, although he had been hit by seven bullets in the chest.

Gerry, our American Marine, had been on deck beside me when the first shots pelted us. We took cover on the open deck behind an iron projection. From there, we could see several of the American and British volunteers lying in the bow. They were using rifles to return the Palmach's fire.

I shouted at them to stop shooting and go down below, but they did not hear me above the booming of the guns from the shore and the rat-tat-tat of machine gun fire. Sharing my concern, Gerry jumped up from our shelter and ran toward the bow, ignoring my shouts at him to get down.

Overcome with the same madness, I ran after him. Bullets whistled through the air, pouring down like hail on the deck. As we reached the men in the bow, I saw Gerry grasp one of his hands with the other. With the blood gushing from between his fingers, he shouted, "Cease fire!" and ordered the men to go below.

There we were in the open bow with Gerry cursing and blood flowing from his wound. I forcibly led him below to his chorus of, "It's nothing, it's nonsense ..." He dressed his own wound and returned to the deck.

The *Altalena*'s physician, Dr. Lazarev, had gone ashore at Kfar Vitkin to attend to his patients who had been removed from the ship there. The few women who were still on board bandaged our wounded, but some of them were dying.

We begged the Palmach commander to send us a boat to bring the wounded to shore where they could get medical attention. He promised to do so, but no boat came. We asked again. Again we received the promise, but still there was no boat; and the men lay on deck bleeding, the life draining out of them. One of our volunteers from Cuba died. He had come all this way never even to step foot on the shores of Israel. During the brief respite from the bullets, Fein called

me away from the others. "Look there," he said, handing me his binoculars, "to the north. They've stationed artillery!" I could see the installations at Camp Yona in north Tel Aviv with cannons aimed directly at us.

We again appealed to the Palmach commander on land repeating our request for aid for the wounded. We received promises – again empty words. Then the first shell hit the water below us, followed by another and another. The next round hit home, and the *Altalena* shook under a salvo of shots from all types of weapons. In the sudden storm of noise, we watched as our men staggered and fell.

Then through the smell of gunpowder and blood, we suddenly smelled fire. Our sacks of blankets and clothing in the hold were aflame, ignited by a shell that had torn through the deck.

I called to Menachem where he stood near Fein. "The ship is burning!"

"Raise a white flag!" shouted the Captain. "They must understand that they should stop firing at a ship loaded with ammunition!"

It was one of the American volunteers who climbed up the rigging to hoist the white flag. The Captain and I followed him in case he was hit on his way and fell. With relief, we watched him shinny down the mast after tying the white flag of surrender to its topmost spars. And still the shooting and shelling went on.

A tremendous barrier of flames enveloped the clothing stores, barring us from the main hold where there were still crates and crates of weapons, ammunition, grenades, and bombs. How long would it take for the fire to reach our explosives? When the flames burst onto the deck, those who could ran to the rear of the boat began to jump into the water. The Captain distributed life-jackets and strapped them around the wounded.

Only a few of us – the Captain, Menachem, I, and a few

others – remained on board to help tend to the wounded. We watched as the others battled the waves to swim ashore. I myself had never learned to swim. I might as well have been standing at the edge of a precipice.

We brought the wounded up on deck from the sick bay, congregating all the wounded at the ship's stern. The bow was already engulfed in flames.

Fein had not yet despaired of saving his ship. He ordered the crew to open all the hose valves to flood the fire, but the water only dampened the blaze. Sailors risked their lives running back and forth under the volley of bullets that still rained down, despite the white flag and ship in flames. Every person on board knew that, at any moment, the fire would reach our armory and the *Altalena* would explode in a fiery plume.

The turbulent wake caused by our propellers was hampering the escape of those who had jumped into the sea. Fein called to the ship's engineer, an American gentile, and asked him to go down below and stop the engines. This was a deadly mission, because the boat could explode at any moment. I was afraid he would refuse; but to my surprise, the engineer simply mumbled, "Sure," and hurried down the companionway leading to the engine room. Smoke billowed from all the portholes and ventilators; the deck was enveloped in a thick black pall. Our eyes watered as we waited for whatever would come next – the emergence of the engineer from the fire below, the cataclysm that would blow the *Altalena* to kingdom come, and us with her, or a miracle that would make the nightmare end.

Then, emerging like a blackened wraith, the engineer staggered toward us and reported that the fire still had some small distance to go before it reached the crates of munitions. Embracing him, the Captain told the American to jump and save his own life – the life that he had risked so willingly.

Rowboats were approaching from the shore, manned by young men who were jeopardizing their lives in the unabating storm of bullets and mortar fire. As they drew abreast of us, they shouted, "Where is the old man? Let us have the old man!" They were shouting for Menachem Begin, who had been tending to the wounded men and engineering their removal from the ship.

I went over to him and said, "Menachem, go down to the boats."

He refused. "Let the others go first."

I pleaded with him, but he was adamant. Then, I faced him squarely, towering above him, and shouted, "I am the commander of this ship and I demand that you go ashore at once. You do not understand the danger. Get off at once!"

The shock registered on his face. He was not accustomed to receiving orders from his subordinates, but my expression must have convinced him that I was in earnest. I had already decided that I would remove him from the ship by force if he refused to leave on his own. Our eyes were locked for what seemed like minutes in the hallucinatory atmosphere of the crisis. Then Menachem turned to look at the young men who surrounded us. "Eliahu," he said in a conciliatory tone. "Eliahu...What's come over you? Very well, I'll get off as soon as we remove the wounded. Now calm down."

I gave in. We attended to the wounded.

Abrasha was by now unconscious. His large frame did not accommodate itself to any rescue. We tied a rope harness beneath his armpits. It took five men to lower him down the fifteen feet from the deck to the water. His wounded leg dangled as though defying all the laws of anatomy. He recovered consciousness at mid-descent and we heard him moan. Solicitously, the rowers laid him in one of the boats.

After Abrasha, we lowered Merlin, who was fully conscious despite what must have been excruciating pain. In these moments of crisis, he behaved like a hero, coolly

telling us that he would manage to reach the boats by himself once we got him into the water. We could see how the pain from his ruined leg contorted his features at each jerk of the ropes. He must have passed out when he hit the water, because he sank like a stone. The men in the nearest rowboat grabbed his arms and pulled him up from the water which was reddened by his blood.

When the last wounded man was sent ashore, I went over to Begin.

"Yes, yes", he pacified me, "but you men get off too," he urged as he approached the railing.

Fein, Joe Cohen, and I were the only ones who remained on board. As we stared at each other in silence, we felt the ship shudder and heard the first explosion as the fire reached the crates of munitions below deck. We dove for cover from the shrapnel, and then Monroe asked me, "Shall we jump?"

I answered in the affirmative, even though I had not let on to anyone that I could not swim. We were all wearing life jackets. Joe jumped first and struck out for shore. Monroe followed, and finally I jumped, too. As I hit the water, I lost my glasses. Quite near-sighted without them, I could not see the shore and floated directionless in the storm of bullets. Suddenly Fein swam toward me and grabbed me shouting, "Hold on to my waist."

As he dragged me through the swell, I watched as explosion after explosion shook the *Altalena*. Bits of her flew everywhere, as she was slowly engulfed in flames. In the final salvo, millions of bullets from the crates exploded, a dream gone up in smoke and fire.

We were dodging shrapnel in the water for about half an hour until we reached the shore. Someone pulled us out, put us in a car, and drove us to the headquarters of the Irgun High Command.

At the Irgun headquarters at the Freund Hospital on Yehuda Halevi Street in Tel Aviv, people were running about in confusion. A press conference was in progress. There was noise everywhere, flashing lights, and a crowd of writers and hangers-on. I sat on a bench in the corner, stunned; my clothes were soaking wet, and all my belongings lost with the *Altalena*. Benzion Keshet (Katzenelbogen) appeared carrying dry khaki pants and a pair of sandals for me. Bezalel Amizur thrust a five-pound note in my pocket. (Both Amizur and Keshet were members of the Irgun High Command.)

Gradually the hubbub subsided as the reporters hustled to their offices to write their reports. The Irgun spokespersons also scattered, grief-stricken because of the failure of the mission. Of the *Altalena* group, only Fein and I were left. No one bothered to ask us how we were or where we would go.

It was late in the evening and the building was almost empty when my sister-in-law, Malka Lanir, came in. My brother Yasha, an army officer, was away at the front. Malka had learned about my arrival in Israel aboard the *Altalena* from the radio broadcast. She hurried to the Freund Hospital and took me and Fein home with her. We did not want any supper, and we did not want to talk. All we wanted was to sleep, to have some respite from the nightmare of the preceding hours.

But we were not given long to find refuge in oblivion. Soon after we fell asleep, we were awakened by the doorbell. An army officer was at the door ordering all men outside. As we emerged, we saw that the building was surrounded by soldiers carrying submachine guns. All men from the building (including one member of the Provisional Council who lived there) were directed onto trucks that transported us to Camp Yona, an army camp located on the Tel Aviv seashore. We were all asked to produce identification.

I felt sorry for all the frightened residents of the building who did not know why they had been awakened and taken away by force. Approaching one of the sentries, I said, "I am the man you are looking for. I am Lankin. Let the others go home."

I was brought immediately to the chief investigator's room. He sat behind a desk, a pistol in front of him, his face masked by a kerchief. I was dead tired and depressed, but the sight of this masquerade infuriated me. "Why the disguise?" I asked him. "From whom are you hiding? You are now a representative of a sovereign government! Where is your self-respect?"

Fein and I were taken to a shack, and a sentry was posted at the door. I had been used to rough treatment by the Haganah; but for Fein's sake, I felt deeply ashamed that while fighting for its very life against the Arabs, Israel still could not make peace within its own family.

It was not until two days later that we were transported by backroads to one of the neighboring kibbutzim – apparently Givat Brenner. We were held in a narrow, dark room, probably the very cell used to hold kidnapped members of the Irgun during The Season. We were too tired and too dispirited to protest. From the kibbutz, we were taken to a police station. Fein was released almost immediately.

At the end of ten days of being moved from one place of confinement to another, I was brought to a detention camp for political prisoners at Bet Shean in the Jordan Valley. Four fellow members of the Irgun were imprisoned with me – Yaakov Meridor, Hillel Kook, Moshe Hasson, and Bezalel Amizur.

We were held at Bet Shean for approximately two months until the end of August. During all that time, we repeatedly demanded our release or a trial. Only after attorney Max Seligman petitioned the High Court of Justice on our behalf, did the government finally bring charges against us.

In sworn testimony, Brigadier Zvi Ayalon said, "There are grounds to suspect them of treason to the homeland. Their release would imperil the welfare of the State of Israel." He promised to bring us to trial as soon as the investigation was concluded.

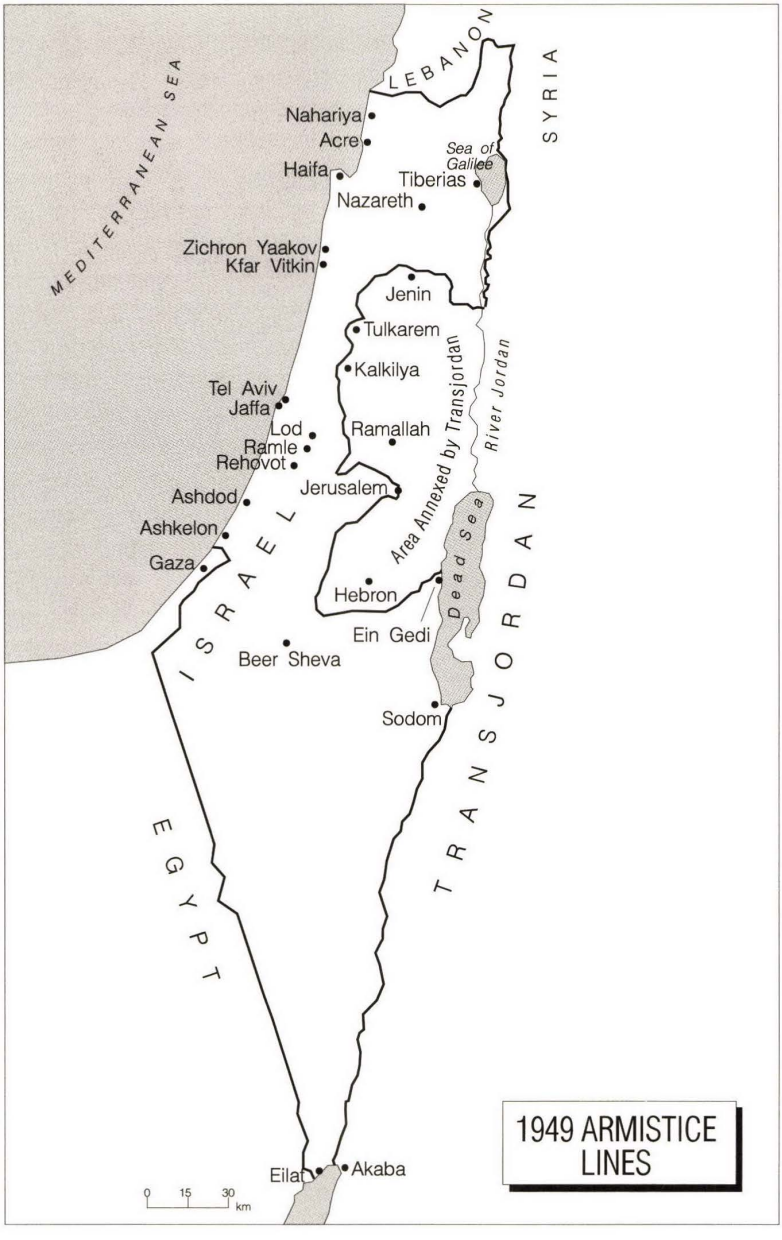
It seems that the investigation was not worth concluding; because although the authorities claimed that we were traitors to the homeland and that we intended to perpetrate a coup, we were never brought to trial. At the end of August, the gates of Bet Shean prison were opened. To this day, I wonder at what stage I unwittingly ceased to be a menace "to the welfare of the State of Israel."

A day or two after I returned to Tel Aviv, I chanced to meet Issar Harel, the future head of the Israeli Security Service (the Mossad), who already held an important position in the Security Services. He asked me what my plans for the future were. I answered that as a young, able-bodied man with a war raging against my country, that the only course open to me and that was to volunteer for the army.

"Do you mean to say that after all that has happened to you, you are willing to swear allegiance?" he asked in amazement.

I could not help smiling. Apparently, our concepts regarding civic duty and civil rights in a sovereign democratic state were quite different, but he did help me to enlist. I was inducted as a private and then immediately sent to an officers' training course. A few years later, I commanded a brigade of field artillery; and after my discharge, served in the reserves even after I reached the mandatory retirement age.

Epilogue


MEDITERRANEAN SEA
LEBANON
SYRIA
Nahariya
Acre
Haifa
Sea of Galilee
Tiberias
Nazareth
Zichron Yaakov
Kfar Vitkin
Jenin
Tulkarem
Kalkilya
Tel Aviv
Jaffa
Lod
Ramle
Rehovot
Ramallah
River Jordan
Jerusalem
Area Annexed by Transjordan
Ashdod
Ashkelon
Gaza
Dead Sea
Hebron
Ein Gedi
Beer Sheva
Sodom
ISRAEL
TRANSJORDAN
EGYPT
Eilat
Akaba
0 15 30 km
1949 ARMISTICE LINES

Epilogue

Although more than forty years have elapsed since June 1948, there is still no authoritative account of all the events that led to the destruction of the *Altalena* and the weapons in her hold.

In the intervening years, many of the participants in the *Altalena* tragedy have come out publicly, in books or in the press, with statements that throw some light on the controversy. A full analysis of these materials is beyond the scope of this story, but it cannot end without some comments on the events of those fateful days.

Not unexpectedly under wartime censorship conditions, the story of *Altalena* received one-sided press coverage full of half truths and distortions. Anyone whose sole knowledge of the event came from the press would have gleaned the following story:

1. The High Command of the Israeli Army learned about a boat carrying arms for the Irgun only a few days before its arrival and reported the matter to the Provisional Government.

2. Arrival of the arms ship on June 20, 1948 was viewed by the Israeli Government as a violation of its international obligations under the U.N. cease-fire agreement. Consequently, the Government reported this matter to the U.N. commission in Tel Aviv.
3. Upon the ship's arrival, the Irgun Command was asked to surrender the ship and its cargo to the State; but it refused to do so. This was viewed as a violation of the laws of the State of Israel and of the written agreement signed by the Irgun regarding its dissolution and the transfer of soldiers and arms to the Israeli Army.
4. The Cabinet also viewed this failure to surrender arms as part of the Irgun's conspiracy to overthrow the government by force.
5. Consequently, the government decided to take all measures necessary to prevent the unloading of the *Altalena*'s cargo by the Irgun. When members of the Irgun started unloading the ship, Army units were ordered to prevent them and given sanction to use all necessary force.

On June 23, the Palestine Post reported that the Hebrew press was united in condemning the Irgun's attempt to bring in a cargo of arms in defiance of the Government of Israel.

But on June 24, an op-ed piece by David Courtney sounded a different note:

> "The truth of the matter is hard to get at. The government says one thing, the Irgun another... To the ordinary citizen who has to do without the facts and to judge on a combination of confused evidence and his own common sense, this seems no time for a clash of forces within the State."

In the same issue, the paper reported that as a result of shelling two days previously, 14 men were killed and over 50 wounded in the fighting between the Army and the Irgun, that 90 Irgun leaders (including the Captain of the *Altalena*) were under arrest, and that shots were exchanged between soldiers and dissidents at the Revisionist Headquarters in Tel Aviv.

For the first time, the paper revealed that the Cabinet faced a crisis over the *Altalena* affair. The reports in the June 24 and 25 issues of the Palestine Post described the following stages of the debate:

1. An extraordinary meeting of the Provisional Council was called to discuss the government action against the Irgun and the *Altalena*.
2. Representatives of General Zionists, Mizrahi, and Revisionists argued against the use of force and claimed that the problem could have been settled without bloodshed.
3. Two cabinet ministers, Moshe Shapiro of Hapoel Mizrahi (Minister of Immigration and Health), and Rabbi J.L. Fishman of Mizrahi (Minister of Religion), resigned in protest over Ben Gurion's orders to use force against the dissidents.
4. In response to Ben Gurion's claim that the Irgun intended to overturn the Government, Mr. Pinkas of Mizrahi said that the charge was unfounded, as the Irgun had informed the Government of the time and place the arms ship was due and had asked for help in transferring the arms to land.
5. On Wednesday, June 23, the Council defeated a motion to appoint a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the affair; but on Thursday, the

> Council approved a motion to appoint such a Commission consisting of Ministers of Defense, Interior, Justice, and four members of the Council. Following this motion, the Government received a vote of confidence by a majority of Council members.

The press generally reflected the strident voice of government accusations against the Irgun. These accusations raised five issues:

1. Concealing information from the government about the weapons ship.
2. Violating the cease-fire.
3. Violating the agreement between the Irgun and the government to transfer Irgun units into the Israeli Army.
4. Refusing to submit to the discipline of the State.
5. Conspiring to overturn the government by force.

The validity of these accusations is analyzed below.

1. Concealing information from the government about the weapons ship.

This accusation was put forward by Ben Gurion to justify the use of force against the *Altalena* when he stated in a speech[1] to the Provisional Council on June 23:

> "I learned about it [the ship] this Sabbath [June 19] when a special emissary of the General Staff came to me and informed me that he was notified by the Irgun that a ship with arms would be coming and that they were requesting help with its unloading ..."

In fact, the Israeli government was fully informed about the ship many weeks before its sailing. On May 15,

Menachem Begin, Yaakov Meridor, Shmuel Katz, and Chaim Landau met with Israel Galili, Levi Eshkol, and David Hacohen (representing the Haganah). Begin reported on the acquisition of the *Altalena*, and on the plan to bring arms and men to help in the Jewish struggle for the State. He further proposed that the *Altalena* could bring an additional 1,000 Haganah volunteers from Europe. In exchange, the Irgun would receive $250,000 to buy additional arms and equipment to arm Irgun soldiers when they joined the national Army. On completion of the mission, the Irgun would make a gift of the ship to the Government. Two days after his offer was transmitted to Ben Gurion by Israel Galili, Begin received Ben Gurion's answer – a decided "no."

I had personally approached Israel's representative in France, Maurice Fischer, to transport 1,000 of the Haganah people from Europe aboard the *Altalena*. This proposal was transmitted to Israel; but the government's response was that the *Altalena* was too well known to Arab agents, and the Government did not wish to jeopardize the lives of Haganah refugees by sending them on a ship that carried armaments.

In mid-June 1948 (as reported by Pinchas Vaza[2] who was one of the Haganah's officers responsible for procurement of arms), the Irgun requested an urgent meeting with representatives of the Government. The meeting took place at Irgun headquarters in Tel Aviv. Participating at the meeting were Menachem Begin and Yaacov Meridor representing the Irgun, and Israel Galili, Levi Eshkol, and David Hacohen representing the Provisional Government. At this meeting, Irgun leaders informed the Government about the ship's departure from France, its contents, the fact that it sailed without communicating with Tel Aviv, and Begin's order to the ship to stay away. A short time later, the Irgun was informed of the Government's request that the ship proceed with all possible speed to Kfar Vitkin (the original

destination was the beach at the end of Frishman Street in Tel Aviv).

One may speculate that the information provided to Galili in mid-June was not passed on to Ben Gurion. On August 20, 1971, Israel Galili published a statement in the Ma'ariv (a widely circulated Israeli evening paper) regarding the *Altalena* affair. His statement included the following:

> "We agreed to the arrival of the ship in Kfar Vitkin ..." We made technical preparations (to receive the arms on the shore) ...
>
> "...My actions and those of officers of the General Staff in the matter of the *Altalena*, from beginning to end, *were carried out in accordance with orders from the Prime Minister and Minister of Defense* ...[Emphasis mine, E.L.]
>
> "I reported fully to the Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, [Ben Gurion] at each stage, both by word of mouth, and in writing, about the meetings with Irgun leaders, including the night meeting, the meeting next day, and the additional meetings. I know too that other members, and other officers, who were dealing with the matter reported to the Prime Minister ..."

The arms brought to Israel aboard the *Altalena* were brought *with* the knowledge of the Government and *with* the personal knowledge of Ben Gurion. His statement in the Provisional Council that he had not known about the ship until one day before she landed is absolutely untrue.

2. *Violation of cease fire.*

Violations of the cease-fire by the Arab forces were

widely reported prior to and following the arrival of the *Altalena*. In fact, both sides, Arab and Israeli, were not fully observing the terms of the cease-fire. On the same day that the *Altalena* arrived at Kfar Vitkin, the Haganah was unloading its own shipment of arms at Bat Yam, brought by the ship *Inco*.[3]

Recognizing that the accusation by the Government of a cease-fire violation was a transparent double standard that would not be accepted by the public, M. Sharett tried to qualify the accusation. On June 22, he stated in his press conference that

> "...it was not merely and primarily a question of the violation of the truce, grave as that in itself is, but it was also a question of upholding state authority."

In light of Arab violations of the cease-fire, as well as similar violations by the Haganah, this accusation only emphasizes the government's bias against the Irgun in dealing with the *Altalena* affair.

3. Violating the agreement between the Irgun and the government to transfer Irgun units into the Israeli Army.

The Government's position was that the Irgun's transport of a shipload of men and arms on its own was a violation of the agreement between the Irgun and the Government regarding incorporation of Irgun units into the Army.

An agreement dealing with the Irgun's merger with Israeli Defense Forces had been signed on June 3, 1948. In essence, this agreement provided for induction of Irgun members in areas under State controll into the Israeli Army under the General Mobilization Order with the proviso that special battalions would be established out of Irgun forces under a temporary command by Irgun officers. All

weapons would pass into the control of the Army, separate acquisition of weapons would cease, and the Irgun would cease its independent existence. A special joint Irgun-IDF provisional staff was to be organized for implementation of the agreement.

This joint provisional staff was composed of representatives of the Irgun and the Army and was subordinate to the Army General Staff. It was planned that this provisional body would function until Irgun members were inducted into the ranks of the Army and the activation of their regiments was fully completed.

Between the signing of the agreement dealing with the Irgun's disarmament (June 3, 1948) and the arrival of the *Altalena* in Israel (June 20, 1948), seventeen days elapsed.

At the time of the *Altalena*'s arrival, some of the Irgun regiments were already integrated into the Israel Defense Forces. There had never been any complaints by the General Staff of the Army about the pace of mobilization of Irgun men and no one ever thought of blaming the provisional staff for delaying or deliberately postponing the integration of Irgun forces into the Army.

Negotiations about the distribution of the *Altalena*'s cargo of arms had been initiated by Begin at his June 15 meeting with Galili, Eshkol, and Hacohen, when Begin reported to them on the *Altalena*'s departure for Israel.

Irgun representatives proposed that the arms brought by the *Altalena* be distributed among the various fighting forces. Some twenty percent would go to Irgun forces in Jerusalem, which was not yet part of the territory under the control of the Israeli government. Therefore, Irgun forces in Jerusalem were not yet under government command.

Begin also wanted *some* of the *Altalena*'s arms distributed to Irgun units within the Army. The bulk of the arms would go to the non-Irgun Israeli Army. At the time, the Irgun command felt it was entitled to such distribution,

especially since Irgun men felt deprived of their fair share of arms within the framework of the Army. They suffered discrimination within their regiments from some of their commanders who were ex-Haganah personnel, and this discrimination extended to their arms as well.

Discussions of the allocation of arms consisted of demands and counterdemands. Galili presented his terms, Begin countered with his. Galili agreed to some of Begin's terms (as in the matter of Jerusalem), but did not agree to others.

The accusation that the Irgun violated their agreement with the Government was just a "red herring." It was used as an effective means to vilify the Irgun in the eyes of the *yishuv* and to inflict heavy political damage on Ben Gurion's opponents.

4. Refusal to submit to the discipline of the State.

The words of the Government communique issued on Monday June 21, 1948, are particularly significant:

> "The leaders of the Irgun *were asked to submit to the discipline of the State* ...When members of the Irgun...refused to recognize the authority of the State, an order was issued to use arms against them."

This text apparently refers to Begin's refusal to comply with the ultimatum of Dan Even, Commander of the Alexandroni Brigade (which surrounded the Irgun men at the time of their attempted landing at Kfar Vitkin on June 22) to surrender to him all the arms on the ship "within ten minutes."

Begin did not regard this ultimatum seriously. He asked his deputy, Yaakov Meridor, to go to Dan Even and arrange for a meeting between the two of them. Begin wanted to explain, among other things, that there was no possibility

of complying with Even's demand "within ten minutes." However, the request for a meeting was ignored.

Under the circumstances, how could Begin, who was negotiating with Israel Galili, Deputy Defense Minister, on the very issue of arms allocation, treat a "ten minute ultimatum" to submit to the discipline of the State from some local unit commander?

At best, the ultimatum was a misunderstanding; at worst, it was a provocation. In any case, Begin's response could not be viewed as a rebellion or insubordination to military orders, precisely because Irgun in accordance with the agreement with the government had segments operating independently of Army command.

5. Conspiracy to overthrow the government by force.

The accusation of a conspiracy to overthrow the Government of the State of Israel is the most vicious and the least credible of the claims leveled by Ben Gurion's faction. For months prior to the arrival of the *Altalena*, the Irgun called for the establishment of a Provisional Government, offering to disband and support such a government at its inception. On Saturday night, May 15, 1948, following the proclamation establishing the State of Israel, Begin appealed to the nation over the Irgun's radio station.[4] In an emotional speech rejoicing in the establishment of the State and acknowledging the hardships that lay ahead, Begin pledged his loyalty to the newly born State:

> "The Irgun is leaving the underground inside the boundaries of the Jewish independent State...there is no need for a Hebrew underground. In the State of Israel we shall be soldiers and builders. And we shall respect its government ..."

In its struggle against the British, the Irgun was always

determined in its policies and actions to avoid fratricidal civil war, despite such provocations as The Season. Apart from publicly declared loyalty and apart from the record of the past and current agreements, were the Irgun's actions indicative of a planned coup?

The more I reflect on this claim about the so-called conspiracy, the more my amazement grows at the audacity of those who were not ashamed to publicize such an outrageous accusation that was so ridiculously incongruent with the facts. My amazement is even greater that this vicious story has been maintained so steadfastly for so many years.

According to the Ben Gurion version, the *Altalena* operation was a *sub rosa* plot to enable the Irgun to forcibly take over the young State.

Let us examine how this "plot" unfolded. Information about the ship, the quantities of its weapons and ammunition, and its date of departure was relayed by the "conspirators" to the authorities a week or two in advance. They sought the aid of the authorities in unloading the weapons and were prepared to turn them over to the authorities in its entirety, even though the question of arms distribution – and not their surrender – was still under negotiations.

When the ship arrived at Israel's shores, it landed at a location chosen by the Government. Its hold was filled with weapons and ammunition, but the soldiers whose task supposedly was to take over the government by force, were unarmed.

What do the "conspirators" do? They unload the 900 unarmed soldiers and send them to Netanya to an immigrant camp in order to enlist in the Army.

And the munitions – those munitions supposedly intended for storming the citadels of the Government – are unloaded on the beach in *sealed crates*. According to Pinchas Vaza, 1,815 rifles, 2 million rounds of ammunition, 3,000 "Fiat" shells, and 206 Bren machine guns were unloaded

from the *Altalena* onto the beach at Kfar Vitkin. No attempt was made to use these arms or to distribute them to the Irgun men who came to the shore to help unload the ship.

Another claim was that the Irgun men had deserted their Army units and "streamed" to the area where the *Altalena* was beached (first at Kfar Vitkin and then Tel Aviv). This was interpreted as part of the sinister plot to overthrow the Government. I heard a firsthand account of these events from Irgun veterans who left their Army camps and went to Tel Aviv. Their story is simple. When they heard that "a pogrom" was being perpetrated upon their comrades at Kfar Vitkin and later at Tel Aviv, they rushed to the defense of their friends. Of course, formally, they violated Army discipline; but is it so difficult to understand their feelings of frustration and their mistrust of those who only a few short years ago betrayed their comrades to the British or held them in captivity during the "hunting season?"

Meanwhile, the *Altalena*, which had fled under fire from Kfar Vitkin, ran aground on a sandbank on the shores of Tel Aviv and was helplessly stuck. There were at most some tens of Irgun men on deck. The beach itself was held firmly by the Palmach, while two ships from Israel's fleet barred the way to the *Altalena*'s retreat mid-ocean.

It is true that Begin was aboard the *Altalena*, but what could he do with a handful of men trapped between the horizon and the shore? How much of a threat of "overthrow by force" did those plotters who brought the *Altalena* pose to Ben Gurion's government?

The full answer to the question as to why Ben Gurion acted the way he did may never be known; but as I reconstruct the events against the background of the situation that prevailed in Israel at that time, I believe that two factors constitute a major part of the answer.

First was Ben Gurion's determination to destroy the

Irgun opposition as a significant element in the political life of the new State. To this end, the *Altalena* affair was a well-planned provocation: first encouraging its arrival and directing the ship to Kfar Vitkin, then presenting it with a "ten minute ultimatum," and then accusing it of a treasonous attempt to challenge the government.

The second factor has to do with that particular moment of history in which a new State was born, the infant Jewish State surrounded by powerful enemies threatening to destroy it. At that moment, the Army, the press, and all other instruments of government were in the hands of Ben Gurion, simultaneously serving as Prime Minister and Defense Minister. The nation did not dare not to believe him, while he – determined to retain the power in his hands – took full political advantage of this psychological moment.

Simply put, Ben Gurion acted on his belief that if he had been in Begin's shoes and had been holding the same cards, he undoubtedly would have "rebelled" against those he considered the despoilers of his people "for the good of the nation and the State." Therefore, it was quite inconceivable to him that Menachem Begin had no such intentions.

One thing is clear. Destroying the *Altalena* deprived the Israeli Defense Forces of arms and ammunition they badly needed. There was a heavy price paid because of the tragic error in the judgment of Ben Gurion's government. Jewish lives were lost needlessly in the ranks of the poorly equipped Israeli Army.

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Chapter 7

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Chapter 8

1. *The First Decade*, by Israel Eldad, in Hebrew, Hadar Tel Aviv, 1956.

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4. *The Revolt, ibid.*

Glossary

Af-Al-Pi (Hebrew, in-spite-of) the name given to the clandestine immigration (in defiance of British restrictions) organized by the Zionist Revisionist Movement, Betar, and Irgun Zvai Leumi during 1934-1940. During this period *Af-Al-Pi* succeeded in landing about 40 ships bringing about 20,000 refugees from Central and Eastern Europe to Eretz Israel. Most of this time (until 1939) clandestine immigration was opposed by the Zionist establishment.

Aliyah (Hebrew, ascent) the coming of Jews to settle in Eretz Israel. The term means more than immigration, it is an expression of the primary Zionist ideal of Jewish return to Eretz Israel.

Statistical data for Aliyah are divided into five periods. The First Aliyah (1882-1903) brought some 25,000 and the Second Aliyah (1904-1914) brought some 40,000 mostly from Eastern Europe. The Third Aliyah (1919-1923), following the conclusion of the First World War, brought some 35,000 and the Fourth Aliyah (1924-1928) some 67,000, including a number of middle-class skilled workers and professionals from Western Europe. The Fifth Aliyah (1929-1939) brought in some 250,000 Jews, mostly refugees from Nazi Europe, and included many with investment capital, valuable skills and business experience.

Altalena (Italian, swing or see-saw) pen name used by Zeev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky for his column in the Russian newspaper Odessa News during early 1900's.

Altalena name of ship carrying volunteer fighters and a large amount of weapons and ammunition assembled by the Irgun in Europe. The ship sailed from France in June 1948, and upon its arrival in Israel was destroyed by the Israel Defense Forces before its cargo was unloaded.

Am Lohem (Hebrew, the fighting nation) name adopted by a group of leaders of the Haganah and the Irgun Zvai Leumi who, in the Fall of 1943 tried to form a united front in the struggle against the British control of Eretz Israel.

American League for a Free Palestine established in the Spring of 1944, was dedicated to the support of national independence in Eretz Israel and of the revolt against the British Mandatory Administration. The League, co-chaired by former Senator Guy M. Gillette and Ben Hecht, prominent American writer, was an organization closely associated with the Hebrew Committee of National Liberation. The activities of the League were bitterly opposed by the Zionist and Jewish establishment organizations.

Gillette met with government and public leaders in the U.S. and abroad, urging them to grant independence to Jews in Palestine. In 1946, in a letter to Chaim Weizmann he suggested that the 22nd World Zionist Congress proclaim that "the aim of Zionism has been attained and that the existence of the Hebrew Republic of Palestine is now a

fact."

The League was also successful in activating American public support for the establishment of the Jewish State. In the Fall of 1946 the League produced a dramatic play "A Flag Is Born" which opened on Broadway. Kurt Weil wrote the music, Luther Adler directed the play starring Paul Muni and Marlon Brando. The proceeds from the play were partly used in support of Irgun's activities in Diaspora and in Eretz Israel. The League ceased its existence in November 1948.

Arab Liberation Army military forces consisting of volunteers from Palestine and neighboring Arab States which attacked Jewish communities in Eretz Israel following the UN vote for partition of Palestine (on November 29, 1947). The British, still in control, did nothing to prevent units of this army entering the Mandate territory. After the British withdrawal from the State in May 1948, the military forces of the Arab States openly attacked Israel.

Arab Riots organized Arab attacks on Jewish communities. These attacks continued with various levels of intensity throughout the Mandatory years. Major flare-ups occurred in 1920, 1921, 1922, 1928, 1929, and 1936-39. Arab violence was encouraged by the British Mandatory and was used by the British as an excuse to default on their obligations to implement the provisions of the Mandate dealing with the establishment of the Jewish National Home.

Arab Territorial Claims in Palestine became an issue with the breakup of the Ottoman Empire during World War I. In 1915, Sir Henry MacMahon, British High Commissioner in Cairo, negotiated with Husain, Sharif of Mecca (great-grandfather of Hussein, current king of Jordan) regarding independent Arab territories at the conclusion of the war. On October 15, 1915, Sir Henry wrote a letter to Sharif Husain that Britain was prepared to recognize and support the independnece of Arabs in all regions claimed by Husain, with the specific exception of the coastal area west of Jordan and west of districts of Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Damascus, stating that these areas were not purely Arab and therefore "should be excluded from the limits demanded." This exclusion covered all of Western Palestine, Lebanon, Syrian coastal area and Turkish area around Messina and Alexandretta.

In response to this letter Sharif Husain claimed that the Syrian coast, Lebanon, and northern part of modern Israel (as far south as Hadera, midway between Haifa and Tel-Aviv) were purely Arab. It is significant that the district of Jerusalem was not included in Husain's 1915 claim. MacMahon, responding to Husain on behalf of the British Government, in a letter dated December 14, 1915, reiterated that the Western coastal areas were not included in the territories promised to the Arabs. Also see Palestine, British Mandate for Palestine, and Transjordan.

Asefat Hanivharim (Hebrew, elected assembly) a public body elected by the Jewish community in Eretz Israel during Mandatory Administration. It was the supreme body of the *Yishuv* in dealing with internal, political, and fiscal matters. It convened infrequently to establish policies and to elect the *Vaad Leumi* (National Council) which acted on behalf of the Assembly between its sessions (see *Vaad Leumi*).

Balfour Declaration issued on November 2, 1917, by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Balfour, in the name of the British government, formally promised the support of the British for the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration was included in the text of the Mandate for Palestine.

Betar (abbrev. B'rit Trumpeldor) Zionist youth organization founded by Zeev Jabotinsky in 1922, dedicated to the creation of a Jewish State in Eretz Israel. Affiliated with the Zionist Revisionist Movement, see Union of Zionist Revisionists.

British Mandate for Palestine issued by the League of Nations after World War I. The League established the Mandate system to implement Article 22 of its Covenant, which stated in paragraph 4 as follows:

> Certain communities formerly belonging to the Turkish Empire have reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized, subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone...

Four Mandates were issued by the League of Nations under the above provisions: Palestine and Iraq were placed under the British Mandatory, and Syria and Lebanon under a French Mandatory.

The Mandate for Palestine, adopted by the San Remo Conference in April 1920, recognized the promise expressed in the Balfour Declaration and adopted the establishment of the Jewish National Home in Eretz Israel as its primary purpose. Furthermore, Article 21 of the Mandate stated that the Mandatory shall

> be responsible for placing the country under such political, administrative, and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish National Home...

The words "Arabs" or "Palestinians" did not appear anywhere in the text of the Palestine Mandate. While it did emphasize that civil and religious rights of the non-Jewish (Arab and non-Arab) population must be protected, there was no reference to Arab political rights. At the end of World War II, the Arab claims to independent Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and several other states on the Arab Peninsula were recognized by the Allied Powers; thus, the Arab national claims to independence, as seen by the League of Nations, were satisfied without including Palestine as one of these States.

Eventually, a controversy arose about the meaning of the responsibility to secure establishment of the Jewish National Home. The Jews understood this promise to mean eventual establishment of a Jewish State with a Jewish majority in Palestine. Also see Transjordan.

British Mandatory Administration in Palestine (1920-1948) tried to administer the Mandatory territory on a colonial pattern, with the Mandatory responsible to the British Colonial Office in London. The British Colonial Office, strongly pro-Arab, had opposed the decision of the British Foreign Office to issue the Balfour Declaration, had opposed the text of the Mandate committing England to promote the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine, and in its administration of the Mandate for Palestine was determined to ignore

these commitments.

Administration was headed by a High Commissioner appointed by the Colonial Office who controlled all government departments, including police, health, public works, finance, education, courts, etc. Heads of departments, who were generally British, had two deputies under them, one Jewish and one Arab. The British had considerable military forces stationed in the territory nominally responsible to the High Commissioner.

English, Hebrew and Arabic were the official languages; the Mandatory issued its own money, the Palestine Pound, which was keyed to the Britsh Pound Sterling; it also issued passports to the residents of the territory for travel outside Eretz Israel. Holders of such passports, Jews and Arabs alike, had the legal status of 'Palestinians,' subjects of the British Commonwealth.

From the very beginning the British Mandatory failed to fulfill its international obligation to create a Jewish National Home in Palestine. To appease the Arab protests against implementation of the Mandate, the British introduced restrictive policies on immigration, land purchase and agricultural and economic development.

Committee for a Jewish Army organized in Washington, D.C., was formally inaugurated on December 3, 1941. The aim of the Committee was to bring about the formation of a Jewish Army based in Palestine to fight under Allied Command for the survival of Jewish people and the preservation of democracy. After Pearl Harbor the name was changed to the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews. Initial impetus for this Committee came from members of Irgun Zvai Leumi in the U.S., Hillel Cook, Eri Jabotinsky, Aryeh Ben Eliezer, Sam Merlin, Alex Rafaeli, and Yitzhak Ben Ami. Under chairmanship of Samuel Harden Church, President of Carnegie Institute, and with Pierre Van Paassen, a prominent journalist, as National Chairman, the Committee attracted many prominent U.S. politicians, journalists, writers, artists, educators and professionals.

Though the Committee was violently opposed by the Jewish establishment, both Zionist and non-Zionist, it succeded to make the U.S. public aware of the plight of European Jewry and of the particular role of the Jewish community in Palestine willing to fight alongside the Allies in the common war against the Nazis. One of the most dramatic presentations of the unfolding events was a spectacular pageant, "We Shall Never Die," first staged at Madison Square Garden on March 9, 1943 under the direction of Ben Hecht with music by Kurt Weil. Later the same pageant was staged at Constitution Hall in Washington D.C. and other American cities. The Committee ceased to function in 1944 after establishment of the Jewish Brigade (see Jewish Brigade) and was succeeded by the American League for a Free Palestine.

Diaspora (Greek, dispersion) strictly speaking refers to voluntary dispersion of the Jewish people from their homeland. It describes all Jewish communities outside Eretz Israel during the historical periods of the First Temple, the Second Temple (Greco-Roman) and subsequent to the establishment of the State of Israel. Forced dispersion, which refers to the remaining thousands of years strictly speaking is

described as "galut" (exile). In colloquial usage these distinctions are often blurred.

Eretz Israel (Hebrew, Land of Israel) part of the Biblical land of Israel designated as the Jewish National Home under the British Mandate. Also, see Palestine and British Mandate for Palestine.

Falasha Jews an Ethnic group in Ethiopia which practices a form of Jewish religion based on the Bible. The falashas themselves prefer to be identified as *Beta Israel* (House of Israel). Most Falashas speak Amharic – official language of Ethiopia.

Gaffir(im) armed civilian militia established by the British during the Arab riots in April 1936 and designated as "supernumerary" police. They received uniforms and arms from the Mandatory Administration and trained and served under the command of British officers.

General Zionist Party the group within the Zionist movement which did not follow either the Labor Zionist or the Religious Zionist movements. In 1929, the group adopted the following principles: priority of interests of Eretz Israel over class interests, united effort of labor and capital to serve the *yishuv*, encouragement of private enterprise in addition to the support of national funds and collective settlements, abolition of party control over educational, health, and similar institutions. Also see Zionism.

Haganah the underground military organization in Eretz Israel from 1920-1948 established for the defense of Jewish settlements against Arab attacks. The strategy of the Haganah was "passive defense," i.e., local units defended their communities from preselected defense points. This strategy was not always successful, and during the bloody 1929 riots 133 Jews were killed and 339 were wounded by Arab attackers.

The effectiveness of Haganah's defense strategy, as well as the level of its military preparedness, became an issue and in 1931 a split in the Haganah ranks led to the formation of a second underground military group which eventually adopted the name of Irgun Zvai Leumi. See Irgun Zvai Leumi and Underground Military Organizations.

Hapoel Hamizrahi Party (Hebrew, Worker's Mizrahi Party) religious pioneering and labor movement in Eretz Israel, founded in 1922. Its program incorporated some socialist concepts related to the value of labor, but emphasized retention of religious values and opposition to class struggle. In 1956 Hapoel Hamizrahi merged with Mizrachi and later became an important constituent of the National Religious Party. Also see Zionism.

Hashomer Hatzair (Hebrew, Young Guards) Zionist youth movement with Marxist leanings advocating kibbutz settlements in Eretz Israel, founded in Vienna in 1916. Hashomer Hatzair sought to create a synthesis between Jewish culture and rebuilding of Eretz Israel with universal cultural and socialist values. Its ideology has been strongly influenced by the romantic aura of the Russian Bolshevik revolution.

havlaga (Hebrew, restraint) the policy of non-retaliation against Arab violence formulated by the Jewish Agency during the 1936-39 riots. This policy was not followed by the Irgun Zvai Leumi.

Hebrew Committee for National Liberation founded in March 1944

under chairmanship of Hillel Kook (then known as Peter Bergson), was dedicated to the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz Israel. To legitimize its lobbying political activities in the U.S., it applied to the Department of State for registration as a foreign agent representing the "Hebrew nation which consists of those Jews in Palestine and in occupied Europe who desire to belong to it."

The establishment of the Committee, which closely followed Irgun's declaration of revolt in Eretz Israel, was actively opposed by the U.S. Jewish establishment. Also for some time a rift developed between the Committee and the Irgun, but this more or less abated by 1946. In Spring 1946 the center of the Committee's activities shifted to Paris, while in the U.S. its work was closely coordinated with the American League for a Free Palestine. The Committee ceased its existence on May 16, 1948, the day following the establishment of the State of Israel.

Hechalutz Movement (Hebrew, the pioneer movement) an association of Jewish youth, established in 1905, whose aim was to train its members to settle on the land in Eretz Israel.

Histadrut (Hebrew, federation) usually refers to the General Federation of Labor in Israel, founded in 1920. It is partly a trade union organization, maintaining more than thirty trade unions which negotiate labor contracts with management. In addition, it operates economic enterprises and engages in agricultural and industrial production, mostly on cooperative basis. It also provides social services including comprehensive medical care to its members, pension funds, and workmen's compensation insurance and has an extensive program of educational and cultural activities, including publication of daily newspapers, periodicals, books, as well as operating professional sports clubs (Hapoel). Arabs and members of other minority communities join the Histadrut as full members.

There also exists the National Labor Federation, founded in 1934, established by the Zionist Revisionist workers. This group was founded because of the members' opposition to the socialist orientation of the General Federation (class struggle, red flag, use of International as an anthem) and the conflict of interest within a Labor Federation which acts as both employer and worker representative.

Irgun Zvai Leumi (Hebrew, the national military organization, also known as I.Z.L. or Etzel), an underground military organization in Eretz Israel.

From 1931 to 1936 Irgun operated on somewhat similar strategy as Haganah, except that the notion of retaliation for Arab attacks on Jews was introduced.

The years 1936-1939 were years of continued attacks by Arabs on Jews and on Jewish settlements. At first both the Haganah and the Irgun operated under the policy of *havlaga* (restraint) in response to Arab attacks. But the increased violence of these attacks led to the abandonment of the policy by the IZL. In April 1937 a split within IZL on this issue resulted in about a third of its members returning to the ranks of the Haganah, while about 2,000 chose to stay with the IZL and organize it for a new strategy of active defense.

Outraged by the publication of the May 1939 British White Paper, restricting the Jewish immigration at the very moment when evacuation of European Jewry could have saved millions, the IZL began a series of attacks and sabotage against British installations in Eretz Israel. But with the outbreak of World War II, both Haganah and IZL joined in the Allied effort against the Germans and IZL ceased its operations against the British.

Early in 1944, IZL, now under the command of Menahem Begin, renewed its anti-British activities. A proclamation addressed to the Jewish nation signalled the inauguration of the "revolt." These activities continued until the departure of the British from Eretz Israel and the establishment of the State of Israel. In the summer of 1948 IZL was incorporated into Israel Defense Forces. Also, see Underground Military Organizations in Eretz Israel.

Jabotinsky plan refers to his 1936 proposal for evacuating one and a half million Jews from Poland to Eretz Israel. This plan stirred up a storm of opposition by the Zionist and non-Zionist Jewish establishment. They declared that Jews would not allow themselves to be "expelled" to Palestine by Polish anti-Semites. In the United States this plan was attacked by Dr. Stephen Wise, leader of the American Jewish Congress, and other Zionist and non-Zionist Jewish leaders.

Jewish Agency non-government body centered in Jerusalem, established in 1922, as the representative body of Jewish organizations charged with the task of helping the development and settlement of Eretz Israel. Article 4 of the British Mandate stipulated that "an appropriate Jewish Agency shall be recognized as a public body for the purpose of advising and cooperating with the Administration of Palestine in such economic, social, and other matters as may affect the establishment of the Jewish National Home and the interests of the Jewish population in Palestine." The same article stipulated that the Zionist Organization shall be recognized as such agency, and that the agency shall secure the cooperation of all Jews who are willing to assist in the establishment of the Jewish National Home.

In 1929 the Agency was enlarged to include representatives of non-Zionist Jewish organizations who wished to contribute to the development of Eretz Israel. The main functions of the Agency prior to 1948 included immigration absorption, economic development, social and educational development, and political representation to the British and to the League of Nations.

Jewish Brigade, The a World War II military unit, part of the British Army fighting under a Jewish flag. After the outbreak of the war the Jewish Agency on several occasions requested Britain to allow Palestinian Jews to join the war as a national unit. While many Palestinian Jews joined the British Forces, the requests for a nationally identified unit were rejected until 1944 when Jewish servicemen in the British Forces were allowed to transfer to the Brigade, which fought under a Jewish flag. The unit saw action in the European Theater and after the war, when the Brigade was demobilized, some of the officers and men stayed on in Europe and helped the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust.

Jewish Legion, The a World War I military unit, fighting under a Jewish flag, part of the British Army. At the start of World War I majority of Zionist leaders did not support the Allies because they did not want to antagonize Turkey, which controlled Eretz Israel at the time. Some Zionist activists, however, convinced that at the end of the war Turkey will be on the losing side, saw an opportunity to gain political support for their aspirations among the Allied Powers. In spite of opposition by the established leadership of the Zionist movement, Jabotinsky and Trumpeldor, among others, began to campaign for the establishment of a Jewish military unit to fight alongside the British troops in liberating Eretz Israel from the Turks. By the summer of 1917 three British regiments consisting solely of Jewish volunteers formed a separate unit under the name of the Jewish Legion and distinguished itself in the campaign against the Turkish military forces. The Legion was one of the first political victories for the Zionist movement.

The Jewish Legion was formally demobilized in May, 1921, and some of its officers and men, Jabotinsky among them, played a leading role in establishing Haganah in 1921.

Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemet L'Israel, Hebrew, the Perpetual Fund for Israel) was set up in 1901 by the World Zionist Organization for the purpose of purchasing land, and its reclamation, afforestation, and development. The lands purchased by the Fund became public lands, and since the establishment of the State of Israel, are held as state lands.

Jewish National Home term used in the Balfour Declaration (November 2, 1917) to describe the Jewish Zionist aspirations for Palestine. Also see Balfour Declaration and British Mandate.

Keffiya traditional Arab headgear.

Kibbutz a voluntary collective community, mainly agricultural, in which there is no private wealth and which is responsible for all the needs of the members and their families. The first small kibbutzim (plural) were formed in 1909, later larger self-sufficient collective villages combining agricultural and industrial production were developed. Several confederations of kibbutzim with common political or religious beliefs formed political groupings which play an active part in Israeli politics.

Knesset (Hebrew, assembly) the parliamentary legislative body of the State of Israel. The Constituent Assembly elected on January 25, 1949, became the First Knesset on February 16, 1950.

Labor Zionist Movement see Poalei Zion.

League of Nations an international organization founded in 1919 at the end of World War I under the treaty of Versailles. The object of the League of Nations was to establish world peace, to provide the necessary machinery both for enforcing the treaties and for removing injustice from them, and to promote cooperation between member states.

Predecessor of the UN, it had a similar structure: a permanent Secretariat, an Assembly of all the member states, and a Council consisting of five permanent members with four other members selected from

time to time by the Assembly. It established a Permanent Court of International Justice and advocated resolving potential conflicts between members by peaceful means.

The Covenant of the League, was greatly influenced by the vision of Woodrow Wilson, President of the U.S., 1913 to 1921. Paradoxically the U.S. Senate did not ratify the Covenant, and therefore the U.S. was not a member of the League. The League, based in Geneva, Switzerland, functioned between 1919 and 1939, when Hitler started World War II. Formally it ceased to exist in 1946 with the establishment of the UN. Also see the British Mandate for Palestine.

LEHI (abbrev. Lohamei Herut Israel, Hebrew, Freedom Fighters of Israel) an underground paramilitary organization founded by Avraham Stern in 1940. This new underground group adopted a policy of terrorist action against persons, attacking British policemen, soldiers, and government officials, but taking care not to harm the civilian population. It consisted of a small group of extremist idealists who split from IZL because they were opposed to the cessation of activities against the British during the war with Germany. Also see Underground Military Organizations in Eretz Israel.

Mandate, British in Palestine See British Mandate.

Mapai (abbrev. Mifleget Poalei Eretz Israel, Hebrew, Labor Party of Israel) a Zionist socialist party dedicated to the national redemption and the ideal of socialism in the homeland. Founded in 1930, it regarded labor as the central force in the nation, responsible for achievement of national goals, held a dominant position in the *Asefat Hanivharim* and the Jewish Agency during the 1930s and 1940s.

Mapam (abbrev. Mifleget Hapoalim Hameuhedet, Hebrew, United Workers Party) a labor Zionist party with strong Marxist leanings, founded in 1948. The party drew its constituency from Hashomer Hatzair and Ahdut Haavodah Poalei Zion.

Mizrachi a religious faction of the World Zionist Organization, founded in 1902 whose progam was based on the principle that the Land of Israel is for the people of Israel according to the Torah of Israel.

National Council See *Vaad Leumi.*

New Zionist Organization See Union of Zionists Revisionists.

NILI (abbrev. Netzach Israel Lo Ishaker, Hebrew, the glory of Israel will not lie) a secret pro-British spying organization that operated in Syria and Palestine during World War I under the leadership of Aaron Aaronson and his sister, Sarah, of Zichron Ya'akov.

Palmach (abbrev. Plugot Hamahatz, Hebrew, an underground paramilitary organization) established in May 1941, when the British were faced with the possibility of a German invasion of Palestine. The British military and the Jewish Agency created this paramilitary unit to fight against the Germans in the event of an invasion. Originally they served under the British command, but as the war drew near the end, these units separated from the British and operated under the Jewish Agency control.

Poalei Zion (Hebrew, Workers of Zion) movement based on ideology combining Zionism and Socialism. Poalei Zion parties were established in Russia, Austria, the U.S., and Eretz Israel in the early 1900s.

The World Union of Poalei Zion was established in 1907 in the Hague. Throughout the years the movement was split between Left Wing (Marxist oriented) and Right Wing (Zionist oriented).

Provisional State Council a legislative body established on May 14, 1948, under the terms of the Declaration of Independence of the new State of Israel. Chaim Weizmann served as President of the State Council, which included Members of the Provisional Government, Members of the Council, and Alternate Members. The Council served for nine months, until February 14, 1949, when it was replaced by the Constituent Assembly (see Knesset).

Provisional Government policy determining and executive arm of the State government established under the terms of the Declaration of Independence. The Provisional government was replaced by the First Cabinet formed following the first elections on January 25, 1949.

"Season" ("The Hunting Season") operation by Haganah in 1944-1945 to stop IZL and LEHI from implementing the renewed struggle against the British.

In the fall of 1944, the leaders of IZL were rounded up by the Haganah, some were detained in prison cells in the kibbutzim, but most of them were turned over to the British authorities. These were imprisoned and about 250 were exiled to detention camps in Africa. This operation failed to stop IZL activities and after about six months it was discontinued.

Tenuat Hameri see United Resistance Movement.

Transjordan territory under British Mandate for Palestine east of Jordan. The boundaries of the original (1920) Mandatory territory for establishing the Jewish National Home in Palestine encompassed all of the territory of the State of Israel prior to 1967 plus Gaza, Judea, Samaria, Golan, and all of the kingdom of Jordan. In the spring of 1921, Winston Churchill, then British Colonial Secretary, conceived of a plan for the excision of Transjordan from the Mandatory territory and awarding it to Abdullah (son of Sharif Husain) who, in exchange, abandoned his claim to Syria.

Initially the territory remained under the Mandate for Palestine, but eventually the British granted Jordan the status of an independent kingdom. The Jewish claim to a National Home under the Mandate was then limited to the territory west of the Jordan.

Zionist Revisionist groups did not accept this limitation and continued to strive for a Jewish state "on both sides of the Jordan" as envisaged in the original Mandate. But majority of Zionists were willing to give up this claim on Transjordan, believing that this "land for peace" concession would satisfy the Palestinian Arab nationalist aspirations.

Underground Military Organizations in Eretz Israel volunteer paramilitary units organized when it became evident that the British Mandatory Administration was not able, and sometimes not willing, to provide adequate protection against Arab attacks on Jews. Later these organizations became the Haganah, which operated under policies established by the Jewish Agency. Irgun Zvai Leumi, which split from the Haganah in 1931, and LEHI, which split from IZL in 1940, operated independently until 1948 (see United Resistance

Movement).

All of the underground military organizations were incorporated into the Israel Defense Forces following the establishment of the State of Israel.

Union of Zionist Revisionists movement of political Zionists, based on Theodor Herzl's concept of Zionism, founded in 1925 by Vladimir Jabotinsky. The basic objective of Zionist Revisionists was stated as the establishment of a Jewish State with a Jewish majority in the entire territory of Palestine (i.e., on both sides of the Jordan). The movement emphasized the importance of political foundation for settlement in Eretz Israel believing that "ninety percent of Zionism may consist of tangible settlement work and only ten percent of politics; but those ten percent are the precondition of success." Additional conditions in the Revisionist program included the establishing of Jewish military units in Eretz Israel for protection of Jews and the introduction of legislative and administrative measures designed to foster mass immigration and settlement.

In 1935 the Revisionists left the World Zionist Organization and established the New Zionist Organization. In the late 1930s the NZO called for a policy of speedy evacuation of the Jewish masses from the danger zone of Eastern and Central Europe (see Jabotinsky Plan). The Zionist Revisionist movement challenged the duality of the Labor Zionist's political concepts which accepted socialist ideology as a basis for the new society in Eretz Israel. Jabotinsky articulated the view (monism) in which establishment of a Jewish State was the sole ideological commitment. During the 1920-1940 decades the Zionist Revisionist programs met with strong opposition of the Labor Zionist parties.

United Resistance Movement came into existence in November 1945, when the Jewish Agency came to the conclusion that the British Government would not abandon its anti-Zionist policies voluntarily. The United Resistance Movement (*Tenuat Hameri*) emerged with Haganah, Irgun, and LEHI operating under a joint coordinated command. Massive operations destroying radar stations, mobile police installations, railway stations, bridges and workshops, airports and aircraft were carried out under United Resistance banner.

After about a year and a half of the joint Jewish underground operations, the British decided to strike back. On Saturday June 29, 1947, known as "Black Saturday," all available members of the Jewish Agency (except Chaim Weizmann) were arrested and imprisoned, and four thousand Haganah members were arrested and sent to detention camps. Partly as a response to the "Black Saturday" the Irgun operation against the British Military Headquarters in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem was approved by the joint command.

The operation was carried out on July 22, 1947, and the south wing of the hotel was completely destroyed. Unfortunately, the British refused to believe the warning of the impending explosion and lives were lost, including British officers, Jewish officials, Arab workers and casual visitors to the administrative office. The Jewish Agency and the Haganah blamed Irgun for this tragedy, even though it was

approved by the joint command. The weeks following King David explosion saw the end of the United Resistance Movement. From fall 1947 until the proclamation of the Jewish State, the underground military organizations operated more or less independently.

Vaad Leumi (Hebrew, National Council) representative body elected by *Asefat Hanivharim*, which met several times a year. The *Vaad* elected an Executive which included heads of the administrative departments – political affairs, local communities, rabbinate, education, health, social welfare, sports, and information.

White Papers, The a series of "White Papers," government policy guidelines issued by the British. In 1922 the **Churchill White Paper**, in addition to excluding Transjordan from the Mandatory territory, restricted immigration, limiting it to "the economic absorptive capacity," which was artificially determined by the Mandatory.

In 1930 the **Passfield White Paper** (Passfield was the Colonial Secretary at the time) placed further restrictions on the immigraiton of Jews, without any restrictions on immigration of Arabs. Attracted by the expanding economic opportunities created by the Jews, Arabs from neighboring Syria, Iraq, and other Arab countries, settled in proximity to the Jewish centers of population. The 1930 White Paper aroused vigorous protest by the Jewish Agency, and some of the restrictions on Jewish immigration were relaxed.

Following the new flare-up of Arab disturbances in 1936, a new Royal Commission headed by Lord Peel was appointed to examine the situation. The Commission, after numerous hearings and on the spot inspections, concluded that the Mandate was unworkable and that the territory west of the Jordan must be partitioned in two parts, with a smaller part becoming a Jewish state and a larger part to be combined with the Arab state of Transjordan. A White Paper was published accepting the findings as government policy. The **1936 White Paper** aroused vigorous debate in England political circles and its implementation was postponed pending further investigations and new government proposals.

The Chamberlain government issued the **1939 White Paper** which rejected the partition plan, but proposed establishment of a Palestinian state after a transition period of ten years, with Arab majority and guarantees for the Jewish minority. Under this plan the Jewish immigration and land purchase rights would terminate within five years. This was total betrayal of the League of Nations Mandate, and this proposal was rejected by the League's Mandate Commission. Hitler's invasion of Poland and the start of World War II on September 1, 1939, dealt a death blow to the League of Nations and its ability to influence resolution of world conflicts.

World Zionist Organization (often referred to as the Zionist Organization) was founded at the first Zionist Congress convened by Theodor Herzl in Basle, Switzerland in 1897. The governing body of the Zionist Organization is the Congress, which is elected by Jews throughout the world who identify themselves as Zionists. the Congress meets every four years (early Congresses met annually), and in the interim the General Council acts on policy and legislative

matters. The executive organ charged with the implementation of the decisions of the Congress and the Council is the Executive, which meets several times a year, usually in Jerusalem.

While the Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency operate as independent entities (at least nominally) the Zionist Organization designates 50% of the members of the Agency, and they have the same Treasurer and Comptroller. Originally (based on the Mandate) the Zionist Organization designated all the members of the Agency, but in 1929 the Agency was enlarged to include 50% non-Zionists, representing Jewish organizations supporting Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel, but not necessarily identifying with Zionist political aims.

Between 1947 and 1971 the executive bodies of the Agency and the Zionist organizations became identical, but since 1971 the separation between the two bodies was reestablished. The functional division between the Zionist Organization and the Agency assigns Zionist activities in the Diaspora to the former and the aliyah and absorption activities in Israel to the latter.

yishuv (Hebrew, settlement) the Jewish Community in Eretz Israel.

Zionism a political movement whose goal was the return of the Jewish people to Eretz Israel. Zionism emerged at the end of the nineteenth century as emancipation failed to solve the problem of anti-Semitism. The Zionist solution to the problem envisaged a national revival through ingathering of Jewish people in Eretz Israel and through the establishment there of a Jewish National Home.

United by the common goal of national revival, different factions advocated different programs for achieving this goal. The largest group advocated "practical" Zionism, believing that establishing Jewish settlements was more important than laying political and legal foundations for the future state. Others emphasized the political and legal aspects of creating a Jewish state. Religious Zionist groups advocated including religious practices into the constitution of the National Home, and a socialist wing of Zionism advocated a socialist-marxist economic system for the Jewish community in Eretz Israel. (See General Zionist Party, Hapoel Hamizrahi, Hashomer Hatzair, Mapai, Mapam, Mizrachi, Poalei Zion, Union of Zionist Revisionists). Sharp political rivalry among some of these groups (and various splinter groups within them) marked the first 50 years of the Zionist movement and established a pattern for the bitter contention among the political parties in contemporary Israel.

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Born in Russia in 1914, Eliahu Lankin grew up in China in a region bordering on Soviet Siberia. He was raised in a traditional Jewish home, and at the age of 15, joined the Zionist Youth Movement, Betar. In 1933, he went to Palestine and immediately joined the Irgun Zvai Leumi (IZL), an underground military organization. With the creation of the State of Israel, he was elected to the first Knesset (Parliament) but left the political arena in 1952. After completing a course of studies in law at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he entered the practice of law.

Throughout the years he served on numerous government committees and commissions, including the Board of Directors of the Israel Broadcasting Authority, the Board of Governors of the Hebrew University, the National Committee of the Israel Bar Association, and as Chairman of the Jerusalem Bar Association.

In 1981 Lankin was appointed Israel's Ambassador to South Africa, returning to Jerusalem in 1985. In 1987 he was awarded the title *Yakir Yerushalaim*, Honorary Citizen of Jerusalem, and in 1991 was chosen to be the Ombudsman of the Israel Bar Association. He lives in Jerusalem where he continues to practice law.

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