# LETTERS FROM THE DESERT

*by*

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# LETTERS FROM THE DESERT

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# Introduction

These "letters from the desert" were written by a Jewish soldier to his wife, children and friends during the first three years of the present war. The term Jewish soldier, so strangely direct and unqualified, will be puzzling to many. Is there indeed, such a creature as a Jewish soldier, as distinguished from the soldier of Jewish faith or race in the British or French or American army? Is there a Jewish soldier in the service of the Jewish people?

Moshe Mosenson, one of the over thirty thousand Palestinian Jews enlisted in the British army, is a soldier of a people whose national aspirations are still a matter of controversy. In the course of the quarter of a century which has passed since Great Britain was first entrusted by the League of Nations with the mandate for Palestine, different and contradictory interpretations have been placed on the term Jewish National Home; even to this day the final word has not been spoken about the political future of Palestine by those who have the power to do so. Yet, to the Jewry of Palestine and to millions in other countries, Palestine is not a problem, but a reality—the only solid reality in the nightmare of their most recent history.

How the six hundred thousand Jews who have made Palestine their home regard the political status of their community was clearly stated in a recent speech of one of their leaders, David Ben Gurion: "...We, Jews of Palestine," said Mr. Ben Gurion, "are not British subjects, and the Palestine government is not in the same position towards us as the British government is towards British citizens. We have a mandatory government, which is a temporary government for a specific purpose, whose chief function is the promotion

of the Jewish National Home . . . The Jews of Palestine have a different legal status from that of the Jews throughout the world. The Jews of Palestine, including those who have come from Poland, Germany, England and the United States, are not Polish, German, English or American Jews, but simply Jews—or, if you like, Jewish Jews. The Jews of Palestine are not subject to any non-Jewish state or nation. They are subject to the laws deriving from the mandate, but their connection is with the Jewish nation in the homeland."

This, stated in legal and political terms, is the credo uniting Palestinian Jewry. It is also their answer to the challenge of the British White Paper policy, which is the complete denial of all Jewish aspirations. Yet, this disagreement between the mandatory power and the Jewish community has not had the least effect upon the devotion and the scale of its contribution to the war effort. When war was declared on September 3, 1939, the Jews of Palestine, who as citizens of a mandated territory were not subject to conscription, immediately set up machinery for the mobilization of their able-bodied men into the British Army. They did not join the British Army as British subjects (which they were not in any sense) or as individual sympathizers with the anti-Hitler cause. They joined as Jews, as citizens of the Jewish commonwealth in the making, motivated not only by general considerations, but also by their Jewish hatred for an enemy who had set himself the task of the complete extermination of their people. Until recently, when the British War Office acceded to the demand of the Jewish Agency for the formation of a distinctly Jewish military force, the Jewish Brigade Group, Jewish volunteers had been serving in special companies of British military units. The recurrent demands for official recognition of the Jewish character of these Palestinian companies were either not granted at all, or only very unwillingly. But the thirty thousand Jewish volunteers continued to regard themselves as Jewish soldiers. As such, they guarded their

homeland and served on many fronts of the World War—in Eritrea and Abyssinia, Crete and Greece, North Africa from El Alamein to Tripoli, Sicily and Italy, Iraq, Persia, and Syria.

Moshe Mosenson, the author of these letters is one of those soldiers. In civilian life he was a farmer, a member of a small agricultural community on the Judean Plain. He is not a professional writer or public spokesman. Occasionally he may have participated in a meeting of his communal settlement or contributed an article or a sketch to its "diary" (daily bulletin), but not until these letters were published did he emerge from the anonymity of private life. And yet these letters are more than mere family documents. It is not only the individual soldier, Moshe Mosenson, who addresses us; it is a community speaking through the voice of one of her representative sons, one of the many thousands whose toil and courage have made the ancient dream of the Return take on the shape and glow of life.

Necessity and choice, or, to put it differently, external pressure and inner need, have combined to place Palestine in the very center of Jewish life today.

The dream of a return to the ancestral land has continued to haunt Jewish memory ever since the Roman legions overran its soil nearly two thousand years ago. During those centuries there was never a time when some Jewish pilgrims, driven by an overwhelming longing for the land which was to them "the throne of the Lord", did not attempt to gain a foothold on the sacred ground. But, strange as it may appear on the surface, it was only in the modern period, when secular culture had made the most devastating inroads in the Jewish communities of the West and the East that the most resolute, large-scale, and successful efforts for the re-colonization of Palestine were begun. But then it was perhaps inevitable that the urge to re-gather all the scattered energies of a people, to

revitalize its powers through a return to the sources of their historic being, should have arisen at a moment when they seemed to reach bottom—out of the depths of threatening nothingness.

Not many Jews were carried away by the passion for a new beginning in Jewish history. Beginning with the '80's of the last century, millions of European Jews emigrated from Europe to the United States and to other countries overseas. Only a few thousands deviated from this main trek of Jewish emigration. From these came the founders of the first Jewish agricultural settlements in Palestine during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. These colonies bore such names as "The First in Zion" (Rishon L'Zion) and "The Gate of Hope" (Petach Tikvah). Yet, despite the considerable sums and vast energies that poured into these colonies they brought the "lovers of Zion" more heartbreak than encouragement. The early Jewish colonist bore little resemblance to the ideal of a rooted and independent Jewish farmer which had inspired Zionism from its earliest days; he had much more in common with the type of colonial plantation-owner, whose enterprise is dependent upon cheap native labor—with this exception, that the Jewish colonist was generally very poor, incapable of supporting himself, always in debt, and at the mercy of the whims of capricious philanthropists. Despite their unmatched heroism and sacrifices, the pilgrim fathers of the new Palestine were defeated by the conditions under which they labored.

Jewish colonization in Palestine was put upon a sounder foundation by the efforts of the generation of pioneers who succeeded the founders of the first Jewish settlements—the group known in the history of Zionism as the *Second aliya.* Of these pioneers it may be said that within the short span of a decade (1904-1914) they succeeded in creating what was most essential to the establishment of a Jewish Palestine—the prototype of a self-sustaining, rooted and culturally integrated

Jewish community. It was no accident that this should have been a cooperative community. Many of the pioneers of this generation had brought with them to Palestine the hope that the Jewish homeland would succeed in avoiding from the very beginning the evils of uncurbed capitalism, the hope that at least some elements of an equitable order would be introduced into the new Jewish society. This would probably have remained a pious hope, had not the experiences of the earlier settlers proved that Jewish colonization, in order to be able to expand and provide the immigrants with employment and a fair standard of living, must be founded on a maximum of mutual aid and cooperation. Thus was born the *Kvutza* (communal settlement) and the *Moshav* (smallholders' cooperative village)—the original contribution of Jewish Palestine to the present day struggle for a new social order.

Attempts to establish the "ideal community" have been made in various countries and at different times. Practically all those experiments ended in failure. It would be a fascinating task to inquire into the causes of the singular success of the collective settlements in Palestine. For the purposes of this introduction it suffices to say that they *are* a success. Since 1908, when Dagania, the first *Kvutza,* was founded on the banks of the Jordan, these collective and cooperative villages have been increasing in number. At present there are about 200 of them with a population of 40,000.

These villages are divided into two main types. The *Kvutza* (or *Kibutz*) is a complete commune whose principles are collective ownership of the means of production, planned communal work, and a common household. In the *Moshav* cooperation is limited to marketing and purchasing; work is communally planned and organized only in certain branches and during particular seasons of the year. The traditional functions of the family home, as a household and a nursery have remained undisturbed in the *Moshav.* The community as a whole, however, does bear a measure of responsibility for the

individual members; a mutual aid fund provides workers to replace the head of the family in cases of illness or death. What both these types of cooperative community have in common is the principle of "self-work," i.e., the elimination of hired labor, the cooperative organization of consumption and marketing and responsibility for the welfare of their members, even if they are incapable of doing their share of the work. The maximum of equality and collective responsibility has been obtained in the *Kvutza.* There the profit motive has been completely eliminated; if some of its members succeed in attaining some individual distinction in their community it is due solely to voluntary and unremunerative service. It is the very industrious or inventive member, or the person who has contributed most to the cultural activities of the community who is the hero of the *Kvutza.*

Only 40,000 of the over half a million Jews now living in Palestine have chosen the way of life of the *Kibutz* and the *Moshav,* yet the cooperative sector is exerting the most powerful influence upon the social and economic life of the country and is the pride of the entire Zionist movement. Sceptics and opponents, no less than confirmed admirers, regard these villages as the vanguard of the Jewish nation in the homeland, and the workshop of a new Jewish civilization. These pioneers are generally regarded as the elite of the new Jewish Palestine—but an elite by the right of the heavy burdens they have assumed rather than by the enjoyment of social or economic privileges. It is the *Kibutz* and the *Moshav* who have drained and made habitable the marshes of the Valley of Esdraelon, transformed the rocky hills of Upper Galilee into fields and vineyards, settled and brought life to the waste of the Dead Sea, and have now begun to colonize the plains of the Negev.

But even more important is the role that these settlements have played in reeducating the refugee into a citizen of the Jewish homeland. It is in the *Kvutza* and the *Moshav* that Jews from East and West, from Russia and Yemen, Poland and

Turkey, England and Syria, and a dozen other countries meet and recognize each other, unlearn what is best forgotten in the new land, and help each other to acquire the skills, the habits, and the esprit de corps of a nation. These villages are only islands in a community which is still largely a conglomoration of transplanted human beings—some who came to Palestine because there was no other choice, others shell-shocked by their tragic experiences in their old homes, some incapable or unwilling to part with old habits or expectations. The *Kvutza* and the *Moshav* have exercised a magnetic influence upon these heterogeneous communities. They remind even the most casual immigrant that he has settled in a Jewish country and that to assimilate there, he must become fully a Jew; they have attracted the youth of the country, even those grown up in middle-class homes. Growing with the community, ever expanding and broadening the sphere of its activities, the *Kvutza* has become a powerful instrument of national integration. In these collective settlements, more than elsewhere in the new Palestine, we see the rebirth of the Jewish people; there the Jewish distress of our time has been harnessed to the elan of national redemption.

A non-Jewish writer who has shown unusual understanding of the inner meaning of Zionism, once said: "To the Christians who have a feeling for the sacramental bond between God and hallowed earth, between bread and man—*the true bread of Israel appears to be his land*" (Julia De Beasorbe).

The pioneers of Jewish Palestine, most of whom are children of an age shy of the language of religious myth and concept, do not speak of their aspirations in terms of the sacramental; they prefer the safe and drab term *normalcy.* Their labors, they assure you, are dedicated to a secular and modest end—to create the conditions for the normal existence of the Jewish people. They are working and fighting that the Jewish people may again possess what other peoples enjoy

as a matter of course—a land, national sovereignty, self-government. No more and no less.

And yet, it is the "sacramental" rather than the merely political that the atmosphere surrounding Jewish effort in Palestine calls to mind. It must be obvious even to those who have only the most superficial acquaintance with the men who have given modern Jewish Palestine its character, that the political goal of Zionism, the establishment of a Jewish Commonwealth, is to them not an end in itself, but a means. The deeper motive and aim of their efforts are to be sought beneath the level of politics; it is on that level that one should search for the deeper meaning of that normalcy which is the explicit aim of Zionism.

Underlying all Zionist thought and feeling is the assumption that there *is* a normal state of national existence, and that it cannot be circumvented without grave consequences to the moral and spiritual health of the individuals comprising the national group. This point of view, which will strike no one as very original or novel when applied to other national groups, has met with stubborn resistance when it was brought to bear upon the Jewish problem. Modern, emancipated Jewry has been clinging to a philosophy of Jewish history, which labored to prove that that which might be a misfortune to other people must be a boon to Israel. Jews, everywhere a minority, completely dependent on the good will of the majority, always on the defensive, could still remain a self-respecting and even proud people. As long as Jews were granted equal civic rights with others there was no reason for them to feel that anything was lacking in their lives.

There are many Jews, however, to whom this point of view appears to be a denial both of the truth and of human dignity. To them it was a form of vanity because it claimed for one human group a superiority to human finiteness which verged on the blasphemous; and it was a degrading arrogance because it could not be anything more than a theodicy of

misfortune, a compensation for the "bread of life." Those Jews dared to face the truth of their insecure and tragic position among the nations. They were ashamed of the self-flattery in which some Jews seek a compensation for a gnawing sense of weakness and insecurity from which there cannot be an escape in the Diaspora. It is not only absolute power that corrupts absolutely, but also absolute powerlessness, even if to a different degree and in different ways. Dependence upon the approval of others cannot ever be anything but a pernicious poison, destructive of that sense of worth which is the condition of all true spiritual productivity. Jewish life in the Diaspora, particularly in the secular era, has been more deeply affected by this poison than most Jews are willing to admit.

A hunger for the "bread of life" has brought several generations of Jews to their ancient homeland. To them the "bread of life" has been synonymous with freedom—freedom from the pressure of a culture which they felt could never become fully their own; from the humiliating necessity of constant self-justification; from the spirit-crushing and ultimately futile toil involved in earning the stale rewards of "toleration"; the freedom to live and work out of inner compulsion, true to their own guiding values, secure in the knowledge of their place in the stream of history.

To the achievement of this "normalcy" adventurous-hearted Jews of several generations have brought heroic energies and a religious passion. What are the Jews seeking in Palestine? Things that are as common as bread to other peoples, of which they are as unconscious as the air they breathe. But it is the fate of the Jewish people that after almost two millennia of exile it can hope to attain this status of common humanity only by heroic effort and boundless faith.

There are terms widely current in the every day speech of the Palestinian Jew which bear witness to the religious source and religious intensity of his secular nationalism. The term *aliya* is a good example. In the Bible this term, meaning literally ascent, was used to signify the three holiday pil-

grimages to the Temple in Jerusalem; in the Diaspora, *aliya la-Torah,* or ascent to the Torah, referred to the act of mounting the pulpit in the synagogue to read the weekly portion of the *Torah; aliyat neshama,* the ascent of the soul, is a term originating in the literature of Jewish mysticism. In present day Palestine, *aliya* is applied to denote two acts of crucial significance in the building of the Jewish homeland—*aliya laaretz,* ascent to the land, or immigration, and *aliya al hakarka,* or ascent on soil, a term referring to the acquisition of a new tract of land for the purpose of settlement.

The choice of such a term to denote such activities casts some light upon the impulse behind the Return. To those actively engaged in the restoration of the Land of Israel these common events—the arrival of a shipload of immigrants, the addition of a few more acres to the cultivated area of the country, the birth of a child, a forgotten Hebrew word resurrected from an ancient text and added to the dictionary of modern usage, the launching of a Jewish ship—all these are significant episodes in the drama of a people's ascent.

The pioneer of the Jewish homeland rarely speaks of the "Jewish mission" or even of the "Jewish contribution to civilization." He is too painfully aware of the scars and rifts which today deface the Jewish body and the Jewish spirit to indulge in such compensations. Today he is completely devoured by one desire—to create the foundations of an earthly home for the Jewish people. His dominating mood is that of concentration on the nearest goal. The heart of the Zionist mystique is a truly religious yearning for the normal. "We wish to descend downhill," said the poet Yaakov Steinberg, "where the atmosphere is heavy and a mist rises from the earth, hiding the distances from view." And another Hebrew writer, M. J. Berditchevsky has said: "Give us a stone upon which to rest our heads: then we shall dream."*

* "And Jacob . . . took one of the stones of the place, and put it under his head, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on earth and the top of it reached to heaven."
(Genesis, 28; 10-12)

The army letters of Moshe Mosenson are a self-portrait of the *halutz* as a soldier. Those who are familiar with the pioneer in work dress will find no difficulty in recognizing him in uniform. To the Jewish soldier, particularly if he is a member of a communal settlement, joining the army did not involve a transformation as radical as that which the average civilian usually undergoes when he enters the army. Anything but a militarist in outlook or inclination, the *halutz* even in peace time leads a life which has many points of resemblance with that of the soldier. Like the soldier, he takes for granted hardship, danger, frugality. But his discipline is self-imposed; the civic stature of the individual Jew in Palestine is measured by his readiness to do the hardest job, to volunteer for the most hazardous post, to endure without grumbling, to "do without."

The *halutz* taking his oath of allegiance in the recruiting office of the army cannot but remember another oath, a "wordless oath... which must precede all others." He had once joined another army, an army of workers dedicated to the rebirth of his people. The oath to serve loyally in the present war against the mortal enemy of humanity and Israel is to these Jewish soldiers only a logical consequence and extension of that "wordless oath," which every *halutz* has sworn at one time in his life.

The Jewish pioneer-soldier has taken with him to the battlefields of the World War the memory of "a home which is more than a home." The poignancy of that memory is increased by the awareness that this home is not yet a complete reality; it has provided shelter to hundreds of thousands, but millions whose survival depended on it perished because strangers stood between them and those who were eager to give them rescue. The homeland has brought happiness to those who have labored to build it. There is pride in the mastery over the resisting soil, joy in the blossoming of abundant life on sand-dune and rock, and gratitude for "the

faith and friendship we have been granted." But the *halutz* is aware that he is building the New Jerusalem in the midst of a world of shifting power, broken promises, and precarious friendships.

Yet these apprehensions cannot weaken the ultimate determination of the soldier-pioneer; not in the face of what Moshe Mosenson and his comrades-in-arms have witnessed in the ravaged Jewish communities of North Africa and of what they experienced later, after these letters were published, in Rome, Florence and other ruined Jewish communities in Italy. And what they may encounter tomorrow in Germany and Eastern Europe, where they will not find even the graves of millions of their brothers, victims of the blood-lust of a depraved enemy and the indifference of callous friends, can only steel their resolve for the toil and the struggle which will begin for them after this war is brought to a victorious end.

SHLOMO GRODZENSKY.

# RECRUIT

## RECRUIT

August 5, 1940

Here I am at the training camp. There is a barbed wire fence around it and a stranger is on guard at the gate. The way home is both barred and distant; how far away Naan* seems to me now! For the first time I see my home and my former life as if through a mist—a mist of longing. I know that this separation will be hard to bear and that it will not be a matter of a single year. I know that the atmosphere of uniforms and the military life will be difficult for people like us to accept. But my heart remains calm.

I was sworn in some days ago. I stood in a half-dark room, next to the officer's desk. There was a military blanket hung over the window to keep some of the light out, and it filled both room and heart with gloom. The evening before my arrival here there was a farewell party for the volunteers at Ramat-Hakovesh. There I heard one of the comrades speak of an oath, a wordless oath, that precedes any other oath, and of keeping faith with the oath that is taken first. And now I am being sworn in. The sunlight filters through the army blanket and a single ray lights up a corner of the wall where the whitewash peeled off when a water-pipe was repaired. It brought to mind the *mizrach,* that patch of space in the eastern wall in traditional Jewish homes that can never be whitewashed, in memory of the destruction of the Temple. And while I was being sworn in, my thoughts were full of this ray of sunlight and the corner of the wall that can never be whitewashed.

You asked me to tell you how I succeeded in persuading my

* Name of communal settlement of which the author is a member.

comrades to let me go. You say you are amazed at this. Let me tell you about it. . . . On that evening I saw my comrades and my wife in a light that I shall never forget all my life long. Before that evening there had been a meeting of the "activists" of the *Kibutz** at Beit-Hashita. During the discussion I gave voice to my fear that the volunteers would be chosen from among the men who could most easily be spared. I went on to say that the *Kibutz* was obliged to give of its best people to the first core of the Jewish volunteers, that it was the most devoted and deeply-rooted, the fathers and veterans who should go. Those who had taken root most deeply in the *Kibutz* would be most likely to maintain their ties with home, to enrich the lives of those remaining behind, and would be least in danger of being lost to us in the difficulties and confusions of the times. Before I spoke I had already decided, within myself, to be one of the volunteers. When I came home to Naan I gave a report on the meeting. I voiced my point of view again and argued for it. Many of the comrades objected to the idea of fathers being called upon to volunteer. But I insisted most stubbornly.

I shall never forget this meeting. It took place out-of-doors, as is usually the case in the summer, on the lawn in front of the dining-room. I asked for the floor and said: The days of our youth are over and we are no longer in the habit of hearing or giving vent to personal confessions. But this evening I cannot help it. I was brought up in Palestine and have seen several mobilizations. I was a child during the last war, when the whole of Tel-Aviv followed the members of the Jewish Legion on their way to the railway station. Later came the days of Tel-Hai.† Many young men had gathered in our courtyard in Ein-Ganim on their way to the Upper Galilee. The wagons

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* *Kibutz* (or *Kvutza*): Hebrew term for communal settlement.

† *Tel Hai:* One of the first communal settlements. It was attacked by Arab terrorists in the Spring of 1920. Among the seven men and women who died in its defense was Joseph Trumpeldor, captain in the Jewish Legion of the first World War and one of the fathers of the idea of the *Kibutz.* The battle of *Tel Hai* is commemorated annually throughout Palestine.

carrying them went forth from our courtyard. I asked the driver, one of my father's friends, to take me with him. He picked me up and took me with him and I was overcome with happiness. The other boys scolded him, and on the border of the colony I was set down, while tears of shame choked me.

Later came the riots at Jaffa.* We lived in Nveh-Shalom at that time. The boys who had been killed at the Beit-Ha-chalutzim in Jaffa were brought close by our house. I saw their torn bodies. And when it was heard that the Arab villages were planning to attack Tel-Aviv and the suburbs of Jaffa, Margolin, the commander of the Jewish Legion, came to Tel-Aviv. He came with other soldiers from the camp at Sarafand. There was a proclamation posted in Herzl Street. Any one who could handle a rifle was to register at the Herzlia High School. I went up there and spoke to the man who was taking down names. I knew how to use a gun. I had used a rifle in my father's orange-grove. . . . But I was chased out ignominiously. On the following day I stood near the courtyard of the high school and saw the boys return from Jaffa with the rifles that Margolin had handed out from the army arsenal. I was still a youngster and had no right to go out and stand shoulder to shoulder with the others.

After the riots of 1929 that I experienced as an adult, there were the riots of 1936 and I was one of the defenders then. . . . There was Wingate's night brigade,† there was the Tegart Wall,‡ there was Hanita§ and there was a lack of experienced men. But I did not object then, that I could not join them. I

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* Anti-Jewish riots which took place during the early days of May, 1921.

† The so-called "night squadron" fought the Arab terrorists under Charles Wingate, British soldier and ardent friend of Zionism, who later attained fame as the liberator of Abyssinia and leader of the guerrilla fighting in Burma. He was killed in an airplane crash in March, 1944.

‡ The Tegart wall (named after the engineer in charge of its construction) was built on the northern boundary of Palestine in 1938 to prevent the influx of terrorists from the neighboring countries.

§ *Hanita:* Isolated mountain settlement on the northern border, established in the very midst of the riots. Because of the circumstances under which it was founded the name of this settlement has assumed a symbolic significance as an expression of the determination of the Jewish community to continue in its constructive activities despite the prevailing dangers.

knew that I was in a key position and that I had no right to leave my place. Today, however, it is different. . . . I feel that it is impossible for me not to go, and you must permit me to join.

Everyone turned to my wife. She got up heavily and said: I ask that Naan let him go. . . . Thus it was decided.

But here I am in a new and strange world. The group of Jewish volunteers has not yet crystallized. The atmosphere is difficult and depressing. Only here do I realize how right I was. The men most rooted in the country, its culture and its language are needed here. All about us we hear a confusion of languages, cynicism and crassness. Yet in the face of all this you realize your mission even more clearly. . . .

August 11, 1940

What shall I write to you, my dear ones, about the training camp, the military atmosphere and about myself, the rookie?—Everything is still new and strange, full of expectancy for whatever will happen next. Every morning I awake, and open my eyes with wonder to find myself in a barrack. I do not cease to be surprised when I put on my military uniform. Everything in my past life is still close to me, the work in the fields, the friendship. But never mind, I'll get used to this, too, in time.

We live in a large and neat hut, full of beds lined up in rows. Three of us have managed to put our beds together and we have asked not to be separated. From the first moment you realize what friendship means in a military atmosphere. In the noisy company of others you feel the need of a true friend beside you. . . .

Most of our training is concentrated on driving. The lectures are very interesting. We are studying the motor, the type of work that is connected with driving, and the history of our company for the last two hundred years. Today we were told that we must be careful not to sully the honor of the

company. We are to be drivers and must never do the repairs on our machines; there are workmen for that. It was strange for me to hear this. . . .

August 12, 1940

My dear daughter,

You'll probably be very surprised to hear that your father has begun to go to school. But Judith is not the teacher here. The teacher here is an English officer. This is a school for soldiers. This school is at Sarafand and thousands of boys from all parts of the country are here. They are studying to be soldiers. You know that there is a great war being waged now and that there is a foul enemy who wants to destroy our people. We must fight against him.

I am in a transport company. In a few weeks I will receive the truck that I am to drive and I will become part of the army that is stationed in the country. There are many of us here. When we stand together for roll-call in the morning it is hard to count us. The field is full of men, all in the same kind of uniform, and if you were to come to look for me here in the morning, it would be hard for you to find me in the sea of khaki. But I would wink to you with my right eye and smile and then you would find me. However, children are not allowed to visit at Sarafand. Only their letters are allowed, and particularly if there is a picture in the letter and if it is written immediately after their father's letter arrives. We live in large huts, sixty of us in each one. In the evening, sometimes, it is gay and we sing. But not everyone knows Hebrew. I've been teaching several of them Hebrew and they have been teaching me English.

Good-bye, my big daughter.

September 1, 1940

Yesterday we were told at roll-call that all leaves were cancelled. Why—we have not been told. . . . A question hovers over us: what can we expect in the next few days?

As I stood in line, listening to the announcement, I seemed to see Ron's eyes looking at you and asking: Why doesn't father come? I won't pretend, I fell into a very low "mood." All because of that cancelled leave. I walked about laughing at myself: a fine reason for a man to walk about sadly in these days. And you think that you are ready to go out to the front. . . .

But you, you know the reason for my impatience and why I wanted to be with you this week. If I can't see you face to face, I'll have to talk to you from the distance.

As for a name—if it's a boy, I suggest that we call him Nadav. For he was born during the days of the volunteers.* Do you agree? The name is euphonious, short and fits the meaning of these days. And if not Nadav,—then perhaps Giura?† I haven't thought of a girl's name yet. Don't be angry at me for not thinking of a girl's name. I'm so certain that he will be Ron's little brother. But, if you like, I'll think of a girl's name. What do you say to the name Shachrit (Dawn)?

Don't be surprised that I write so little. The very fact that home is so close, only an hour's walk, makes it difficult for me to write. Besides this, there is the army censorship. This delays the delivery, so that I may arrive home before my letter. It sometimes seems better to stuff the letter into your pocket, or to give up the idea of writing altogether while waiting for your leave.

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* *Nadav:* Biblical name signifying chivalry.

† *Giura:* The name of one of the leaders of the Zealot party which played a decisive role in the defense of Jewish independence against the Romans.

September 8, 1940

When I was at home I told you about the background of most of the volunteers. Only very slowly does our group seem to be acquiring a definite character. There is a need for someone who will give our unit a human and Hebrew character. You have no idea how troublesome and ominous this need is. It won't be easy, but it will have to be done. Those who are conscious of this need have been getting together, seeking for a way to handle it. Perhaps something will be done soon.

A little incident took place this week. A group that has already been assigned to different units in the army was asked to sign in English for the receipt of their uniforms. Some of them took fright immediately and signed as the sergeant demanded of them. But others refused and announced that they would only sign for this in Hebrew. They were threatened with military arrest and punishment. But they persisted and maintained that they were not required to give up their language, although they had been mobilized. Finally their demand was acceded to. You may think this is unimportant, but if we are able to insist on small things, we will also know how to insist on bigger ones.

We have started some Hebrew courses. Many of us are rootless and strange to the country and ignorant of the language. At times I think to myself: Where can we get the strength to take these people in hand and to insist upon their learning the language, so that they will understand the reason for their coming here and will know that they have a home which will be theirs on their return. . . .

Today I talked to a young man who came to register for Hebrew lessons. He explained to me that he cannot concentrate on studying these days. He is a refugee from Vienna. He spent a year in Dachau.* For six months the ship he was on

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* *Dachau:* Well-known concentration camp in Nazi Germany.

roamed the seas before he was able to enter Palestine illegally. He spent another half year in the internment camp in Athlit, and from there he volunteered for the army with only the thought of revenge in his heart. His wife remained in Prague and his children were scattered among their relatives. Their fate is unknown to him. In talking to me he lifted the veil from a single corner of the tragedy of European Jewry. It is different when you hear this from a man's lips, instead of reading it in the papers. A dark light is thrown on the story of the "Patria" and the "Atlantic", and those who have been drowned in the Black Sea.* . . . One is speechless before this bottomless agony.

September 17, 1940

You see,—I have been lucky, for owing to our little Giura I have succeeded in getting leave. No one else in our barracks has received leave. At the last moment the officer arrived and deferred their leaves. All of theme were taken to work at fortifications. When I returned I was greeted with shouts of delight and I treated them all to a glass of wine in honor of Giura, the son of Scout No. 6.

Today we were moved to another barracks. Our old one has been turned over to a new batch of volunteers. Instead of our iron beds we have been given wooden ones. All of us were restless that night. Many of us got up and stood on the porch outside. Today I tied a rag soaked in benzine around a stick, lit it—and instantaneously a smell of burnt sheep spread all over Sarafand. But don't think that we're eating sheep-flesh. Those were bed-bugs that sucked my blood one whole night.

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* The S.S. Patria and S.S. Atlantic arrived in Palestine late in 1940 with large cargoes of "illegal" immigrants. The British administration ordered both ships to return to their ports of embarkation. The S.S. Patria was blown up in the port of Haifa and the largest number of its passengers were killed in the explosion. The passengers of the S.S. Atlantic were forcibly exiled to the island of Mauritius, where they are still interned.

Soon the first phase of our life in the army will be over and we'll be on the march. We haven't been told what our destination will be. It is certain to be far away. And our longing for home will grow. That's how it is. . . .

October 23, 1940

The last night in our country. How strange it is. Tomorrow morning we will pass beyond the boundaries of home. Today I said goodbye to my wife and children near the gate. . . . But are we alone with this burden?

The thing that worries us most is: will we be able to hold our own in the face of what we must meet? Here, in Palestine, in the atmosphere of home, even the most uprooted among the soldiers were influenced by us. But there—what will nourish us? Will we too now lose contact with soil and home?

This evening we had a farewell party. Dov Hos* addressed us. At the end of the party he sat with us on the porch and talked to us like an elder brother who is sending his younger brothers out on a family mission. He talked to us a great deal, about the country and the prisoners at Acre† whom he had visited on that same day. He spoke well and what he said was good. But the impression he left can only last a short while. As time passes, in far places, how will the message of the movement be transmitted to us?

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* A leader of the Palestine Labor movement, veteran of the Jewish Legion of the first World War, who was very active in the mobilization of Palestinian Jews into the British army in the second World War. He died in an automobile accident.

† Reference to a group of forty-three young members of communal settlements, most of whom fought in the Wingate Night Squadrons. They were accused of "training with illegal arms." One of them was given a life term and the others sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. They were released after serving eighteen months; all of them then joined the army.

Tomorrow morning, before we leave, we will have a roll-call and Dov will present us with a flag. You know that I am not usually excited by flags. But after our talk with Dov I feel that there is something sacred about this flag. We will unfurl it even though we don't have official permission to do so. We will use it to cover the bodies of our dead, on their way to burial in a strange country, and with it we will return some day (will I be among these?) to our work, to our country.

# TRAINING DAYS

TRAINING DAYS

## TRAINING DAYS

December 6, 1940

I am writing to you this evening out of a deep need to find some refuge from myself. The story has finally reached us, in the training-camp, of what happened to the "Patria." Have you ever walked in the blazing sun without a shirt and felt the sun burn you? Do you remember the horrible pain you feel when your shirt touches your burnt skin? I have something of the same feeling today, although I haven't been out in the sun. My uniform seems to burn into my flesh. I try to think of every possible logical explanation. I explain to myself that I joined the army only at the call of my conscience and political disappointments and insults cannot change this decision. All this is not new to us. But nevertheless my khaki shirt weighs heavily upon me today. I had to tell you this, even though many blows may be still in store. Nevertheless. . . .

December 26, 1940

I don't know why, but this evening I was seized by a terrible feeling of loneliness and homelessness. A devouring kind of loneliness. I left my dearest friends and my home for the battle-front. I live in a tent full of dust and dirt and boys sleeping in their clothes. But why this sadness? I don't know. It's not easy to get accustomed to army life. I thought that for us, men of the *Kibutz,* who are used to living with others, it would be easier. But there is something completely alien to us in this kind of life, something particularly difficult for us. Our home was more than an ordinary home. And separation from it is very hard. . . .

You're probably sitting with Giura on the grass. The sun is setting, the heat has lessened. Ron, his face excited, comes to see his little brother. . . . A bus enters the courtyard and the children run to meet it. Everyone crowds around the evening edition of the paper to read the news of the front. The evening grows darker. At Naan it is the hour of meeting for children and parents. It is only three months behind me and it seems like many years. . . .

I have been reading the diaries* you send me and I am sharing in your life. I count every wagonload of hay and every newly hatched chick and rejoice over every new-born child. . . . The news I get of what is happening at home and in the *Kibutz* is like dew in the desert.

January 5, 1941

Today we went to visit a nearby town, a typical Egyptian-Arab town. We were told that a number of Jewish families were living there. We wandered about the town for a whole evening, looking for a Jewish face. How well I understood those English soldiers who wander about with an air of strangeness and indifference in Tel-Aviv or the colonies. How hard it is to be alone in a strange city. After wandering about for a long while we realized that it was naive to expect to find Jews by simply looking for them in a town numbering thousands of people. . . . A Greek shopkeeper agreed to take us to the Jewish families in the town and told us that all the Jews in the town dealt in gold. He brought us to a Jewish money-changer, who appeared confused at the sight of a dozen English soldiers in his shop. We greeted him with a *"Shalom aleichem."* But there were some Egyptian Arabs in his shop at the time and we felt that he wasn't too happy to receive us at that moment. *Galut!*†

* *"Diaries":* Internal bulletins issued by communal settlements.

† *Galut:* Literally, exile or dispersion. The universal form of Jewish existence after the loss of national independence. The term is also used to describe, in a derogatory sense, the political status of Jewry as a minority group and its effect on the freedom and dignity of the individual.

He offered to lend us a young boy as guide and we were brought to the rabbi, who is called *Chacham Bashi* (chief rabbi) in the East. We followed the boy through dark alleys until we reached a tall house, into which we followed him up a dark stairway. The boy knocked on the door and someone called out: "Who's there?" When the boy called out his name they answered him and only then was the door opened. The *Chacham* was startled at the sight of soldiers standing on his threshold. We quieted him by saying that we were Jews, from Palestine. *"Shalom aleichem."* His face brightened and he received us immediately with touching warmth and made us come in. The room was a synagogue with an Ark of the Covenant. Other Jews came in, some speaking Hebrew, and others only Arabic. This was a very moving encounter. In the midst of the conversation the rabbi said: "My dear friends, we have not yet prayed *Mincha;** let us pray together. It will be a great honor for us." The invitation was unexpected, but in a moment we had decided to accept. I held a prayer-book that the rabbi gave me and prayed *Mincha.* I prayed for you and for the children and for my distant home. Don't smile when you read these lines; it was very moving. Jews from such different places met like brothers and prayed together. "And may we all be gathered to Zion in Thy grace," prayed the rabbi with a melodious little sing-song and we answered: "Amen. So be it." We left them, these Jews, with the door of their synagogue closed against the hostile darkness. I know what they had gone through in this strange city during the riots in neighboring Palestine. It was a time of horror, and the marks of it are still on their faces.

In the last few days I have seen some beautiful countryside. The road cuts through little villages in the shade of date-trees, and between the palms the earth is green and blooming. And then suddenly all this disappears and you find yourself in the heart of the desert. Yesterday I stood and watched a desert sunset from the door of one of the shops. The sand-dunes all around

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* *Mincha:* The second of the three daily services of the Synagogue.

were covered with gold and the sky was ablaze with it.

. . . And the people you live with, the longer you know them the more impressed you become with how good the good ones are and how degraded the lower types are. . . . But the English soldiers find us very strange. On our return from the town we met one of them drunk. He embraced us and wished us a happy New Year. Afterwards he asked B. "Do you like whores?" B. replied angrily: "No!" He turned to me: "Do you like whiskey?" I said "No." Then he turned to another boy who was with us and asked: "Do you like to play cards for money?" The boy answered that he didn't play cards. The drunk stopped for a moment and asked: "Where are you from, —in the devil's name?" Yes, we seem strange to them. And I hope that we will continue to seem strange and queer to them, even though many of us are not different at all. There are all kinds.

January 17, 1941

I want to tell you again about the countryside I have been seeing. There are green stretches in the midst of the desert, a dead, dry plain, stretching as far as the eye can reach. . . . The little houses stand beneath palm-groves. Around them it is all green. Every plot of earth is a garden-patch. Every piece of ground is irrigated. Around each house there are canals, with water flowing both by day and by night. Poles are set up in the pathways and there are climbing vines on them. There are arbors built over the canals and vines grow all over them. And what an abundance of water there is, not the way it is with us, where each meter is counted on the water-clock. The water wasted here would be enough to irrigate hundreds of our villages. There are many fruit-trees here. There are oranges here, too, (though not as good as ours) and figs and tangerines and all kinds of fruit whose names I do not know. Vegetables are extremely cheap. Agricultural

science here deals almost exclusively with the relation between the soil and the water: whether the canals should be raised, or whether the soil should be lowered. Wherever the water reaches naturally, there is a flourishing garden. For there is no rainfall here. Everything is watered by the Nile river. For thousands of years now the people living on both its banks have drawn water from it in canals. Tremendous tracts are watered by them. Sailboats and motorboats go up and down carrying building materials and agricultural produce to great distances. I can't tell you how beautiful it looks. I never understood the magical importance of water in the Near East until I saw this countryside. We intend to visit the farms here on our next leave. The Egyptian farmers receive us hospitably, owing to the Arabic we speak, but the other side of the story is also evident here. . . .

And all about this green oasis is the desert, in its many different forms. . . . There are areas in which you can travel for hours upon an endless, monotonous barrenness. Others have been shaped by the wind and storms into sandhills and vast, white stretches of waves. This is the land of contrasts. Not a drop of rain falls here, but there are great storms that raise clouds of dust. Perhaps this land of contrasts has left its mark on us. . . .

January 22, 1941

I received a copy of *Shittim* from Beit-Hashita. It brought us some bad news. Another suicide in the *Kvutzat Hachugim.* While I was reading it I recalled another suicide in the early days of the group, near the spring of Gilboa. Something has changed since then. There is no longer the fear of death, which seized the group at that time. Then we thought that everything would be lost. We thought of breaking up the commune. Since then we have become stronger; we can meet death face to face and go on living. It was not for nothing, then, that during the riots our youth paid in hundreds of graves for its matur-

ity. We knew death as a constant companion; it no longer terrified us. It became a part of our life. And it was good that it was so. But, just because of this, it is hard to accept a death like *this* among us, and particularly now.

I received a booklet in memory of the two comrades from the *Kvutzat Hachugim* who were killed while working on the banks of the Jordan. What simplicity and innocence there is in it,—a spirit of purity seems to breathe from its pages. How wonderful that we have been granted such faith and friendship.

# FIRST ADVANCE

FIRST ADVANCE

## FIRST ADVANCE

January 27, 1941

My little girl,

I won't tell you exactly where I am, for that is forbidden to soldiers. But if you close your eyes, wrinkle your brow and think about the stamp on the envelope, you'll remember suddenly and say: "Father is in sh-sh,—never mind!" There is a man who sits and reads every letter that a soldier sends and every letter he gets. The name of the man is—the censor. He, too, has a daughter, probably, whether her name is Dvora or not, and he reads and smiles: "What a poor father! He wants to tell his daughter what country he is in, but he is afraid to. I'll help him and I'll write to his daughter: 'Your father, little girl, is in Egypt.'" . . . When soldiers and officers remember their daughters far away, in another country, they become very kind. But perhaps he'll refuse to tell you where I am, for a rule is a rule, especially in wartime. So the name of the country that I'm in will have to remain a secret. And I won't tell you what it is. If you guess what it is, tell it to Nira and the other children at school and ask them to keep the secret. When I come home I'll have a great many things to tell you about this country and the people who live in it. . . .

Do you know that I am a soldier in a transport unit and that I drive an automobile so big that you could put half of Maoz on top of it? I shall tell you about everything that I saw on my trips when I get home. And you'll understand, my daughter, that your father feels a little sad in a strange country and that every letter from his daughter makes him feel happier. . . . Before I left Palestine I sent you a present, a game called "The

Journey of the Children of Israel through the Desert." I wanted the game to tell you where I was going. Did you get it?

If you were to see who was sitting on my knees now, in the tent, you would burst out laughing. Well, guess—who is sitting on my knees and trying to take the pen out of my hands and licking the quill? You don't know?—I'll tell you: a monkey, like the monkey you saw at Ashdoth-Yaakov. . . . His name is Togo. He is very mischievous and charming. But he isn't wild, like the one we saw at Ashdoth-Yaakov. He is very good-humored. He is in love with our tent and refuses to leave it. Let me tell you what happened on the first night that Togo came to our tent. It was evening, and there was a dust-storm outside (a little like the dust-storms that the wind raises at Maoz, but thirty thousand times worse) and I was returning from a long trip. I came into my tent and found a guest sitting there, on my bed, deep in thought. His brow was wrinkled and he was thinking. Of course you know who this was—Togo. Of course he belongs to the whole company. But just because everyone is supposed to take care of him, no one does. The wind got stronger that night and very cold. Our friend Togo began to weep and wail, because he felt so cold. I took pity on him. I was covered with three army blankets and a sheet beneath them. As there was no choice, I had to take Togo into bed with me; I put him in between the second and third blankets and fell asleep. That night I had strange dreams and I tossed from side to side. This disturbed my little friend. He felt around in the blankets until he found me and pinched me in the stomach as hard as the old witch pinched the snow-maiden. I awoke suddenly, very angry, and pinched him back in the same way, so that he leaped out of bed and into the next bed beside mine. It was dark, and he jumped right onto the face of my neighbor who was sound asleep. And of course my neighbor awoke, screaming with fright, in a way that ill befits a brave soldier. Togo got frightened too, and climbed up the tent-pole, and from there to the shelf; suddenly the cork-helmets we keep there started raining down upon us. Luckily, we didn't

have our steel helmets there, or it might have been much more serious. From then on Togo has never left our tent. It is true that one of the boys, the one on whose face Togo jumped that night, hates him and covers his head with a blanket every night. He says that it is only because he doesn't want to "swallow the dust," but when he says this, I look at Togo and Togo looks at me and we both smile.

February 13, 1941

It's a long time now since I received a letter from you. It may be that your letters are following me but have not yet caught up. To tell you the truth, it is hard for me to write you long letters these days, in the way in which I have been doing. I am well, driving and covering a lot of ground. I have covered hundreds and hundreds of kilometers in the machine. I have driven over bombed roads, in rain and darkness and I am proud that I have stood up to it. Only recently I met Giura* face to face. It was a hot and stormy encounter. There was nothing friendly about it, as when we first met him in our reading room, in the company of Remarque. Now Giura has left us; we meet him very rarely. Occasionally, however, we receive little notes and warm greetings. But only occasionally. You can imagine how much I long for you, after all this. Are you all well?

As for the battles themselves—I learned that Reuter's cables can be trusted. I saw the defeat of the Italians with my own eyes. It's a long way from the border of Egypt to Benghazi, a distance of thousands of kilometers, sown with cannons and machine-guns abandoned by the retreating enemy. It's a pity that I can't write you about everything. It was our fate to see the ruins of Jewish communities. The Jews have been scattered; their shattered houses remind me of our house in the last war. When I have time I'll write you about these experiences.

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* *Giura:* The name of the author's son, often used as a veiled reference to the front, in order to pass censorship.

I am sending you this letter after a long period of silence. . . . But I am still not certain as to when the letter will go out and when it will reach you. . . .

Yesterday we had a *T'u B'shvat* party,* given by the engineers. At the same party we mourned the destruction of the Jewish community in this town. Tobruk had a large Jewish community and now we are living in its ruins. We found the synagogue that had been saved from the air-bombardment and we cleaned away all the rubbish that had collected there. It was a strange and moving spectacle. We wrote on the wall with paint: "This synagogue was polluted by war and was cleansed and purified by Jewish soldiers from Palestine serving in the Jewish Transport Corps."

Before the city was taken all the Jews had fled and all their property had been plundered. We found the Jewish school, of which only one wall was standing as a result of the bombing. The children's drawing notebooks were lying about the courtyard. I saved one of these notebooks. I looked through its pages and came upon a Star of David and a picture of a man ploughing with the title, "A Ploughman in Palestine." Ah, where are you now, dear children, victims of calamity? At this moment I thought of Dvora, of Ron and of Giura . . . Jewish children . . . our children . . . will we save them from the fate of the children of Tobruk?

February 20, 1941

V. and I have just completed an important piece of work. We boiled four cans of water in one of the ruined courtyards of the Jews of Tobruk. We had cans that had been emptied of benzine. As to water—you probably wonder—we got it out of a crate full of bottles of mineral-water. We emptied all the bottles and had a real bath. We made a fire underneath our

* *T'u B'shvat:* Traditional holiday similar to Arbor Day, celebrated by the planting of new trees.

cans and ministered to it stark naked, in a courtyard full of ruins and debris. We poured boiling water on each other and cleaned ourselves. And do you know what we used for feeding the fire? Broken pieces of furniture lying about in heaps. Everything had been destroyed and anything can be used for feeding a fire. But the main thing was that we got clean. I can't explain to you what the feeling of cleanliness means to us now. Apart from everything else, the Italians have left us hordes of fleas.

I can't write you about our life or our work in detail. What you read between the lines will give you some idea of the kind of life we are leading. The boys are not bad. Whatever is good in a person is revealed in the hour of trial. We had many doubts and fears but now we are glad to say that they have been proven false.

I have had some wonderful encounters with Australians. They are splendid boys. One day, on the road, a dust-storm blew up and it was very hot (a la Giura). We looked for shelter and found it. There were a number of Australians there who had also been looking for a "cooler" place. The place we met in was a cave cut out of the rocks. It had become late and it was still impossible to go out into the daylight. We began to feel the pangs of hunger. A fire was in a corner of the cave and the boys opened cans of meat that had been left behind by the Italians. There are piles of these, everywhere you go. We had a good meal and the Australians brought out some bottles of beer which we shared together. As they began to feel a little more cheerful the Australians offered to sing for us, if we would sing for them. Some of us can sing well and we began, in spite of the noise of bombs and explosions that reached us from outside. The Australians sang as soon as we had finished. Generally I don't care for their singing, but in that cave it seemed to have great beauty. After that we took out photographs of our families and passed them around. The Australians passed theirs from hand to hand and I took your

picture out of my pocket. When we left the cave we realized that we had lost our way and had come too near to the front.

I wanted to describe this meeting with the Australians, but I see that I have not succeeded in making it alive. I shall try again another time.

Now let me tell you about another encounter that moved me. No natives are left in this region. They have all run away or have been deported. One morning, among the Australian barracks, I saw a crazy old Arab woman, carrying a two-year-old child on her back in a sack. The child was white and clean and smiling. I took off my army sweater and gave it to the poor woman, so that she could cover the child with it. I had a few coins in my purse and gave them to her as well. I told her to buy something for the child with the money. But she opened her mouth wide and began to curse me and my father and grandfather back to the beginning of time. It seems that she is a native of this region and that, as a result of her flight and hardships, she has lost her mind. She went on, cursing continually and the child kept smiling to itself. I stood there with sobs in my throat. I was filled with fear for the fate of our own home....

And, truly, what will happen? When you see what happens to people whose homes have been caught in the fires of war, you find yourself praying for the safety of your home. Sometimes these thoughts keep me from falling asleep at night. Fear for the country keeps gnawing at me. Will our home be spared from these fires? . . .

And now let me tell of the leave that I spent together with M. from Dafneh. One morning, just after the machine had gone to the repair shop, we slipped away from camp quietly and went swimming in the sea. We wandered for hours in empty and deserted stretches of land that had served as battlefields only a while ago. We fired hundreds of shots with the Italian rifles that we found there and exploded tens of hand grenades in the trenches. For us, Palestinians, it was hard to accept the idea of such a waste of ammunition and weapons. Imagine

what we must have looked like, two Jewish boys wandering about in this deserted place and making the empty spaces resound with gunfire. We also found a machine-gun in position on the beach and we fired hundreds of shots into the sea. We were possessed with a craving for war. We practiced shooting at targets. . . . After we had deafened our own ear-drums, we slid down to the seashore. We bathed and swam in the beautiful bay. There was a wonderful feeling of tranquillity in the air and our hearts drank it in.

When we came up after swimming we discovered that we were hungry. We found a frying-pan in one of the trenches and washed it in sea-water. We opened five cans of Italian meat and after we had started a fire on a stone hearth we cooked ourselves a meal. We sat on a tall rock on the beach, eating and enjoying the sight of the beautiful bay spread out before us. After that we lay down in one of the trenches and tried to doze a bit, but the fleas there began to torment us and forced us to leave. We continued to wander about, throwing hand-grenades that we found there, and aiming at targets. Towards evening we returned to the camp, refreshed and full of new impressions. We were well scolded, but even the scolding did not spoil the high spirits that we experienced all that day.

February 22, 1941

It is the Sabbath Eve. All of us have gathered in the half-shattered hall to take part in the Sabbath festivity. I was surprised to get a letter from you after several weeks of waiting without one. The boys are singing here and I sit in a corner, reading and re-reading your letter and trying to feel myself at home with you. And my home seems far away, though I can see the lights of the Sabbath in it. It seems far away, not merely because hundreds of kilometers separate us, or because the frontiers of four countries lie between us, or because merely of the distance in time, for it is only a few months since I left you—but

because things have happened to me in the space of these few months that make me feel as though they were decades. And everything that I have left behind me seems so distant and inaccessible. If only you knew how good it is to receive a letter from home. If only you could see how it changes them all, so that they seem to be radiant with goodness. . . .

There are some among us who never receive any letters at all. These are "illegal" immigrants, lonely, solitary souls, without friends; their parents have remained in the Diaspora, a prey to the hazards of war and persecution and there is no one to write to them. They seem so pitiful at a moment like this. In comparison with them there are well-fed, well-rooted boys who receive an abundance of good things, letters and packages and money. The contrast between them and between the boys who don't receive anything, not even a letter or a newspaper, is shocking to see. There is also the member of a *Kibutz* who has received nothing at all, not a single letter, not even the "diary" of his village. There were tears in his eyes. At that moment I saw quite clearly how a man's ties with his group and with the whole movement can be destroyed by his sense of pain and disgrace. Is there no way of avoiding this? If the volunteer does not have relatives or close friends he is left forsaken and alone, in most cases.

I had an experience today that was very touching. There is an "illegal" immigrant from Germany among us, a man with a wife and son. He is very embittered. In Palestine he had some bad experiences with "connections" and "pull"—and he was crushed by them. Now he is in the army, and most of our boys, instead of teaching him Hebrew, have been grumbling about his German. They use every opportunity to call him "Yekeh."* He, in his bitterness, threatens that he will return to Germany again, after the war, "when it becomes democratic again." Today he came to me pleadingly: *"Bitte,* read this letter to me." I sat down, with a letter in childish

* *Yekeh:* Term of ridicule used by Palestinian Jews of East European origin with reference to immigrants from Germany.

handwriting in my hands and read to him: "Dear father, Mother cries every evening and says, Hansi, let's pray to God so that father will come home safely. I want you to come home already and I want you to bring me a bicycle. I had a birthday party at school. I am ten years old already. When you come home, we'll make another party and mother will fix the coffee the way you like it. I am studying well. When I am big I will work in a *Kibutz* and you will drink coffee and rest from the war. Only come home soon!" I read the letter slowly and translated each word into my broken German and he, the father, sat there weeping. Then I realized what had happened. The son had taken root in the country and his father, for his son's sake, would take root in it too. When I finished reading the letter I said to him that we would teach him Hebrew so that he would be able to read his son's letters himself. He was very moved by this offer and almost kissed me. Such is the power of children.

As for our work, I can't write you about it except in hints. Our unit has received a new name. We have been working with trucks that were captured from the enemy. The best trucks were given to British companies; we, being mere stepchildren, have to use the other kind. Sometimes I shall write you at length about all this. Just now it is impossible.

In a letter before this one, which was mailed two days ago, I wrote you about an encounter with the Australians. What fine boys they are. We had to take care of one of them whose leg was broken. We set his leg with some boards and we had to twist it in order to push the broken bone back into place. If you could have seen the courage with which he behaved. Not a single groan escaped him. All he asked for was a cigarette. They are very strong and supple and wonderful workers. One day we sank into the road because we were loaded too heavily. A few Australians came along and, without a word, began to help us. If you could have seen the energy with which they unloaded boxes and pulled the truck out of the ditch!

I had another interesting encounter with an Australian Jew.

I was standing next to the store-room with my machine when an Australian came up to me and asked me to help him. I went over to his truck to help him load a heavy crate on it. It didn't "go." The boy took a pencil out of his pocket, drew a Star of David and said: "This time it will work." I wondered at this, but I didn't say anything. We tried again, and this time it "worked." When the crate was settled on top he explained: "Listen boy, if ever you have trouble loading, make this drawing on it and then it will be all right." I asked him in English: "What does that mean?" Luckily he didn't notice anything wrong with my English and he explained further: "I am a Jew," he said, "and this is a Jewish religious symbol and it helps." I asked: "Do you speak Hebrew?" "Yes," he said, "I learned how in my new homeland, in Palestine; I was there for about a year." "Do you like Palestine?" I asked, still in English. "The way you love England, and the way I love Australia." Then he turned to me excitedly and said: "Listen, have you ever been in Palestine? No? Listen to me then. Go there on your next leave. You will see labor-groups there such as you never saw in your life." And he went on to tell me, the "Englishman," about the *Kibutz* and about the country. He talked like this for about a quarter of an hour. I couldn't understand everything he said, but I understood the tone. After the war, he said, he would go back to Palestine and join a *Kibutz.* His father is a landowner in Australia, but he said that he would persuade him to come to settle in Palestine. After this I couldn't restrain myself any longer and told him who I was. He was very amused at my little trick and embraced me. He is a handsome, broad-shouldered boy whose name is Billy Gorsch. We laughed a long time together. Finally he took a bottle out of a crate in the truck and together we drank to Palestine and to the *Kibutz.* He promised to come and visit our Sabbath festivities, but this morning he came to tell me that he has to push on and we parted affectionately. I hope to meet him again one of these days and some time I will bring him to Naan. He left me his picture and a tremendous box of cigarettes.

February 23, 1941

Yesterday I did something that I couldn't help doing and you can laugh at me if you like. There is a government building here with a Fascist flag waving over it. The flag was slightly torn by bomb fragments, but it is fairly whole. I climbed onto the roof and there, leaning on a shutter, I hung over it a chamber-pot which I found in the street. Below me stood some Australians and they cheered at the sight of the chamber-pot. The building is very beautiful and so is the flag. They are craftsmen, those Fascist scoundrels. Now the Fascist flag won't infuriate me as I walk by. All the passersby smile when they see it. Even the Italian prisoners smile at it, strangely enough. They say that two prisoners who were transported in an auto called out to an Australian, as they pointed at the chamber-pot: "To Mussolini,"—that is, they wanted to send the pot to Mussolini.

Let me tell you now about my conversation with some of these prisoners. I may be exaggerating but it seems to me that the majority of them have a hostile attitude to Fascism. Some of our boys claim that this is hypocrisy. But I happened to stand guard over some of them at work. At noon, when the guard was changed, I stayed with them during the lunch-hour. I offered them some English cigarettes and began to converse with them, by means of gestures, drawings on the sand and a confusion of English and Italian words. I said to one of them: "Finish Fascism." . . . He murmured something in Italian that I did not understand. Another boy with a fine proletarian face came up to me and said: "Signor—socialist?" "Si," I said. He asked me to come and sit down at the work-table. This was in the automobile station where they were working. "Signor," he said, pointing at himself, "Socialist." He put his hand under the table—to show that he was in the underground. He went on "Anti-Fascist . . . Silone," and went through the motions of writing to show that he meant Silone, the anti-Fascist writer.

He put his hand under the table again, in the form of a book and said "Fontamara" and after that raised his hand above the ground to show a child's height. I understood that in the underground movement he used to read anti-Fascist books to young people, among them "Fontamara." He went on to explain, helping to make himself clear by gestures: "Uno Fascisto" and then he imitated the position of a man holding a rifle, to show that it was a Fascist who with gun in hand forced them all to make war. Then he pointed to all the others and explained that they were all anti-Fascists. And so I gathered from his gestures and his words that they had all given themselves up to be prisoners with great enthusiasm: "Finito Fascismo!" Then he explained that he had more freedom as a prisoner of war than he had had in his own country. And so it is. I asked him: "Bambino?" . . . If you could only have seen how full of longing his eyes became. "Si, signor." He raised three fingers. He pulled out a picture of his eldest daughter and so each of us became acquainted with the other's children. I mused on these two strangers coming from the ends of the earth united in their common concern for their children. The name of my anti-Fascist friend is Josefo. Every morning he greets me: "Hello, Mose," and I call, "Hello, Josefo."

This meeting brings to my mind a conversation I had with my friend Matt, a driver from Liverpool, during my first days in Sarafand. I stood on the porch and watched the rain with my heart full of longing for home. Matt, the driver from Liverpool, came out, tapped me on the shoulder and said happily: "Now it's the way it is at home." We stood and watched the rain. I asked him how long it was since he had had a letter, and after a while began talking about our children. He went into the room and brought out packages of letters with pictures in them. He looked at the picture of his little son a long time and said, thoughtfully: "It was for you, baby, that I went to fight. So that you might be a free man when you grew up. . . ." Yes, it is worth making every sacrifice so that our children may be free. But what will happen after the defeat of Fascism?

This question gives me no rest. What kind of world will arise after victory? And what will our place be, as Jews, in the new world that will be built? This question gnaws at my heart continually....

March 2, 1941

I have been greatly moved in these last few days by our fateful meeting with brothers in this corner of the Diaspora. I want to tell you about an evening we spent, on Sabbath Eve, when we went to worship in the synagogue in the Jewish community here. We went out to the town, brushed, and with our buttons shining. We were in a holiday mood, singing. In this way we passed through most of the streets in the town. In the Jewish quarter we were met by crowds of Jews who greeted us with pride and enthusiasm. For these Jews, who live most of their lives in a state of oppression—the double oppression of the cross and the Fascist emblem on the one hand and the Moslem crescent on the other—this was a moment of encouragement and gave them a greater sense of self-respect. They saw their Jewish brothers in army uniforms, walking erect and marching through the streets of the Gentiles while they sang Hebrew songs. We had a short drill near the synagogue. The commands were given in Hebrew. Then we entered the synagogue.

Within the synagogue the faces of the worshippers told of excitement and happiness. The marks of poverty were on all of them. Most of them were in Arab dress, artisans, desperately poor, who had to come to celebrate the Sabbath in their rags. Some of them were refugees from a nearby town that had been abandoned, the very town in which we cleaned the synagogue. But what radiance there was in their faces! On the gallery, which is reserved for women, there was the children's choir. They sang a few passages from the prayers in a melody peculiar to them. In the interval before the beginning of the service

one of our comrades arose and spoke. He greeted the Jews of the city in the name of the Transport Unit. He apologized for those of us who were not present because they were unable to get permission to come. He explained that the Jewish soldiers from Palestine are "hewers of wood and drawers of water" in the land, and that they left the work of building behind them in order to join the army. He spoke of how eager we were to meet our brothers here. At the end he said that in a few days hence, when we would sit at the table to celebrate the festival of freedom, to say as we have said for hundreds of years: "Next year in Jerusalem," we would say this time with faith and hope: "This year in Jerusalem." We hope that when the evil forces are defeated, the walls will be broken down and we will all go up to Zion to build our house on the heights—amen. And the audience of Jews repeated fervently and with longing: "Amen." Afterwards the head of the community expressed the feelings of all in welcoming us, and wished us a victorious return so that they, too, might go up to Zion with us. At the end of the speeches the children's choir began to sing Sabbath songs. They sang sweetly. One of our boys was the cantor and he did quite well.

When we left the synagogue, crowds of Jews stood in the corridor and shook each soldier's hand fervently. An old woman met us in the street and pressed our hands with a motherly *"Shabat shalom."* It was a moving sight. The children clung to us with love and pride. Those were only fleeting moments, but they left a mark that will remain with us for many days. . . .

I have been thinking a good deal lately about religion. Don't be startled—I haven't become religious, although there are moments when I am overcome by a deeply religious feeling. . . . We Palestinians have never known what it is to meet Jews in other countries. Perhaps that is why we are touched, to the innermost depth of the heart, at a meeting of this kind. For these Jews experience their most poignant moments, of joy or sorrow, as part of their religious life. Thus we met with

them in the synagogue on the Sabbath and we felt the need of purifying the synagogue that had been desecrated and dishonored. We were sincere when we stood among the praying congregation, united in our common sorrow. . . . In moments like these you forget the darker side of religion as it has operated for generations. Your heart beats for your sorrowing brothers who take shelter in the protection of the eternal and merciful grace of the divine presence. . . .

March 5, 1941

I have just heard that the forty-three prisoners are at last free.* It is good that this nightmare is finally ended. One night I wrote you a long letter about this but I could not finish it and left it as it was. Today I received your letter with its good news and the present inside it. Thank you for the razor-blades. All of us here look like bearded highwaymen, but, thanks to your razor-blades, I am the only one who looks civilized.

On our return from the military cemetery this week many of the boys drank cognac and got drunk, among them, some of our comrades from the movement. The excuse was the need to "forget it all." But this continued the next day and the next. The only consolation lies in the fact that it's difficult to get liquor here. You really have to know something about the life we lead here, soldiers in a strange country. Certain things leave their mark on your nerves and you can't write about them.

One evening I fell into it too and got drunk myself. It happened inside a shelter, strangely enough. Some Australians were gathered there, as well as some enemy prisoners and English and Scottish boys. When I entered the shelter and the Australians noticed the Star of David that I was wearing on my helmet, they welcomed me noisily, drew out their bottles of liquor and we drank together to Palestine and to Australia. When I had to leave them I felt as though the whole world

* See footnote on p. 11.

was shaking. How I got back to my car only the Lord knows.

If you could only see with what excitement letters and packages are opened. One of the boys from a *Kibutz* received a letter from the kindergarten children together with a bunch of dried flowers. It was a charming gift. But never mind. I received a gift from the *Kvutza* too. I think that tears stood in my eyes when I opened the package.

Kiss the children for me every evening. When Giura learns how to say "father," let me know and it will be a holiday for me here in this deadly wasteland.

March 8, 1941

I want you to know why I've been writing so little these last few weeks. All because of Giura,* may he be damned. It's hard to bear him. At the moment, however, we have some respite from him. The dust-storms have lessened a bit too, and so I have a chance to make up for my sins and to write.

I should like to tell you about my battle experiences, but believe me that when the German planes start showering bombs in your vicinity and the explosion throws you into the air and down again sometimes at a distance of eight meters, a feeling of rage, rather than horror seems to take possession of you. You fall to the ground and gnash your teeth at the fact that you, as part of the infantry, are helpless in the face of this. It is particularly depressing the first time it happens. But after a while you get used to it. I remember the night when the Arabs attacked our colony. I ran to my position, with the desire to release the fire burning within me. But here, when danger strikes from the sky, you have no possibility, as a simple soldier, to return the bombardment. You know that I am not allowed to write any further on this. That is why I have written so little.

There is something else I noticed. We have passed through periods in Palestine when life was constantly in danger. We

* See footnote on p. 25.

knew times when death was our permanent companion. There were the riots and Hanita and the mines. But I never felt as I do now that new senses and capacities may develop in a man. For example, I am driving. Suddenly, almost unconsciously, I am struck dumb, my foot touches the brake, my hand turns off the motor and I find myself in a shelter which I did not even know existed. And outside the fatal noise begins. Your senses become sharpened. Instinctively you learn to pick out a shelter, wherever you are. You're driving and your machine hums and whirrs. But you hear the planes coming immediately. You hear the sound of people running for shelter and without hearing anything precisely, you know exactly at what moment you have to act. A man learns to react like an animal in danger of destruction, and senses that have become atrophied through generations of civilized living return to him.

Yesterday, Friday night, we celebrated the Sabbath again, after a long interruption. Far away from home, about a hundred Jewish soldiers sat together and listened to someone read. It was a clear night, without any dust and the moon shone as brightly as it does in Palestine. Afterwards we heard some good music on the captain's gramophone. I sat and listened to Mendelsohn's music for "A Midsummer Night's Dream." . . . In these last few days with the growing danger to the country, the tension and longing for home have increased. Since the days of the Bible we have feared the "evil that comes from the north." When you see the realities of war and the destruction that it leaves in its wake, you become filled with anxiety for our home. How do people live now in Palestine? Are they prepared and ready for the danger?

Some of our boys were invited to a Jewish community here in Libya. When it was learned that they were soldiers from Palestine they were surrounded by crowds in the street who tried to kiss their hands. It was a moving encounter and at the end the "*Hatikvah*" was sung. The memory of it follows us on our long journeys. . . .

March 16, 1941

I have seen stretches of land in Libya that were like a flourishing garden. After a long stay in a bare and desolate desert without a bush, a stream or a tree, I had not thought that there were places like that in this country. After wandering through many wastes with nothing but sand and rock where you breathed dust constantly it is wonderfully refreshing to see a green world again. I have been driving for kilometers now through wonderful woods, almost a jungle. It was in this area that the Italian government started its colonizing project, settling her surplus population here. The most beautiful places were chosen for this project. Centuries ago there was a dense population living here. This was one of the granaries of the Roman empire. Since then the region has been desolate, although its fertility has been preserved. The hills and mountains are covered with trees that recall the woods on Mt. Carmel. There is a wonderful highway cutting through this region. On both sides of it, for thousands of kilometers, you can see the new colonies, white houses, all in the same style and around them cultivated ground with flourishing gardens, wheat fields, fruit trees and vegetable patches. Large pipes carry water everywhere. The Arab natives (or Senussi) were driven out mercilessly. When you see these farms and the cultivated tracts of land, it is difficult for you not to be filled with envy at the thought of these wide fertile regions that are scarcely exploited at all. There are still vast regions that are almost in the state of a jungle. If you were to cover this ground in a tractor you would feel the loamy, rich soil beneath your plough. It is rich and heavy like the soil of the Galilee. All of it is covered with green grass. Everywhere you look it is green. There is an abundance of rainfall here and a wonderful beach close by. The place is high and has a healthy, exhilarating climate. I passed dense plantations of fruit trees. The pear trees and other fruit trees whose names I don't know were covered with white and violet blossoms.

In the evening we came to an Italian city. All of its inhabitants had remained after the retreat of the army. After I unloaded, I went out driving in the officers' car that I use now, to look for the Jewish families in the city. I already wrote you that we have a Star of David and the initials standing for Jewish Transport Corps painted on the trucks and officers' cars we use. When I appeared in the Jewish quarter crowds of Jews surrounded me. They saw the Star of David on the car and grew so excited that they rushed to kiss my hands. An old man seized my hand and said, as he bent over me, "Blessed be the Lord for giving of His Glory to man... Blessed be He that comes from Zion!" I was astonished. I then realized that they took me for some important personage, for I had arrived in a luxurious military car. I explained to these good Jews that I was simply the Jewish chauffeur of a Jewish officer. But my importance was not diminished in their eyes. And when I began to speak to them in their own language, in fluent Arabic, their faces shone. I locked the automobile and went with an old man who took me to the rabbi, with dozens of Jews escorting me. The rabbi, whose home was close to the synagogue, received me very cordially. I told the rabbi that we were a Jewish unit from Palestine stationed for some time in a certain city (from where I wrote to you very often) that had been abandoned by its inhabitants. I told him that we had found the synagogue there and that we had cleansed it and had worshipped there on one Sabbath Eve. . . . Tears of joy came to his eyes. He called to several Jews who were refugees from that city and presented them to me. They seized my hand and kissed it, although I held it back. . . . A very old man came and led me to a room in the courtyard of the synagogue and took out a scroll of the Torah that had been saved from that same synagogue that we had purified. He raised it to my lips and gave me the honor of kissing it.

You know that I'm not religious. But a deep religious feeling came over me at that moment. It was the eve of the Sabbath and I stayed to pray with them in their synagogue. At the end

of the prayers they began to quarrel about who would have me for the Sabbath meal. Finally I went home with the old man. There I met some very lovable Jews. They honored me by letting me chant the *Kidush.* I must admit that I was very confused for I really know so little about these things. However I managed to get through it safely. The father of the family, the Ben-Dusa family—a very ancient family there—blessed the wine. We ate a good Sabbath meal and drank a great deal of wine and sang Sabbath songs. Suddenly there was a knocking at the door. Everybody grew very tense and looked up as if to ask my help. The knocking was repeated more loudly. When the door opened some Australians, very drunk, were there, looking for women. When they saw me one of them said, "See! I was right. This is the place! . . ." I got up and tried to persuade them to leave us alone. I told them that I was a Palestinian, that this was the Sabbath Eve and that I was the guest of these people at their prayers. They did not believe me. I repeated that I was from Palestine. "Oh!" the drunkard gave me his hand. "Listen boy, all of us were in Palestine and we like Jews. But a little while ago they had a big celebration here. They sang and drank and invited us too. We want to join you tonight. . . ." I translated what he had said to the others and they said that it was true. Three days earlier they had celebrated *Purim** and the Jewish quarter had been full of singing and dancing. In the meantime one of the soldiers began to annoy the rabbi's daughter, an extremely beautiful girl of eighteen. Finally I persuaded them to leave and we continued singing our Sabbath hymns.

After the meal crowds of Jews came to the house. The room was full from one end to the other. In the next room sat the women. It was a strange scene. These Jews look like the Yemenites,† with large, sad eyes. I sat in the center and talked to them (in Arabic) about Palestine, kindling a dream in their

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* *Purim:* Traditional holiday based on the story of the Book of Esther.

† A Jewish tribe from southern Arabia.

hearts. While I was still talking a Jew came into the room and whispered something to my host. He was a messenger from the Rabbi who asked me to come and see the oldest man in the community so that he might bless me.

I arose and followed the man to another house where an extremely old man lay on a sofa. Afterwards they told me that he was a hundred and twenty years old. I was led up to the old man and the rabbi whispered into his ear, "Yechia, the man from the Holy Land is here." The old man raised himself on the sofa and lifted his hands. I bowed my head and he felt for my head with groping, trembling hands while his lips murmured: "May the Lord bless thee, who comes from Zion. May He be with thee as He was with Ephraim and Menasseh, etc., etc." Finally he closed with, "May thousands fall at thy right hand and tens of thousands at thy left, and may you not suffer any injury." This is a very ancient blessing. A feeling of holiness came over me. When we returned to my host's house the rabbi said, "Your honor has been blessed by a holy man. May his blessing watch over you." All this was so full of Jewish tenderness and warmth. I felt that something precious and sacred will remain with me after this evening.

Late in the evening I parted from the Ben-Dusa family. I told them that in the ruins of the community where we had been stationed we had found a book of marriage documents that belonged to the Rabbinate. I promised to bring it to them as soon as I could.

I returned to the hotel courtyard in the car, covered myself with my soldier's coat, closed the door from inside and curled up on the seat to sleep. But sleep would not come near me. I lay there and thought about everything that had happened that evening and I thought about you and the children. You see, their father will return home safely. The blessing of an old man from the Jewish community of Berci hovers over him and will protect him from evil.

March 25, 1941

My little girl,

Now I am very far away from you, even farther than when I wrote to you from the place where the children of Israel were slaves. . . . And even farther than the place that I hinted to you about in a recent letter. Did you receive that letter? I am worried about my letters, for I have not received an answer from you.

But perhaps your letter is following me in the desert somewhere and I hope that it is a fat and heavy one, the way I would like it to be, and that's probably why it is wandering so long in the dusty roads of the desert. Is that true? The distance has grown, for in the meantime we have conquered wide stretches of land from the enemy. But, nevertheless, it will surely find me.

We met some Jews here after we entered the conquered territory. How happy we were at this encounter. They have suffered a great deal, but now they have been saved from the hands of the enemy and they hope to be able to come to Palestine. I visited a Jewish school. The children here don't know Hebrew and I talked to them in Arabic about Palestine. I told them about you and about the other children at home. If only you could have seen how their black eyes shone, how they, children of the Diaspora, envied you, as I told them how free you are. . . . I told them about our Festival of the First Fruits in Palestine, and about the festival of *T'u B'shvat,* and about the hikes you take. The Jews here live in dark houses, in poverty-stricken alleys. They never go out to the countryside and they don't know the name of a single flower. They are pale and weak. But they have beautiful black, sad eyes. For their life is very sad, my daughter. It is sad for them when they see their parents living in perpetual fear of the non-Jews. I was a little ashamed before them when I told them how our children live in Palestine. I thought to myself, "If only we could take these children to Palestine, how healthy they would become then." They have

lived under a cruel government, the Italian government, the ally of the Germans, who tormented the Jews. Now they have been freed from the enemy and they hope to come to Palestine.

We, the Jewish soldiers from Palestine, have brought a great deal of light into the lives of these Jews. We are helping them as much as we can.

I have a nice flute for you. I have been carrying it with me everywhere, but I don't know yet how it will reach you. Perhaps it will come to you together with your father.

March 25, 1941

Just now I am enjoying a short respite from work. I am making use of the opportunity to pay off my debts to the god of sleep. If I were to tell you how I reached this condition you would be very surprised, but at the moment I am lying in a clean bed, breathing fresh, clear air. After you wander about for a long time without any real sleep, the dust having become an accepted part of your life, this new atmosphere is really healing.

I have been having an interesting conversation with a British soldier who was in Palestine during the riots. He has a very strange and distorted view of Zionism, as do many (how little did we trouble ourselves, during that period, to explain our aims to these soldiers) but he has such a friendly feeling for human beings. He is simply in love with us, the Palestinians. This began when oranges were distributed to the soldiers. He held an orange that had been wrapped by *"Yakhin"** and said to his comrades, "This orange is from the country where I spent such wonderful days." I remarked that at home I had been working in an orange grove. A conversation started and we became very friendly.

I am an old friend of the Australians here, and I am making use of the opportunity to talk about our cause with them. Some of them have been in Palestine and speak of it with fondness.

* *Yakhin:* Cooperative plantation company of the Jewish Federation of Labor.

Their direct personal encounter with things there conquered them completely. I think I already wrote you that we have very friendly relations with the Australians here. Any request for help is always responded to generously, sometimes even to an exaggerated degree. For example, one of our boys was driving an old, broken-down machine and the Australians offered him one of theirs instead. The boy hesitated, of course, as to whether to accept this machine, but they insisted on it. They explained that it would make no difference to them. In any case they took his instead and dragged it along with them. That's how they are.

I happened to visit an enemy arsenal with an Australian soldier. There I discovered something about the riots in Palestine. There were boxes there with the label "Sugar" written on them. When I lifted a cover off in order to look inside—can you guess what I found?—roadmines. I remembered a mine exactly like these that I had seen at the police-station in Rehovot. That mine had been found on the road to Kfar Menachem and had not exploded. When I drove to the city in those days I used to stop very frequently at the police-station at Rehovot, so as to leave my pistol with them, and now, here in Lybia, in an Italian arsenal, I saw a mine of exactly the same color and construction as the mine I had seen in Palestine. These boxes are sent with a sugar label on them. I told the Australians all about this.

I was very happy to receive the pictures of the children. You have no idea of what a child's picture can mean here, in the neighborhood of the front. Lots of soldiers take shelter together somewhere, with the sounds of explosions blasting away outside, like the noises of hell, and suddenly someone takes a picture of his children out of his pocket. Then every other soldier starts searching through his pockets for his own precious pictures. And suddenly everyone becomes much finer, and people of different countries find a common tongue. A child's picture can dispel fear and can create a bond between strangers.

March 26, 1941

Today they brought my bed outside on the porch. The view looks out on an ancient orchard, and on the sea. The coast is very beautiful here, with tall rocks standing high in the water and the waves striking against them with white foam. I am lying out here with some other sick soldiers, in order to get a sunbath. The sun is wonderful and caressing.

I had a little quarrel with a British soldier here in the hospital. It started with an inadvertent word and I offered to fight him as soon as we were well enough. I really wanted to hit him then and there. The Australians liked the idea of two boys, confined to their beds, agreeing to have a fight. They went to the doctor, an old colonel, and asked for details regarding our condition. They wanted to know if we would both be well enough to fight at the same time. One of them is afraid that he will have to leave the hospital before this happens. Fighting is a matter of honor for them. But, today the bed next to mine became free and my "enemy" was put into it. I don't know whether this was accidental or a deliberate attempt at humor. In the meantime we have become very friendly. Now that I am out on the porch enjoying the sun, while he is inside, I can hear him, begging the nurses to let him out too. They won't allow it and he keeps calling out to me to ask if the sun is very hot or not. But in spite of this friendship of ours, our agreement concerning the fight still stands. We will carry that out in friendly fashion, too. The Australians won't hear of our cancelling it.

Yesterday M. visited me and brought me a pair of pyjamas. Believe me when I tell you that I was ashamed to put them on. All the patients sleep in their clothes here, except for the wounded or those who are bandaged who wear a first-aid

smock. Some of them sleep in their work-clothes. I shoved the pyjamas under my pillow. . . . I got to the hospital this time because of my head. A bomb splinter struck it, but it stood up pretty well. After getting a fairly heavy blow, it fell asleep for a few hours, but it wasn't cracked or broken in any way. Quite a good head, apparently. From now on I won't fear for it. Most of the time it is covered with a steel helmet, although this wasn't the case when this accident took place, unfortunately.

I am surrounded by friendly attention at the moment. Many of the boys from our unit have been visiting me, and they never come empty-handed. I could invite you to a wonderful snack now. There are two cans of pineapple, three cans of pears, a pile of chocolate, and the best English cigarettes.

I have been invited to meet with the Jewish children in the *Talmud Torah** here. They were promised that one of us would come and speak to them in Arabic about Palestine. As soon as I am well again I will be glad to do this. After all, these are brothers to the *Noar Haoved,*† though in a strange country.

March 29, 1941

Today I left the hospital and was returned to my unit. It was good to feel the comradeliness that welcomed me. Now I am returning to my regular routine. I was already in town today and met with the rabbi and the school-children. I spoke to them about Palestine, its farms, the Festival of First Fruits, the new colonies, etc. One of the children asked me in Arabic: "And when you walk in the street in the Holy Land won't one of the Gentiles call you a Jewish dog? Really?" . . . If you could have seen how their eyes shone, sad, burning, Jewish eyes.

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* *Talmud Torah:* Hebrew religious school.

† *Noar Haoved:* Federation of working youth affiliated with the general Federation of Jewish Labor in Palestine.

I thought of our own children at that moment—how happy they were. Will we be able to preserve their happiness, under whatever conditions?

April 1, 1941

I haven't told you of how we feel, now that we are living in a populated place again, after a long period in the desert. The eyes that were wearied and strained in the blazing light of desert sands and the dust-storms, relax now at the sight of trees, flowers, green lawns and wheat fields, and you live in a room with a roof over it and the shelter of walls and electric light and a shower. After a long period we are living like civilized human beings again in a beautiful building with hot showers, lovely rooms and a dining room furnished with tables. Best of all, we are rid of that awful dust. We used to get up in the tent every morning with our mouths and noses full of dust and our eyes smarting. Everything you touched was covered with it. But here, with a different kind of wind blowing, it seems like a gift from heaven. Besides this, there are our meetings with Jews, a community of Jews. For them too, for these oppressed Jews, the meeting with us seems to be a tremendous experience. We were told how many of them wept with joy at first seeing Jewish soldiers from Palestine riding in cars that had the Star of David painted on them and words in the "sacred tongue." This is a small community, oppressed and humiliated by the rulers of the land. Before this, of course, they were under the Fascist rule, but it is still part of the Arabian Diaspora whose character we know so well.

We gave some Hebrew text books to the community school. We also promised that one of our comrades who can sing very well would go down to the school one day to teach the children Palestinian songs.

April 9, 1941

*Passover Eve.* I'm writing this letter in haste, while sitting in a field. V. and myself are now in the neighborhood of the front again. There are just the two of us among those good, generous Australian boys I have already told you about. You can imagine then in what way we will celebrate Passover this year. I am well. I hope that my letter will reach you in any case, in spite of the fact that it will not be sent in the usual way. Please go on writing, and let us hope that the letters will reach me eventually. If you do not receive letters from me, do not worry; I shall probably be somewhat farther away. It may be that our correspondence will be broken off for a time and that I will be together with Uri*—do you remember him? In any event, do not despair in case you do not get letters from me for a time. But you—write, write! Yesterday, out of necessity, I burned your letters. I read them again from the beginning to the end and my longing for you all rose up in great waves that seemed to engulf me. I think of you all a great deal. Kiss the children for me. I can't write to Dvora now, because I am only permitted to write one letter at the moment.

I will be short now, for it is really impossible for me, in my present state of mind, to write one of those long letters that you like so much. It is hard for us, living in caves and hiding in rocks, with hellish noises raining down from above, to write now. I will write you at length if things get a little more comfortable. And if I meet Uri* I'll give him your greetings. Again, don't worry about me if you don't get letters. Go on writing anyway. Regards to you from my comrades here. Take care of the children. For their sakes we will certainly meet again. Bless you all.

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* Name of a friend, a soldier, who was taken prisoner during the fall of Crete. Veiled reference to the possibility of falling into the hands of the enemy during the first retreat from North Africa.

April 13, 1941

We were granted a short respite today. How good it is. My dwelling place is a gully between the rocks, and the dust is so thick as to be unbearable. You get up with spectacles of dust that cover your eyes, and your mouth is full of dust; your lashes are coated with it. And yet, these hours of rest are precious. Today a few of the boys went out to the front lines, while we remained behind to gather strength.

I have seen a great deal in these last few days and you understand, of course, that I can't write you about it. But the thing that troubled me most was the sight of the Jews living in these places. If you could see their eyes and the terror in them. There will be legends told, in the Libyan Diaspora, of the Jewish boys from Palestine. There will be legends told of the Jewish boy who drove his machine back, with death at his heels, and how he loaded his car with seventy Jews and carried them to safety. There will be many stories like this told of our boys. This gives you faith in what you are doing. I have seen a great deal. There are many revelations of humanity in this hellish darkness. The Australians are in the front-lines here; it is heartening to see the way in which they act towards each other and towards us.

Just before dawn I reached the front-line trenches. I took a group of fresh soldiers to relieve the ones already there. The battle was raging then. They welcomed me very warmly when they heard that I was a Palestinian. We have heard many fine things said about us by Australian officers. We are known everywhere for our courage. This too gives you strength for every additional effort. Believe me, one can get used to everything. After your first few trips into the front-lines you become quite calm, full of quiet assurance, so that you think only of what you have to do.

I already wrote you a little about how I passed the Seder night. My comrades and I dug a hole in the ground, got into it, covered ourselves and dozed off. I knew that far away I had a

home with hundreds of comrades who were celebrating the holiday joyously. I lay there and tried to imagine myself among them. I sat beside you and I looked into your eyes and felt full of festive rejoicing. Only the sound of the cannons tore me away from the world of the imagination from time to time.

But I am full of anxiety for our home. It gives me no rest. Sometimes it seems to me that this fear that walks beside us deepens our sense of comradeship. Yesterday, when I came back for this short respite I was greeted by an atmosphere of such warmth that it seemed like an oasis in the desert. Everyone was full of concern and friendliness. The three of us, M., V. and I, made a bed for ourselves among the rocks and slept. Seeing M. again was like meeting a brother. We embraced each other. This morning he left for the front line again.

April 21, 1941

My little girl,

I received your letter today and I was very happy over it. I received it on the last day of Passover, on the Sabbath. I got the little pressed flower too. If you could have seen how that flower passed from hand to dusty hand, from soldier to soldier, and each one smelled it and looked at it with memories and longing. Each one remembered his home and those he left behind. And I followed the flower with anxiety as it passed from hand to hand until it came back to me. It brought me the scent of my home far away.

Now the Passover holiday is over and still there is no possibility of our having leave. We are fighting the Germans; if we did not fight them here, far from home, we would have to fight them at home. So there is no sorrow without joy. But we are glad that we were able to celebrate the holiday in quiet. You beg me to come home, my little girl. I miss you very much too. Let us hope that I'll come home as soon as the wicked enemy is destroyed. First it is our duty to finish with the enemy, far from home and after that we will certainly come home.

April 22, 1941

All morning we dug a shelter for ourselves. And now, after the noon meal, the boys are dozing and I am sitting here in a hole in the rock and writing. I must admit that writing is not easy when all your nerves are taut with listening for the sound of planes overhead. It's hard to concentrate. You'll understand this time and won't be angry if I write you briefly. I've become a primitive creative, whose every muscle and every nerve is centered on one thing: mere survival. . . . And now a steel helmet on one's head doesn't seem as much trouble as it used to be in better days. These days you can't be bothered with brushing your teeth or combing the sand out of your hair. If there is any possibility of sleep, you lie down in your coat, shoes and belt and curl up alongside one of your good comrades and sleep the sleep of the dead as long as you can. But there are few nights when you can sleep without interruption. Without your noticing how, you develop senses that you never had, or that you were not aware of. Above all, there is the sense of a fate shared in common with your comrades. You love those who are near for every trait and characteristic that they reveal. You are ready to forgive them for anything and everything, more than you ever thought possible. There are times when people expose their weaknesses in a way that is frightening. But on the whole our boys have stood up to their ordeal well. Do you remember how often I wrote you with bitterness concerning various types of people we have here? I was filled with fears lest they would not to be able to face the ordeal when it came. It looks as though we have not failed in this ordeal by fire.

We are living at a peak of strain and exertion now. You never think of what day of the week it is or of what people are doing at home. But in days like these you stand in greater need than ever of this contact—you wait expectantly for a letter and it's very bad if the mail comes and there is nothing for you, no letter, no newspaper or book or gift. . . .

And the longings that rise in your heart are numberless and nameless. I close my eyes and try to imagine what is happening at home and how it looks there now. Or perhaps you had better tell me what is happening now around our room. Sit on the porch, look around you and describe everything that is in bloom now. How are the eucalyptus trees? Have they grown tall? And the rose-vine? And the Persian carpet—I forget the name of those little flowers—have they come out this spring? And the willow beside our room—has it bloomed yet? Don't laugh at me for asking about all these things in this way. All this seems like a fairy-tale to me now. Your home is precious and in hours like these you feel that your going was not in vain, for you are fighting against a terrible enemy, the enemy of your people, your country and your very life.

I see them, the enemy soldiers, quite often, as prisoners or as heralds of death in the sky. You feel the hatred springing in your heart toward them as well as the joy there is in giving the best of your strength to the battle against them. There were experiences among these encounters that will remain alive in my memory for a long time to come. But it's hard to write about this now. If we are fortunate and return home safely I will tell you a great deal about all this. But I don't mean that I alone am in danger; I think of you and our home. Do you at home feel as we do here how turbulent the world around us has become?

One of the boys from Ashdot-Yaakov received a "diary" from the *Kibutz* on the second page of which there are many greetings and the signatures of over thirty comrades. Someone probably walked through the dining-room and got everyone to take part in this in a few seconds. Maybe it was a small thing, but how grateful this boy is. I am waiting for our Passover "*Hagada*"*—will I find the signatures of many of our comrades on the cover?

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* *Hagada:* Story of the exodus from Egypt recited at the *Seder* ceremony on Passover.

April 30, 1941

The fate of the Jews that we left behind us when we retreated hangs over us like a nightmare. I wrote you many letters about our meetings with them in better days. But since then "years" have passed. So many changes have taken place. The blessing that I received from that aged man did not bring victory in its wake nor did it save the old man himself or his family from this horror. Can you imagine the state of those Jews, who were able to taste the joy of liberation for a little while and are now again under the heel of the Nazis and the Italians? My letters have nothing to say any more about the joy of liberated Jews. Now we are living with Giura* who separates brother from brother.

The day before yesterday it was four months since we left Palestine. We lay in a hiding-place in the rocks, thought of home and when the noise of the cannon died down and there was a short interval of quiet, we sang our songs. All of us were from *Kibutzim* or *Moshavim*†: from Shaar Hagolan, Nahalal, Beit-Hashita, Tsefon Yam Hamelach, Hadas, Tel-Yosef, Naan, Ashdot-Yaakov and Dafne. Lately we have become very fond of the song, "Fields in the Emek."‡ It is as if this song expressed what we are feeling. It grew dark in our shelter and we sang: "Tonight I shall sing a song to the Emek . . . In the odor of dung there is the scent of hay." . . . And then we sang some children's songs — at that very moment you, the mothers and children, were sitting on the lawn together and enjoying the quiet of the evening. Did you feel how we missed you and longed for you? . . . Four months. And it

* See footnote on p. 25.

† *Kibutzim* (pl. for *Kibutz,* communal settlement); *Moshavim* (pl. for *Moshav,* small holders' cooperative settlement).

‡ Emek: Common abridged form for Emek Israel, the Valley of Esdraelon, an area which is populated almost exclusively by communal and cooperative settlements.

would seem that it was years that we have been living here. The last three weeks alone seem like an eternity to me. Home seems so far away. In that dark shelter lay a dozen boys, workers from Palestine, and thought of their home and what is threatening it. . . .

During these last few days the bond between us has grown deeper. Friendship grows stronger in danger. Let me tell you about these friends. I have told you about M. from Dafne, a brave, sensitive boy. He knows some of our comrades in Sodom and he sends his greetings to them. There is also V., from the *Kvutza* north of the Dead Sea. Yesterday we celebrated his twentieth birthday by drinking several bottles of beer. Another is a boy who grew up in Shefayah and is now in the *Kvutza* "Hadas" at Hedera. Then we have a kindly, broad-shouldered boy from the Jordan Valley, an ideal type of Palestinian worker. Another dear boy from Nahalal, brave-hearted and kind, with a wonderful smile. B., from Beit-Hashita, my friend since the beginning of the mobilization and G. who insists that he is not really a member of a *Kibutz*—and finally there is M., myself. I wonder if you would know him now. I am afraid that a new person has grown inside him during this war.

April 30, 1941

Truly we have become like children in every way. In this atmosphere, where we bless the day each morning and receive it like a gift of God, it is no wonder that we have become like children. We would like to be pampered with letters, sweets and attention.

Yesterday I amazed myself by being able to get absorbed in a book for several hours at a time. I came upon a good new book, "The Pedagogic Poem" by Makarenko, translated from the Russian by Shlonsky. I lay in a hole, with death rollicking above me, and read the book from beginning to end. It's a good sign if you're still capable of reading—a sign that a man is

a creature who can adapt himself to anything. The book is good, of the same type as the "Diary of Kostia Riabtzev." It is pleasant to read something that carries you away from the reality around you. This is a story about the Russian youth after the revolution, a youth that wandered around in bands or grew up in prison, ragged boys, most of them criminals and thieves. Makarenko, who was appointed to educate them, organized them into a commune. The growth of this children's commune, its struggles, the various types—it is all very entrancing. I am happy to think that I can write to you from the front about my impressions of a good book to the tune of aeroplanes and bomb-explosions and the continual noise of cannon and machine-guns. I am sorry that the second part of the book is not available here—who knows if I'll get to read it.

Tomorrow is May Day. Of course we won't be able to have a festive gathering here. How will you celebrate the holiday this year? As far as I am able to think about things at all in these circumstances, I find myself asking, what will the face of the world be like after all this is over? Will it be patched up again with deceptions which will last for a generation? Will I perhaps have to end my life in this war without knowing that Giura and Ron won't have to beat their ploughshares into swords at my age, without knowing for certain that the world will have a different face in their day? It was for this, after all, that we went to fight. Will they and their generation be able to devote themselves otherwise to the building of their homeland and the redemption of their people? What guarantee for this is there? I can still remember the end of the last war. I was a child then but I can remember it as a world that was longing for liberation, a world full of faith and confidence. Only twenty-four years have passed since then. This is already the second year of a bloody maelstrom.

I wanted to write you something about our life, but I am afraid to. I am afraid that I will be tempted to risk saying too much. And rather than have the letter stopped somewhere, thrown into the basket under the censor's desk, I'll be careful.

In my previous letter I tried to give you a description of how we spend our time in a shelter, but I am sure that it did not reach you. How do I know it? This too is something about which it is wiser to keep silent.

It is unbelievably dusty here. One always feels filthy. But it's not too bad. One gets used to everything.

May 2, 1941

I'll tell you how we spent the evening of May Day. It was strange. Holidays and festive occasions always move us very deeply. It was that way on the night of the *Seder,* too. It was in the evening and we lay in the shelter. The tension of the day had relaxed slightly and we were all lying prone on the ground. There is a young boy with us, a very fine boy from Tel Aviv, with a subtle sense of humor. His name is S. He took his harmonica out of his pocket and played and we sang to it, "Today is a holiday of hands, hands building in cities, hands building in villages, hands building the world." We sang, and above our heads circled the Nazi planes, other hands busy at the destruction of the world. . . . Could any contrast be greater than this—the dream for the comradeship of toiling hands coming from the shelter, and the darkness overhead, with its load of destructive bombs?

It grew darker and we lay there and went on singing work-songs and songs of home. Again we were carried away by the mood of "Nights in the Emek." "Tonight I'll sing a song to the Emek." I lay there with open eyes, staring into the darkness, and I saw you and the children and Naan. . . . I saw you so clearly, near the dining-room, in the evening. You watched the bus coming in at the end of the holiday and something seemed to trouble you. . . . It was only the noise of the cannon that goes on all day and all night that made it difficult for me to see you in the dark with Ron and Giura at your side. . . .

May 3, 1941

Today is the Sabbath. Yesterday, as it grew dark after a terrible dust-storm, we asked each other what day of the week it was, and we realized that it was Friday and that we had not been aware of it. We were all dusty and dirty. I washed my face and then we sat on the rocks and I became filled with a sudden sadness and longing that took possession of all of us. At this hour, someone whispered softly, in a voice full of longing, we go into the dining-room—the parents and their children begin to come in. Fancies. . . . We sang "Nights in the Emek" again. This has become our hymn.

May 10, 1941

The days go by without a word or a sign from you or home. Lately I find myself humming, in a tune that I have made up for myself, Rachel's poem, "The Miner."

*Another night, another day, without a voice or sound,*
*Another day, another drawn-out night,*
*And the pick falls from the fainting hand*
*And rests deep in the earth.*

This is just a part of the poem, but it rouses an echo in me. Yes, I feel like a miner in the depths of the earth, waiting for a sign. It is evening now, the end of the Sabbath. The front is quiet now. The fire has ceased although occasionally something rumbles. In comparison with the day-time, however, it is quiet now. At first I was standing watch but I was relieved and now I am crouching in a trench, after pulling out my pad and putting a wooden board across my knees. In this quiet evening, after many days at the front, I feel the tranquillity of the Sabbath. I recall scenes at home. I can see you walking with Giura and Ron trotting after you. It is dark in the courtyard and you

have gone into the room and have asked Ron to put on the light. I smile happily to see how Ron has grown in the months that I have been away. Little Giura has begun to complain, and so you take him away to the children's house. I follow you. We leap across the little gully near the shower-room and climb the stairs near the building of the Secretariat. There T. and C. stop you. Ron clings to them and I think sadly, yes, he needs a father so badly. . . . Only little Giura doesn't notice anything. . . . Now we reach the nursery and you go in, but I stay outside. I remember suddenly that I am dirty and that my clothes are dusty—after weeks of sleeping in trenches in my clothes, devoured by fleas and unwashed. No! I can't go into the clean white building . . . so I remain outside, looking through a window. I can see you leaning over Giura's bed and your lips murmur: "Father's coming, father's coming!" Then I fastened my cartridge belt, took my gun and went back to the letter I was writing to you in a trench in distant Libya. . . .

So you see, we have all become like children. And perhaps it's a good thing that you can still be a child and that you can imagine yourself at home, on the Libyan front; perhaps it's a good thing. For weeks we don't see a child's face. To tell you the truth, I feel that it's very hard for me to write to a child from this place. How thankful I'd be if I could have a copy of the children's supplement to *Davar,** here in the trenches.

Yesterday, after weeks of lying about in shelters, we arranged a Sabbath gathering at the front. We gathered together in a deep gully, among the rocks. What was read aloud was less important than the atmosphere. I leaned on a rock, closed my eyes and listened to the quivering notes of music. The faint light of the moon hidden by clouds was shed upon our gathering and from time to time we heard the thunder of cannon as an accompaniment to the concert.

Later that night, after the music and the singing, some of us got together for a midnight snack. Imagine a midnight snack

* *Davar:* Palestine's leading daily newspaper published by the General Federation of Jewish Labor.

in the depths of the earth, in the darkness, Palestinian boys standing about in their long army coats, with steel helmets on their heads, and their ammunition belts tied around them, counting the number of bombs that explode in the vicinity and chewing Australian preserves.

This morning we rose early again to take up our posts.

May 11, 1941

I want to tell you about an experience that I had in these last few days. One day the enemy planes were circling overhead and dropping a few bombs in our vicinity. The anti-aircraft guns made them take height. We lay among the rocks with our hearts shrinking from time to time at the awful shriek the bombs let loose. You can't think of many things at a moment like this. Suddenly I noticed three white sea-mews in the sky that was full of clouds of smoke and deathly shrieks and the horrible hum of the planes. They fluttered about in confusion in the erupting air, and flapped their wings in a panic at not knowing how to escape. For a moment I forgot my own danger. I could not tear my eyes away from the three sea-mews that had flown into this hellish patch of sky. Even when the boys gave vent to a shout of triumph at the sight of a German plane in flames I could not divert my attention from the sight of those three white sea-mews. You may smile at this, but those sea-mews were like a symbol of stainless innocence to me, lost in a hellish sky inhabited by men. Finally the sea-mews managed to disentangle themselves from the hell around them and to fly off into the distance. Will they know now that it was better to keep away from human beings? I don't know. I wrote Dvora a whimsical letter about this. I wanted to write her a playful letter that would make her laugh. But I was not capable of it. In the news from home and between the lines of each letter I feel the horror that threatens our home, surrounded by seventy wolves.

May 12, 1941

Today is a clear bright day. Libya too, has fine weather from time to time. The air is clear of dust, the sun is pleasant and I am quite free at the moment and can write to you. The enemy planes are absent. Those damned aviators are probably sitting in other fields and writing letters home. It is strange to think that these bearers of death have homes and families, too.

I could write you a great deal about conversations with Nazi prisoners and letters we found in abandoned tanks. But I am afraid to do this, because of the man with the scissors. It may be possible to do so a little later on. I'll just tell you that I am using an Italian machine that was part of our booty. On the glass in front of the driver's seat I found children's names, written in Italian. I did not rub them out, even though "he," the enemy driver, would probably have done so. Over the names of his children I wrote the names of my own children. So you see that the writing of children's names is a general custom, even in the enemy's camp.

This week a Jewish boy from a British unit joined us, a Zionist from England who met us at Derna, before the retreat, and attached himself to us. He visited the synagogue with us there. He requested headquarters to permit him to join us. This wasn't such a simple matter. But this week he appeared among us. He "came home," as he says. We shall teach him Hebrew and make him one of us. . . .

In the meantime—damn it—here they are again. I have to stop.

May 14, 1941

interrupted my last letter in the middle and since then two days have passed. Do you know what day it is?—the eve of *Lag B'omer.** I remembered that a year ago we went out to gather

* *Lag B'omer:* Traditional holiday associated with the Bar Kochba revolt in the first century A.D. celebrated by the children around the campfire.

wood for a great bonfire, near the road leading out of the settlement. We made a big bonfire in the field there and we danced a *Hora** around it with our children perched on our shoulders. I am devoured by longings for home when I remember this. This year probably no festive fires will be lit. I sense the horror that hangs over you at home. I happened to see the May Day issue of the *Davar* and I sensed this fear as I read the poem by S. Shalom:

*It is good to live with death reflected in your eyes,*
*It is good to know each moment may be your last;*
*We are building the city of Jerusalem*
*As men condemned to death.*

A dark shadow seemed to rise toward me from our home as I read these lines. Does this poem really express the mood that people are living in at home? If only this mood would lead to a stronger sense of unity and mutual comradeship within the community. . . . But this poem itself, like a deep and precious melody, has been singing inside me for the past two days and I could not rest until I had copied it out for you.

It is the eve of *Lag B'omer.* How proud I felt at that last *Hora* when I had little Ron sitting on my shoulders with his arms around my neck and the bonfire reflected in his eyes. We shall not light any bonfires here. We have other fires here from time to time. Only this evening, at sunset, when I sit beside the shelter, I shall close my eyes and see Ron in his kindergarten courtyard. You will probably light a little bonfire there and I shall watch it and dream about you all. . . .

May 26, 1941

Days pass. On the days when there are no dust-storms the African summer is as pleasant as a summer in—Sodom. And believe me, we did have a few fine days during these last few

* *Hora:* Popular folk dance.

months, days without any dust-storms. . . . On days like that we hang out our covers, take off our clothes and wash ourselves all over. We have reached the point where we can wash all over as well as launder an undershirt, underpants, a shirt and a pair of socks in a quarter of a can of water. A quarter of a can of water!

Do you remember how I used to come home during the packing season and fall half-dead on the bed so that I went to sleep in my clothes. It is months now since we have taken our clothes off when going to sleep and nobody minds in the least. We get used to everything. We get used to eating everything full of sand and dust and joke about it too. We have also become used to horrors bursting upon us from above and from the side. They no longer terrify us. But suddenly someone breaks down and one wonders what it was that caused it. There is something very complex about the human nervous system.

May 29, 1941

Today I went to the beach with some of the other boys. We came to a beautiful, quiet bay. The water was deep and transparent and the sand at the bottom glistened in its whiteness. In the distance we could hear the thunder of cannon, but here it was all beauty and quiet—a real paradise. We took our clothes off and dived into the water from the rocks that are perched along the bay. How wonderful that was! I swam far out. The sea was as smooth and quiet as the water in our pool at Naan. I thought to myself—how wonderful it would be if I could swim as far as the beach at Tel Aviv. . . .

At the beach we met some young Australians who had come to rest from the front lines. We played about in the water like little boys. The atmosphere was charged with joy and high spirits. We forgot about everything. For once our bodies and heads were clean of sand. I dipped my clothes in water too, scrubbed them and laid them to dry on the rocks. But sud-

denly, the paradise was destroyed. Over our heads the cursed planes circled. We found a shelter among the clefts of the rocks along the bay. How helpless soldiers look when they are naked, without their steel helmets and without their ammunition belts—like forlorn children.

When the immediate danger was past, we jumped into the water again and dove deep down into it; then we swam far out again, and again we enjoyed ourselves. The Australians are good playmates. I met some of my old acquaintances among them. There were days when we were considered the veterans and they would turn to us for advice when a plane appeared. Now, after their taste of battle, they are no longer the tyros of the first days of the siege. The boys have grown up. They have camped alongside of us and ties of friendship have sprung up between us. The bond of comradeship has remained undiminished.

We returned to our camp in the caves, clean and shining and ready for the Sabbath assembly, to the envy of our comrades. They will read a feuilleton this evening and we'll have jokes and laughter. The day after tomorrow is *Shevuot.** A holiday is always an occasion for homesickness. Even the dullest aspect of life at home, even the most ordinary days seem like holidays to us here, or like fairy tales.

Are you arranging the celebration of the First Fruits, with our children bringing them in, this year? I feel that there won't be the usual celebrations this year, although it is necessary to preserve these festive occasions, no matter what the circumstances. I can see Ron at this Festival of the First Fruits with his eyes wondering and inquiring for the meaning of the ritual. . . .

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* *Shevuot:* Traditional holiday. Originally the Festival of the First Fruit, it celebrates the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. At present the agricultural character of the holiday is stressed again.

June 1, 1941

My little girl,

Tomorrow is the Festival of the First Fruits. You will probably have a fine celebration and you will write me all about it. Here we are in a desert, with sand storms that sweep over our camp, and so we can't celebrate. What can we bring in our baskets? The dust storm? Or shall we fill our baskets with our longings for home? Nevertheless, we shall have a holiday meeting in the evening and afterwards each one of us will cover himself with his blanket and will dream about Palestine. That's how it will be.

Thank you for the names of the birds that you studied at Maoz. Here, in the desert, there are great birds flying overhead, at whom we shoot. May these birds never reach you at home. How noisy they are. Do you know their name, too?

June 2, 1941

In spite of everything we did celebrate Shevuoth. The whole company, both officers and men, gathered together in a deep gully. One of the officers made a speech about the meaning of the holiday and one of the men got up and added something to this. Rum was passed around. And then came the turn of the feuilleton. How the boys laughed! The mountain that had been pressing on our hearts seemed to dissolve and disappear. There was something to laugh at. Our life here, our relations with British commanding officers—and they are not always so smooth—all these were covered by the jokes in the feuilleton and caricatured mercilessly. I have discovered that this is a strong and effective weapon. In this way you can express social resentments without formally transgressing the

boundaries of army propriety. In every hole and shelter the jokes of the feuilleton were repeated that evening. But I, I felt very sad, nevertheless. This is the fourth holiday for me away from home. *Hanukah* I was in the training camp at Sarafand. *Purim* I was in Africa, and on the *Seder* night I lay at the battlefront, in the front lines—and now it is *Shevuot.*

A Jewish legend tells about *Shevuot* that there is an hour during the night of the holiday when the heavens open and he who is fortunate to strike the right time can ask for all the wishes of his heart. There were days when our eyes were raised to the sky in childish faith and innocence. . . . But today the heavens do not open for us. They are closed securely against us. When they open, it is only to rain down death and destruction. And this holiday is after all the holiday celebrating the giving of the Law, the Torah, that is so sharply opposed to everything that is happening in the world today. But if the heavens were to open for me, after all, on the night of *Shevuot,* I should ask but one thing—that Nazism be destroyed and that a new world should arise after that, a world in which we, too, will be given the chance to build our home, a home for the most wretched of nations. And when this day comes, and it is bound to come, even if after much blood and tears and suffering, *then* I shall return home.

In the meantime I saw the issue of *Davar* for May 18 with a black border around the names of comrades from the *Kvutza* "Mizra." There was nothing said about the circumstances in which they met their death. But the heart sensed the truth. . . . They are the first. Like an accompanying chant those probing words seem to follow me these days: "And when the hour of trial will come—will each of us stand at the post that fate has assigned him?" My heart is heavy. My home—what will be its fate in the days to come?

June 13, 1941

One of the boys received a copy of Rauschning's "Conversations with Hitler." I read it. It is a terrifying book. In reading it you understand the sense of your lying here, far away from home, far from you and the children; you know the reason for your wandering about the African desert with a machine-gun. There can be no higher duty than aiming your machine-gun at the snake. No bullets were ever charged with more flaming passion than those aimed by a Jewish soldier against the German enemy. You may say, "How strange all this sounds coming from you. It doesn't sound at all like the boy I knew." . . . You remember how we laughed at Ron when he told us a story, "How to shoot down the wicked German aeroplane." Today his father no longer laughs at this. Ron's father pulls in his chin, gets his sights in the lowest slit and tries his best to hit the cursed plane. It's a sweet feeling when the machine-gun barks and the bullets fly up at the plane. None of them are any good. They are all a single giant monster. And you feel this all the more strongly when you read the book of Rauschning's conversations with Hitler. But do we Jews need to sharpen our desire for revenge? This desire for revenge grows inside one like a savage weed. When a man is beaten and humiliated, his pride is crushed. Helpless and miserable, he is led to his death. But from the moment you begin to fight, a new feeling grows within you, a new kind of hatred.

I have had the good fortune to see them, these enemies, otherwise than as the persecutors of our people. I have seen them as prisoners of war, I have seen them wounded and miserable. But my feeling was the same: to crush them. In this feeling too, there is something that makes sense out of our suffering and our longing for home, here, in the Tobruk desert. This is our compensation, and perhaps the only compensation for the oppression that weighs us down so far from home. These are things that burn inside you in this desert. . . .

June 16, 1941

Tonight, as I lay beside my machine-gun, I thought of you and of the children and of all of us. How can we tell what marks will be left on us as a result of this experience? I think with fear of what will happen to us when we return, if we return, perhaps after years. How will we come back to a life of work? In a soldier's life you are completely uprooted from your environment, completely removed from a life of work and creation. I often think about the end of the war and what it will bring to the generation that will have spent its best years in the trenches—especially those who have no ties with a family, a home, or a community. I look at the twenty-year-olds among us. They have left nothing behind them. I see how their ties with home have been shaken and how their meager roots are drying up. It is sad when you think this thought to the very end. But to the devil with these thoughts for which I can find no solution!

What is happening at home? Has the vintage season begun? I was never very discriminating about food, but after months of siege you think with longing of—a sour pickle, or a green salad. You get thoroughly sick of the army's canned meat. When we sit around on sandbags in the evening—at the end of every conversation we find ourselves talking about a green salad. How we long for a bed with a sheet on it, for a room with a night-lamp, for a shower. After months of sleeping in your clothes under woolen army blankets, in dust and dirt, stung by fleas—and all of us have plenty of fleas—a clean room, a floor, a made-up bed seem like dreams of a past that beckon from a distance. . . .

June 17, 1941

Please understand that those two boys who are leaping about on the sand-bag barricade, dancing about in the heat of the sun without clothes on—are not crazy. They are quite normal. "Why should they dance about as if they were crazy on those sandbags?" Listen and I'll tell you. The mail has come. One of the boys went out to get their letters. If he had returned without anything, they would really have gone mad. But he brought letters with him. The boys who might have gone crazy got down from the sandbags to read their letters. One of them found two pictures in his letter. He had to turn away, so that no one might see the tears in his eyes. Is this Giura, then? Is he like this already? Here he is clutching his brother, Ron. How sweet he is, this Giura—only after I had filled my eyes with him could I begin to read the letter. I was horrified to hear the news about Shlomo. So he, too, is a prisoner. I thought that you wrote me that he had managed to escape?

June 17, 1941

Do you know, my daughter, with what I have decorated the cleft in the rock where I sleep now? Your picture. I covered it with transparent paper and fixed it right over my head. Every morning, when I open my eyes, I see you before anything else. But a picture is not enough for me. A picture is not a live person and it is the live person that I miss and that I want to see. Sometimes I remember last summer and I feel sad when I think how we dived into the water together and swam races with each other. I am afraid that by the time I come home you'll have learned how to swim so well and I'll have forgotten

so much that you'll have to tell me not to be afraid. Don't you think so? I should like to practice my swimming, but, unfortunately, my canteen is so small that it can only hold a cup of water and no more.

But I have some good news for you. Soon I shall be coming home for a short visit.

September, 10, 1941

The wonderful feeling of having been home, in Palestine, is still with me and also the feeling of parting from it. I am still moved at that sudden meeting, at one thirty in the morning, on the frontier. I passed the station at Rehovot at night. I looked all over the platform, hoping that perhaps, somehow, you had heard that our departure had been postponed for a day. I was sure that E. and Y. had waited for me at noon and that they had left when they did not find me. Still I looked through the window and there they were. My heart leaped with joy. The door of the carriage was barred by soldiers' packs, and so I jumped through a window. I was excited as a child. We stood there for a few minutes and they gave me some refreshments for the trip—a bottle of good wine and a large package of all sorts of good things. Many of the boys came to the window and looked on curiously at this strange meeting on the southern frontier. I snapped on my flashlight, held it under the girls' faces and called out to the boys: "Boys, look at them carefully. This is the last time that you'll be able to see a Palestinian girl." Many of the boys burst out laughing. The train began to move. I waved at them with my heart pounding. It was a precious meeting, the thought of which I carry with me like a holy thing. . . .

We opened the bottles of wine and drank to our wives and children. We ate the wonderful cakes and even left some for the boys at the camp. At the camp there was another surprise in store for us. At the bottom of the package were three boxes of the best English cigarettes, some good razor-blades, two tubes of toothpaste, paper and envelopes.

# TRANSJORDAN

## TRANSJORDAN

October 2, 1941

You see how I wander about from country to country. Now I am nearer to Palestine, at the eastern end of the Transjordan, on the edge of the desert. The landscape here is beautiful. Our trucks are traveling through a mountainous region, where we sometimes come across charming deer. Our officer tried to shoot one, but he missed. Today, as I was standing beside my car, waiting for it to cool off, I saw a deer leap across a mountain-ridge in the distance. He did not see me, but lingered on a rock close by me and waited. I almost killed it, but suddenly my hands failed me and the gun dropped. The deer looked so lovely, just the way it does in the picture that we had once given to S. I thumped on the automobile and he leaped up and disappeared.

I had another surprise meeting today. I suddenly met an old friend, an Arab that used to work at Sodom. He was the foreman for the Arab workers there and he took me on a hike through the mountains above Sodom. I gave him a lift in the machine a little way and we talked about those days in friendly fashion. . . .

The local inhabitants here are armed, most of them with old German rifles. But it is legal to carry arms here. In some places you find natives who are meeting Jews for the first time, although they have heard rumors of Palestine. There are all sorts of legends told about us here, about the wealth of the country, its marvels and its fair-haired, white-skinned girls. A great deal of tact and understanding are necessary before you can find a language in common with the natives here who see Jewish soldiers for the first time in their lives.

October 15, 1941

If you could see the place where I am writing this letter, you would open your mouth in astonishment. Imagine a road winding up into the hills to a height of hundreds of meters. At the top is my car. A strong, wild mountain wind is blowing and it is fiercely cold. Below me is a sea of petrified mountains — black, violet, brown and gray, in all kinds of shapes. There is a blue mist over everything. The beauty of it is terrifying. I have never seen anything like it. Once there was a terrific geological eruption in this region. Hundreds of volcanoes must have burst out of the earth. . . .

Now let me tell you what I am doing here, in these savage mountain heights. Every two days I have to go to a certain distant city and return. I have to go through desert plains and a wild mountain region. There are stretches of mountain-side that are as black as coal, — volcanoes. Some of them are purple, red or golden brown. There are granite mountains and chalky mountains of all colors. There are mountains in all kinds of shapes,—towers, ships, and Chinese pagodas. . . .

On the top of a mountain I met an Australian whose car had had a breakdown and he asked me for help. I had to attach his car to mine and drag it along by a chain to the next town—where there was a garage that could repair it. But as the way was quite long and the road wound and twisted around hills and cliffs, night was apt to overtake us before we reached the plain, and so we decided to spend the night there and go on in the morning. I always take my blankets with me and he had his blankets with him, too. The name of my Australian friend was Edward M., a fine boy, of about my age. We took three bottles of beer out of his car, sat down and drank it and looked at the scenery.

I took out my pad and began to write to you. "Are you married?" I showed him your picture and the picture of the

children. He showed me his wife's picture; they have no children. He confessed to me that he is writing to a girl he loves, and not to his wife. I nodded my head and felt that he envied me for writing to the mother of my children, instead of to another girl. Perhaps I was wrong, but that is what his glance seemed to say. He showed me the picture of his girl, an Australian beauty. But in a little while his patience gave out and he stopped writing. He got up and began to cut wood for a little fire. I got up too and began to help him. But he asked me to go on writing. "You have a wife you love and children. Write to them. I'll take care of the fire." When words like these are said here, at a height like this, in this strange place, they have a sad note, a tenderness that is so moving that, as I go on with my letter to you, I feel something warm and glowing inside of me.

It has grown dark here. Darkness is heavy over the cleft hillsides and the valleys between them, but the peaks of the mountains are still light. All around us is a kind of divine stillness. It sounds as if someone were praying. Shall we pray together? In a region like this stood a nation of slaves that had freed itself many thousands of years ago and begun its journey of liberation. In a silence like this they had received the Torah and become a nation; receiving it without knowing what was in store for them in the future, without knowing of the path of torment that was to lie before them for generations. Today, after generations of slavery, shame and torture, the sons of this same people are standing here again, with their dreams of the future. . . .

October 21, 1941

Ten of us drove to Petra yesterday.

We came to a police-station close by the village along the mountain highway. The village is smothered in green trees, and grass and orchards watered with fresh springs. We left

our car at the police-station and went on to Petra by foot. The road winds between the clefts in the rocks. On both sides red walls of rock rear up to a height of eighty to a hundred meters. Far above your head the walls seem to join and you feel as though you are walking in an enormous cave. Do you remember that beautiful cave at Sodom? That was nothing compared to this entrance into Petra.

You walk between these two walls of rock for about an hour, with the road winding down and getting narrower and narrower. All along the walls there are signs of ancient canals that used to bring water to the city in ancient days. Suddenly the deep gully comes to an end and in front of you you see an enormous valley surrounded by hills on all sides. This is Petra. In the red rocks that are veined with white, blue and violet, gigantic gates are cut. Within you find enormous temples. The whole city is cut out of a single rock. The gates of the temples, crowned by all sorts of decorations, reach as high as fifty meters. There are many inscriptions of ancient times on them. There are several types of architecture to be seen here, Nabatacan, Greco-Roman, Egyptian. There is an enormous amphitheatre with stairs cut out of the stone in a semi-circle. This was where the public came to watch the duels of lions and gladiators. Only a primitive people could have accomplished something so monumental, when man's value was cheap and the work of thousands of slaves was at the disposal of their rulers. The fear of death led the primitive ruler to build himself permanent monuments for the generations to come. You have a strange feeling as you stand among all this, somewhat like the feeling I had when I stood among the pyramids in Egypt—a sense of the mad desire for greatness on the part of rulers and kings.

I don't know why it is, but ever since I have been wandering through the eastern part of Transjordan I have been haunted by the feeling that this is really *Palestine.* Only as the

result of a stupid decree, and with the help of a Jewish High Commissioner full of Jewish complexes was this enormous tract of country cut off from Palestine.* What gigantic areas there are here, asking for our working hands and our initiative. We met a Christian Arab officer in the Transjordanian army who said to us, "We are waiting for you; we know that only you can turn these gigantic wastes into a flourishing garden as we have seen you do on the western banks of the Jordan." Millions of dunams are ploughed and sown only once in two years and otherwise lie waste. What poverty there is here. There is water, spring-water and water in the depths of the earth, in abundance. Even when I was at Sodom, on the border of the country, I felt the longing to settle in this country, but when you really live here and see the bare expanse of land, this longing is doubled. . . .

Excuse this paper. It is Italian paper, part of the booty we took at Tobruk. I had nothing better with me to write on.

October 23, 1941

See how far I have wandered and in how many countries—I set foot even in Hedjaz, on the most sacred Moslem soil. . . .

I often meet the Arab natives here and talk with them. Sometimes I give a lift to an Arab pedestrian. When he hears my Arabic and sees my British uniform he wonders and asks, "How should an Englishman come to know Arabic?" When he hears that I am a Jew, he stares at me in wonder, "What! Are the Jews like this?" From encounters of this kind I learn something of the fairy-tales that circulate about us in the East, fairy-tales and tales of terror, about us and our customs and our girls.

* Sir (now Lord) Herbert Samuel, first High Commissioner of Palestine (1920-25), a British Jew.

Today I met a camel on the road who was so scared by the machine that he began to run in front of it wildly. He could not understand that he could easily have stood to one side. He reminded me of the camels at Tobruk. When the siege was on and the bombardments were almost incessant, some camels wandered into the city. Who fed them or took care of them I don't know to this day. They wandered about on the nearby hills for months. Those camels were something wonderful and remote in that atmosphere, something rare and precious, for it had nothing to do with soldiers or battles or ammunition. I used to watch them with great tenderness, tranquil creatures that had strayed into the hell created by two-legged animals. Now one of them kept running ahead of me in terror. I stopped the automobile and he stopped, too. I went on and he began to run ahead of me again. I saw that there would be no end to it in this way, and so I stopped the car again for half an hour. After some very slow pacing the camel finally turned to one side and I went ahead. As I dashed by, the camel fled into the desert in confusion.

We are all very tired. It's still a long way to the end of the war. When I listen to the radio I am sometimes overcome by sad and painful thoughts. The fate of the world is being decided now on the battlefields of Russia. Millions of people are dying there and thousands of villages are being turned into mounds of destruction. As against all this horror, there seems to be little importance to one's personal demands and desires. But the fate of the Jews looms at us out of all this. When you listen to the awful news of our ruin and the menace of the horror to come, we know that our going was not in vain, but a solemn duty to the children. For their sakes we must create a world completely different from the one we have today. But as you continue to think about this, you are struck with horror at the depths of misery that yawn before us.

October 24, 1941

Saturday evening. I am huddled up in my machine writing to you. I feel full of homesickness this evening. I have been drinking, but I am not drunk.

Towards evening I came to an Arab town. I went to spend the night at a near-by army camp. For some reason I was feeling quite sad. I think this was because of the mountain winds. An Arab who rode with me a little way told me that close by, among the hills, was a place where, if you called out, the echo would repeat your cry up to six or seven times. I stopped the car at that place and called out a name that is dear to me, and the magic echo answered seven times. As I heard the name echoed through those hills over and over again, I suddenly became quite sad.

At the camp I went into the canteen that was packed full of Australians. They turned up their noses a little at the sight of an English soldier, but suddenly one of them jumped up and actually embraced me. Do you know who he was? One of the boys who visited me at Naan after I came back from Tobruk,—the elder of the two. He was very excited to meet me here, asked about you and even remembered your names. He turned round to his comrades in the canteen and said, "This boy is a Palestinian. He was at Tobruk with the Australians. He came home and told every one in his colony about Tobruk and the Australians there. Boys, let's drink health to the Palestinian." Immediately I was handed a glass of wine and we all drank together. Each one of them clicked glasses with me and there was always some one to fill mine. My Palestinian pride did not allow me to refuse and I drank with every one. It was an hour of real gaiety. They also invited me to visit them in their camp somewhere in this country. I left the canteen somewhat shaky, as they were, after parting from my friends with great affection. This is the secret of my being drunk. But

I'm not really drunk. You can see that my handwriting is quite normal and that I am writing you quite reasonably, at least as much as usual. Now I am sitting in my car writing to you by the electric light.

This evening I am alone among strangers, and this loneliness has not been mitigated by the hearty welcome that I received. How shall I explain it? I am tired of wandering about. It's a year and a quarter now that I have been in the army. My homesickness for my comrades and my longing for a quiet life are devouring, and my longing for our room, for our being together and for the children. It's only a year and a quarter and I know that it's a long way until victory. Before we return home, there will be a lot of bloodshed in the world and many personal ties will be broken; that is why I am overwhelmed by fear at times. . . .

October 26, 1941

You'd probably like to know how I received the boxes of chocolates and cigarettes that I sent you. This is the story. I bought the cigarettes myself, but the chocolate came to me, by "itself" in this way. Sometimes I deliver all kinds of food supplies in the machine. One day I realized, as I was about to unload, that something was missing. I was annoyed, but I didn't know whom to be angry at. I bore this in mind and finally I noticed that the English boys who load me up in the store-room, always smile at each other in a special way. I pretended to be quite unaware of this and noticed that they always put one box of chocolate aside. I let them do this but I paid them back for it twice over, by taking two boxes out of the general pile and putting one aside for myself. So all of us were satisfied. They managed to steal a box of chocolates from me and I managed to pay them back for it twice over. This is repeated over and over. They laugh to each other and put a packet of chocolates aside and I take two, without having anyone to smile to. Thus, on my way, I am always sure of

an extra packet, sometimes of chocolates and sometimes of pineapple. Every one gains from this: we all eat, — they with a bad conscience and I with a clean one. And so you can eat chocolate too, by the same right. The only one who loses anything by this game between me and the boys in the store-room is His Majesty, the King. But he, so they say, is very rich indeed. For the time being they have not been making off with cigarettes; that's why I don't do likewise. But if they begin to think that they can get away with anything, they will be doubly punished again.

October 29, 1941

As winter is beginning, let me tell you the story of a blue sweater that I intend to send you. I still know how, but I'll write you about it. Close by our camp is a camp of New Zealanders. They are very fine boys, as friendly as the Australians, but more restrained. Almost all of them, without exception, are Socialists and their questions with regard to Palestine, the *Histadrut** and the *Kibutz* reveal a great deal of understanding and knowledge of these problems. We have become friendly with many of them. One of them, a boy of nineteen, is very friendly with me and visits me often. When he doesn't find me he always leaves me some chocolate, or some good cigarettes. We talk to each other with our eyes and our gestures and somehow we understand each other. His name is Tate. He is really a youngster, clean-cut, kind. He wishes to be taken along to Naan during our leave. Recently he asked me for one of the pictures of you and the children. He intends to write you a letter in English, if I won't object. That's how it is. Tate has a girl in New Zealand, a girl who lives with his mother. His brother is a well-known engineer and he provides for them. His mother sent him a package with

* *Histadrut:* Popular name of *Histadrut Haklalit Shel Haovdim Haivrim*— General Federation of Jewish Labor in Palestine.

two blue sweaters in it. His mother and his girl knitted the sweaters for him in the evenings, while talking of him. He insisted that I take one of the sweaters. I refused. One morning I awoke and found the sweater in my tent. Apparently he had visited me at night and had left the sweater there quietly, without my noticing anything. On the next day I said to him, when I met him, that I didn't need it, but he stood firm, "It's getting on towards winter and it's cold in the mountains. I have already written to them about you and they'll be very happy over this gift; they'll knit for both of us from now on." Finally I told him that I'd send it to you. He smiled and said: "O. K." Now I'm sending the sweater to you. The love of a mother and a sweetheart are woven into it and it will reach you because of a soldier's friendship.

October 30, 1941

I have just finished Herman Hesse's "Peter Kamenzind."

I have just finished Herman Hesse's "Peter Kamenzind." At first I didn't like it, but as I read on I became fascinated. We have been used to seeing statues and portraits of great heroes. But this is a gray, homely figure, like millions of others. At the end you realize that there is something divine in every human being.

We are in the neighborhood of an Arab country into which it is forbidden for a non-Mohammedan to enter—Hedjaz. The sacred grave of Mohammed is there. Every Mohammedan hopes to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, the holy city. It is a large country, but most of it is desert. I drove into it "by mistake." But I got through it safely. It is a strange country with strange customs. Up to this day it is customary to cut off the hand of a thief that is caught stealing. I saw an Arab with one of his hands cut off for having been caught in this way. He is a servant to an officer. He does everything with great skill with his one hand. It was from him that I learned a great deal about Hedjaz.

There are Bedouins here who have never ridden in a car before. They go about quite freely with their weapons. No Arab travels without his rifle and ammunition. It is a disgrace for a man to be unarmed. These are the true desert Bedouins, quite untouched by the civilization of the towns. Many of them wear plaits. I go about with my revolver attached to my belt. This makes my contacts with the Arabs much easier, for only officers carry revolvers. Thus I don't have to carry my rifle with me on my trips. I look like some sort of officer to them, without stars on my epaulettes. I like to talk with them and to listen to their tales about their life and the countryside. I already told you about that place in the mountains where the echo answers you seven times. And now I have heard from another Bedouin about a gully close by where you can hear music and the clapping of hands in the night-time, like the sounds you hear at Arab festivals and dances. I stopped the car and said "It can't be." The Bedouin swore by the life of his two children that it was true. He himself heard this music one night. He went on, "You see, master, at the top of that hill is the grave of the holy man. May Allah preserve us by his grace." "What holy man?" I asked, for I was curious to hear the legend that the Bedouin might tell me. I tried to drive slowly, so as not to disturb him and he, in good Oriental fashion, with elaborate metaphors, told me what I shall write down for you in a simple style:

"Once there was a holy sheikh who had been tried in a thousand ways by Allah and whom the devil had never succeeded in turning aside from the path of virtue by a hair's breadth. He was a widower of both his wives and had lost his six sons and his flocks and he lived like a poor man, without anything. One day he came to this place. He walked on, his destination the holy city of Mecca. He desired to prostrate himself on the grave of the Prophet and to give thanks to Allah and to his servant Mohammed for the kindness he had received in his youth. When he reached this place, his strength gave way and he laid himself down on a rock in the *wadi* and wept

aloud at his weakness in not being able to go on his pilgrimage to Mecca. And Allah said to him: 'My son, cease weeping. I have not allowed you to go to Mecca, because I wish you to remain here, so that this place will be sanctified and so that you may comfort other weary pilgrims on their way to Mecca by your music.' And the holy man remained in this place. And he said to Allah, 'You are right. You must find a helpmate.'

"On the other side of the mountain there lived an old sheikh, with many flocks of sheep and camels and many sons and one daughter. And the daughter was as beautiful as the sun rising over the mountains. She was a shepherdess, watching over the goats and the camels. One day she was in the meadow with her herds when a white dove flew past her, carrying a leather purse full of golden coins. But the girl did not look at the dove. This went on day after day. On the third day she told her father about this and he said to her, 'Bring me the purse.' And she brought it to him. In the purse there were precious stones and golden coins. On the next night the holy man wept and wailed among the mountains. And Allah spoke to him: 'Why are you weeping, my dearest son?' And the holy man replied, 'The maiden has not sought me, even when I was a white dove and flew past her with a purse.' And Allah said: '. . . Don't go to her as a dove, for not in this way will the woman pursue the man. Go to her in the shape of a snake and bite her and when your poison seethes within her she will follow you.'

"Days passed. One day the sheik and his family were sitting at the doorway of their tent eating their evening meal. Suddenly a snake crawled out from among the rocks and, without approaching the man, crawled over to the girl and bit her on her leg and fled. When dawn broke the girl had disappeared. A passerby said that they had seen a man all dressed in white walking toward the top of the mountain at dawn with a young girl climbing before him. From then on, night after night, the sound of singing and music can be heard in the

*wadi.* The holy man and the girl are singing and playing together and every one of the faithful who grows faint and tired on his way to the glorious grave at Mecca listens to the sound of the music and his strength is restored, so that he goes forth refreshed in the morning, with the aid of Allah and his glorious prophet.——"

In reading this legend in my letter you will miss the rich flavor that it has when it is told at great length, during an hour and a half, by a Bedouin. Some day I shall come to the *wadi* to hear the music at night. If I really hear it and if it truly restores the strength of those who are on their way for a holy purpose, perhaps it will lend me strength in moments of weakness, so that I can continue on the long and difficult road.

November 1, 1941

In the Arab towns here organized propaganda is conducted against us. Our machines are marked with the Star of David and they don't like this. When a car goes through a village the children throw stones at it. This morning I saw a child, of about the age of Ron, standing at the roadside with a stone in his hand, waiting for the car to pass, so that he might throw the stone at it from behind. I stopped the car. The child got frightened and stepped back. "What have you got in your hand, my son?" I asked him in a friendly way. "A stone, sir," he said bashfully and threw it down. "Come, I want to give you something. Call the others, too." Some other children had come forward hesitantly. On the seat next to the wheel there was an open crate with candy in it, that I was saving for the entertainment branch of the unit. I gave each child a piece of chocolate. The biggest of them refused to take it and announced, "It's poisoned." I took the piece, broke off a half of it and began to eat it, giving the rest of it to the oldest child, a ten-year-old. "Why do you think it poisoned? Why should I give you poison?" The children ate the chocolate, but they

still looked suspicious. I looked at the little one, about Ron's age, and asked him what his name was. "Abdallah." "So, is the chocolate good?" "Yes, it's good." I took out a bottle of soda-water, opened it, took a gulp out it and passed the rest of it around. They drank it.

"Why do you throw stones at myself and my comrades when we pass through the village?"

"We don't throw stones,—it's other children."

"Why do they do it?"

"Because they say that you're bad people."

"Am I bad?"

"No, on my life, you're a good man."

"All of us are like that."

We chatted quite a lot together. A great many children gathered and they began to argue about me. One of them said with certainty that I wasn't a Jew, but a Mohammedan from Palestine. All the while I couldn't free myself of a strange feeling. These children of the age of Ron and Giura and Dvora suck in this hatred with their mother's milk,—and what can be in store for our children?

I went on, accompanied by the children's good wishes. The ice was broken, but what can be the value of a single meeting, a transient, accidental meeting, against the organized education of a whole generation? I thought about this a great deal. Of course, the natural conclusion for us to draw is to accept this hatred of us as a fact, and in view of it and no matter what the circumstances, to become numerous and strong,—millions of us in Palestine, so that our existence will not depend on the love or the hatred of the neighboring countries; but even in that case, the problems of neighborliness are so complicated and mutual relations with one's neighbor are so complex that the question is not a simple one at all. Many of us don't think about it. But these are children of the same generation as our children. When you consider the fate of your children and see children of the same age being educated to hate them, it is very difficult to bear. . . .

November 10, 1941

Only yesterday I wanted to write you about my longing for winter, but suddenly it has come and established itself here. I was in the mountains when the skies grew dark and the whole world grew shadowy in the middle of the day. I was dressed in summer clothes and I had left the celluloid window screens in camp. And suddenly the rain came down. A terrific rain—a real deluge. The rain blew into the car from the side and the window-pane in front of me became so covered with drops of water that I couldn't see the road. I had to drive with my head turned to one side, in order to get out of the pouring rain. You can imagine how we got to the first army camp. New Zealand soldiers gave us fresh clothes, and a long army coat belonging to a sick soldier. Now I am wearing dry clothes again. There's a terrific storm outside, but the rain has stopped for the last half-hour. The skies are still cloudy and it looks as though it will rain again tonight.

Everything seems to be in a wintry mood, the mood of the first rains at home. Do you know what I mean—the half-pleasant, half-painful kind of depression that descends on you at the beginning of the winter? I have never quite been able to explain it. . . . It may be that it is related to those remote memories of childhood which have sunk below the level of my consciousness. Everything seems orphaned and abandoned this evening. It would seem that that life had gone by and left me alone. This evening I feel with a kind of sad certainty that everything that has gone by has gone forever. Our home, the children, you,—all this seems like a remote and precious thing,—so far away that your longings seem to suffocate you . . . Our life in the *Kibutz,* the life of work, the sharing of our fate with our comrades, our ties to them all seem so far away, so intangible, as if it had all sunk into some invisible depths, never to come back again. . . .

But bear with me this time. It's the autumn wind, the rain and my loneliness that have depressed me in this way. Tomorrow the sun will shine again and this mountain of sadness will dissolve and disappear. And when I return to my unit, tomorrow or the day after, I'll find a good warm letter from you. . . .

I want to tell you about my meeting with an English Jew. I met him in one of the store-rooms. I thought that he was a non-Jew, but he put out his hand and said, "*Shalom aleichem,* I am a Jew." Every time he saw me he would speak two or three words to me in Yiddish. In the presence of non-Jews he would avoid speaking Yiddish and this irritated me. This morning he drove with me. It was early in the morning, before the rainstorm. I was glad of this opportunity to speak with him freely and to hear something about the English Jews in the British army. I asked him if he had ever visited Palestine. No, he never had. "You probably want to?" "Not really." In everything he said I felt something chilling. He wanted to go to Egypt on his leave. "In Palestine you don't have any whorehouses." "So." "And what do you know about Zionism?" I asked him. Oh, he knew about Zionism. Every week his place of business used to give two shillings for Zionism. When I wondered at this, he explained that this was for some *Yeshiva** in Jerusalem. On top of all this, the man is religious. He asked if we, that is the Jewish soldiers, pray and he was very disappointed when he heard my reply. . . . I called his attention to a wonderful view that we had from the height of the road, but talking to him about this was like talking to the car—both of them were about equally aware of it. I tried to hum something and asked him if he had ever heard any Hebrew songs? No, he never had.

Suddenly, at the sight of the clouds on the horizon, I was reminded that it was almost time for *Hanukah.* I hummed the hymn, "*Ma'oz Tsur Yeshuati*" (The Lord is the Rock of My Salvation), the traditional song for *Hanukah,* and suddenly

* *Yeshiva:* Religious academy.

he joined in and we sang together. He sang very well in a good voice. I thought with sadness that here was the only thing that two Jewish boys from two ends of the earth had in common: the war that had been fought by their people thousands of years ago. But the battle that was being fought in the present for a hope of the future could afford no bridge between them. We are a people that lives only in its past. I tried to talk to him about the Jewish question, on the lesson that we should learn from the history of the Jews in Germany, on the future of his son and his grandson and I felt as if I were faced with a blank, cold wall. I went on to tell him that this was not the first year of our war; our boys in Palestine had experienced three years of war before this. I told him about the riots. Only then did he begin to listen ! If you could have seen how excited he became. I, too, when I saw that I had succeeded in making a breach in the fortress, got excited about my story. I slowed up the machine and went on to tell him, in my broken Yiddish, about our work in Palestine, about the riots, about the new colonies, about our settlements and about the *Kibutz.* He gulped it all down with great excitement. "Why don't we hear about all this?" I asked him if he had never read about Palestine. No. He didn't read. He was a merchant. And he didn't go to meetings. No one in his neighborhood knows about what is being done in Palestine. "Why don't you tell about it? This should be part of the service in the synagogue." He had never heard of any of this. When we parted he asked me to visit him and go on telling him about all this. He promised with great fervor that he would visit Palestine. He asked where to turn and I gave him the address of K. A. in the Central Committee of the *Histadrut.* After this I thought of the Jewish masses—not in some remote corner, but in the very country where the fate of our work is being decided, to a large extent—to whom our work and our struggles are a closed book. But I did not have much time to go on thinking about this for the train interrupted me. . . .

November 22, 1941

This evening I am in a good mood. Not only because of your letter, but because of the news on the radio: *The Libyan front has been breached for eighty miles along the coast.* From Tobruk, too, one arm of the pincer has reached out for fifty miles. How I should like to be at Tobruk again and to chase the enemy as far as Tripoli and farther. We may be sent there, for we are veterans and we know the roads and the conditions of that terrain very well.

If only I could go back there now and visit Derna and meet the Jews there whom I left behind, the prey of the enemy, on that bitter retreat. We, who have tasted the bitter taste of that retreat, should be given the sweet taste of revenge and retribution. After long days of dreariness this news of the attack is like water in the desert. If this continues we'll show a strength such as the world has never known. That is why we are feeling so festive today. There is good news from Russia, too, today. They are standing firm and in some cases counter-attacking. You shall see—victory will follow victory. Let us pray that this is really the beginning.

December 4, 1941

I am in the guard-tent tonight. . . . As I am forbidden to sleep I am sitting near the table and using this extra time for writing, reading and thinking. The wind is howling outside and makes everything sound dreary. The tent is creaking at every stake. There is a heavy dust-storm outside. Inside everything is covered with that awful desert dust. These damned dust storms darken the light of day and irritate you to the core and even blur the light of my lamp at night.

A wind rustling in the trees always throws me into a fit of sadness. I remember that early period of the *Kvutza* near the spring in the Emek. There were several cases of suicide and the mood of disillusionment and despair was general. In the evening you would hear the wind rustling the willow-branches like dry fingers. Ever since then, I think, this sound has caused me to feel depressed.

December 16, 1941

It is time for the third candle of the *Hanukah* festival. In a few days it will be a year since I left Palestine. A year. In honor of *Hanukah* I'd like to tell you about my wonderful meeting with . . . the snow. This was the first time in my life that I saw it. In the morning the sky was clouded and there was a storm raging in the mountains. Down here it was raining. I checked my car carefully before leaving and the captain said: "Good luck to you. You're going to meet with an awful storm in the mountains." I saluted and smiled.

On my way up I encountered a heavy downpour. The machine was completely closed and inside I felt quite warm and dry. But outside there was a frightful rainstorm and a frosty wind was blowing. I thought to myself that you had really been wiser than I when you refused to accept Tate's sweater. I was very glad to have it on then. The machine went higher and higher. Here I had to be quite careful, for I was driving inside a black, wet cloud. Finally I came to a stretch that was white and shining with the snow that had fallen the night before. I got out of the car, wrapped up in my long coat, and walked about in the snow. It was strange to do this—for the very first time in my life I made myself a snowball, but I had no one to throw it at. It was a wonderful feeling,—a feeling of pure bliss.

December 18, 1941

Last night in the mountains I was with a young New Zealander. The night was extremely cold. The two of us covered ourselves with our coats and shivered with the cold. My friend nearly had his feet frozen. Fortunately I was wearing the woolen socks that P. had knitted for me. He set some benzine alight in a can and warmed his feet over it. He was surprised at the fact that my feet were not frozen, and so I showed him my woolen socks and told him that a friend had knitted them for me. "Your wife?" "No, a friend." "That's not nice. You have a wife, but you also have some one who knits socks for you, besides?" With a great deal of effort, in my meager English, I explained that it was possible for a man and a woman to be friends without a breath of the kind of relationship that he imagined. He felt the wool and said, "You must be rich, if you can use wool like this." I laughed and said,—"Yes, we're rich—rich in friendship." Tell P. that her woolen socks saved me from freezing in the mountains and also evoked some suspicions on the part of a naive young New Zealander. . . .

December 24, 1941

It is Christmas Eve. I am at present in Amman.* There is a dreadful rain-storm raging outside but it's warm inside and there is some music on the radio. The sounds of the holiday can be heard from every radio station in Europe. Europe is covered with blood and celebrating Christmas . . . there is something very sad about Christmas carols. Through the sounds of the music I seem to hear the sighs and groans of my Jewish brothers.

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* *Amman:* Capital of Transjordan.

The boys here are preparing for a festive dinner. They are cooking for it already and we are invited too. I'll write you later about our *Hanukah* party.

December 25, 1941

We are camping in a new neighborhood again. Our camp is pitched in a very low place,—almost as low as the Dead Sea and there are mountains rising all around us. There is no rain at all and the winter is very beautiful here. The road here runs through mountains at a height of 1800 meters. There are terrific storms at this height. This morning I left the camp where I had spent Christmas day. The road through the mountains was covered with snow. The snow fell during the night and the day after that there was a hailstorm. The rocks and mountains were covered with snow. Icy winds wailed and the drops of water on my windshield were frozen. From this I descended to the summer climate below.

Now let me tell you about two encounters I had recently. I went into the canteen to buy something and met a group of Australians eating and drinking there. One of them came up to the window, which was covered with icicles, and began to tell me, half-drunk as he was, what it's like at this time of the year where he comes from. Snow is falling, and there is a Christmas tree in the corner of the room. I couldn't understand everything that he said but it was pleasant to watch him, like a child, dreaming of his wife and children in their home far away in an Australian town, sitting around the fireplace and thinking of their father. Another Australian boy, older than the first, put his head on the table and burst into tears. One of them began to sing about Australia with great feeling. The others listened. And then their holiday mood returned, their homesickness was thrust aside and they began to drink beer. A holiday always brings the feeling of homesickness to a degree that is almost unbearable, particularly now, with

danger threatening their homeland. How well we can understand them. They asked me to drink with them. After I had drunk with them several times they asked me why I did not look gay that evening? I hesitated a moment as to what I should say, in my broken English. But something in me was struggling for speech and I said to them, "On this very night, on this holiday, seven million of my brothers are imprisoned in Europe, without a home, crushed beneath the heel of the Nazis. Seven million of my brothers are the victims of cold, hunger and slavery." That was all I said. I said this in my broken English. They were half drunk, but they began to consider what I had said. Understanding and sympathy seemed to shine out of their eyes. The older man among them tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Listen, all those millions of Jewish brothers will have a home. Palestine will be their home. Have patience; wait until victory is ours. Even if it takes another Christmas away from home—or two more Christmases—we'll beat those Nazis." We drank together to victory, to the defeat of Nazism, to the rebuilding of Palestine and, finally, to a Socialist Australia. This last was proposed by a youngster who raised his glass with great excitement and we all followed him.

At encounters of this kind I feel very badly about my limited English.

Now let me tell you about another evening. We were driving along a road through the mountains and the wind was blowing with such force that my faithful car was scarcely able to move. The wind simply froze our bones. The car, although it usually warms up on a trip into the mountains, so that the engine nearly reaches a boiling point on the way up, was as cold as ice. The brake got stuck and water penetrated into the electrical gadget that creates the sparks necessary to heat the machine. Nothing can be worse than this. You have to fight against the wind and handle pieces of metal that are cold and wet on your freezing hands. . . . When I had finished fixing it, it was already dark. We had reached a military building—the wireless station. They made us come in. There was a fire in an

open stove there, like a fireplace. The room was warm and pleasant, but I was so worn out that I couldn't move. I sat down alongside the stove and felt my hands thawing and reviving. The English sergeant who had been driving with me was even more miserable than I was. We sat around the fire and ate some supper, looking like the survivors of a shipwreck. Outside a rainstorm was raging. I was seized with an attack of homesickness. I would have given anything to have been in our room at home. . . .

December 29, 1941

Before I sit down to reply to your good, healing letter, let me tell you about something very moving that happened to me. Tate's mother and sister in New Zealand sent me a wonderful package for New Year's and in it they enclosed this letter:

"Dear Moses,

"I don't know you. But I know my dear son's taste in people. If he likes you so much, you must be worthy of his love. Please accept his mother's love, too. I and my daughter Jenny are sending you a New Year's gift. My son has written me a great deal about you. Every evening before I go to bed I pray for your safety as I pray for the safety of my dear and only son. May God grant that you will come through the war as safely as you came through the siege of Tobruk for the sake of your wife and children. When peace and victory come we will be very happy to receive you and your wife and children as our dear guests in our home in New Zealand. Please accept our modest gift and remember that, far from the battlefields we, the mothers and daughters of New Zealand, are praying for the triumph of justice over evil. With a mother's love,

Eleanora Tate."

January 13, 1942

My dear little girl,

I want to tell you something that will probably make you sad. Within the next few days I shall write you a letter with a new address in it. Then your father will be much farther away from you than he is now. From there I won't have any possibility of visiting Palestine in my car. I shall be back in the same place where I was for such a long time when you couldn't see me. It's a game of syllables: the first is the opposite of bad (*tov*—good in Hebrew); the second syllable is what you spit out (*ruk*—in Hebrew). Of course, I won't be exactly in the same place—but even farther. For we are winning and pushing the enemy back. If you are sad because your father is going to be farther away, remember that he is helping to beat the enemy and to end the war and you will be comforted. Now that you father will be in more difficult places than he is now, write to him more often. There are times in the life of a soldier when a letter from his daughter gives him a lot of strength with which to overcome all kinds of dangers and difficulties. Do you understand me, my big daughter? So tell me, from time to time, what is happening at Maoz and at school. All right?

You wrote me about the way in which you celebrated *Hanukah* at Maoz. We celebrated *Hanukah* here too. All the soldiers and officers gathered together in a big hall, where we have our Sabbath gatherings. In the middle of it we had a lovely *Hanukah Menorah.** On a board opposite it one of the comrades had written the words of Brenner,† "When the hour of trial will arrive—will each one of us be ready to stand at

* *Menorah:* Traditional candelabra used on *Hanukah.*

† Joseph Hayim Brenner (1880-1921): One of the outstanding figures of modern Hebrew literature; killed during the riots of 1921. He exerted a tremendous influence on several generations of Palestinian pioneers.

the post that has been assigned to him?" Do you know who Y. H. Brenner is? He is the grandfather of your friends Michal and Yochai. He was a writer and a teacher. He felt the sufferings of his people more than anyone else and he required that everyone of us be true and work for our martryred people in the Diaspora. When you get older you can read the piece he wrote that is called "This Is What He Told Her." This is the conversation of a son who leaves home so that he may defend his people against pogroms, while his mother fears for him and tries to hold him back.

In the tent it was very quiet and hushed. From one of the corners you could hear the sound of a flute playing a *Hanukah* tune. One of the comrades went up to the candelabra where only the sentinel candle was burning and read something good from the writings of M. Y. Berditchevsky, something about light and freedom; afterwards the candles were lit and the electric lights too. Many of the comrades read other appropriate passages from our classics. We also sang together and drank Palestinian wine. We distributed presents that we had received from Palestine for the soldiers and then we danced.

Now let me tell you about the snow that fell in the mountains here; some of the drifts were several meters high. On a snowy day I reached a camp of Australian soldiers and saw them rejoicing at the sight of the snow. They made themselves a tin sled which they dragged to the top of the mountain and six of them would slide down on it all the way to their camp. When I told them that I was a Palestinian and that this was the first time I had ever seen snow they pelted me with snowballs and made me go sledding with them. It was really wonderful. We also made a snow-man, or rather, a snow-woman.

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# INTERLUDE

# INTERLUDE

## INTERLUDE

March 10, 1942

My tent has been full of loneliness lately. I have been living with one of the comrades from Palestine who is an old-timer, but alone and without a home. He once tried to enter a *Kibutz,* but for some minor reason he was not accepted. During the weeks when I did not receive any letters and felt quite cut off from home, as sad and miserable as he, we had much in common. Both of us were sad creatures, waiting for a word from someone, a word that never came. Today I received a letter and entered the tent, radiant, and suddenly—how can I explain it? —I felt ashamed in front of him. The understanding between us in this dirty, dusty tent of ours, was damaged somehow. I received some bulletins from Naan and with it something really precious and wonderful: a notebook in which every child at the school wrote a letter to me, enclosing drawings and pressed flowers. All this was like balm on my heart, but I was sad because of my friend.

The heat here is as bad as it is near the Dead Sea at midsummer. And don't forget that this is only the spring. They say that it is simply hell here in the summertime. And the flies here—heavenly powers! I never dreamed that there could be flies like these in the world. Besides all this, it's filthy here. We are in the neighborhood of an Arab town and, of course, besides a cinema and some European restaurants, there is a red-light district. At first many of the boys visited there, but later a regulation forbidding soldiers to enter that section was issued, because of the danger of venereal infection. But some of the company disguise themselves as Arabs in order to visit there. And the conversations you hear! But all this is

partly a reflection of traditional army talk. To my sorrow I noticed that there were even some members of our settlements among these.

As a result of this a group of us decided to meet in one of the tents. One of us began by saying that this meeting was necessary because many of us were still unacquainted with each other. Moreover, he continued, certain dangers that are characteristic of army life lie in wait for us, not merely the danger of death, but other dangers as well. It is necessary, then, that we should keep close to each other and watch over each other. Our ties with our home are apt to be weakened after a long period of army life. We must create a group that will be capable of cultivating these ties. Someone else said, "Soon new comrades will come to us from Palestine. They, too, will have to go through a difficult period of adjustment to the army after leaving home. We can make this easier for them if we maintain and deepen the ties of fellowship between us."

Several other comrades spoke in the same vein. We decided that every Saturday evening, at the hour when all the settlements of the *Kibutz* have their general meeting, we would meet to renew our ties with our home. We would read and discuss matters. We all felt encouraged after this meeting.

During the last few days a group of the survivors of the "Patria"* reached us. I read the account of some other survivors who spoke at the convention of the *Kibutz* at Givat-Brenner and I was greatly moved at the fortifying and noble words they uttered. They spoke as members of the movement. Here we meet with the other side of the story. The group that has just reached us has no interest whatever in the movement. They seem to be full of a kind of poison and bitterness. You approach them and try to speak to them, but you are forced to retreat. Then you think of a thousand explanations and excuses for them, for after all, they have passed through experiences so gruesome that not everyone has the right to judge them. And

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* See footnote on p. 10.

yet . . . you think that thousands and tens of thousands of those whom we are straining to save and to bring to Palestine will be like these—embittered, physical and psychological wrecks.

March 13, 1942

You write that you wish that I could come to the *Seder.* My little girl! My comrades and I will celebrate the Passover very far from our country this year. The Passover holiday is the holiday of spring and of liberation. And we are all working hard for another liberation, both the soldiers here and you and the other comrades at home. It is difficult for us to celebrate the spring here. The desert does not have a springtime. There is only bitter cold or blazing heat and always the same dust-storms and the same barren desolation. The spring that we love so much never comes here at all. When we too speak of the spring here, we mean the day of the great attack when—we hope and pray—the enemy will be beaten and liberation will be achieved.

But write me how the *Seder* is at home.

Here, too, in our unit, we are preparing for the *Seder.* It will be different from your *Seder* at home. I will write you about our *Seder* and you write me about yours at home, right away.

March 15, 1942

I visited some of the marvellous relics here, the tombs of the

I visited some of the marvellous relics here, the tombs of the kings of Egypt. During the winter, tourists from all over the world visit here, but now, during the war, this stream of visitors has ceased. This is a whole city built over ruins, an ancient Egyptian city. There is great wealth and treasure buried here. It's amazing to see the walls of the caves covered with drawings in a very cultivated style, with colors that are still fresh today and that you could swear had been mixed only a decade instead of four thousand years ago. The bodies of these kings have

also been preserved for thousands of years. This is an entire city of tombs in which whole dynasties are buried. In one of the tombs lies the minister of agriculture for Egypt, and on the walls are pictures representing the processes of agriculture and the functions of the Egyptian farmer, all in brilliant and lively colors.

Then there are the temples which were buried for thousands of years under the earth and which have gradually been uncovered. This is something gigantic—a city of temples, composed of columns, obelisks, tremendous walls, all covered with carvings and paintings. The history of the period is represented in these pictures and carvings: wars, religious ritual, sex, gods, human desires—everything. There are statues here that must weigh tens of tons, enormous statues carved out of a single stone. These temples were built over a period of generations. Each king would carve or sculpt his face and the face of his son. The king that came after him would blot out the face of the preceding one if he had been an enemy. I was quite confused by the numerous names, dates and dynasties that were poured into my ears.

When you walk about among these enormous relics of remote history you feel like a dwarf against the background of this lofty past. But even when you are most impressed by the brilliant art that flourished thousands of years ago, you cannot forbear asking: Where are they all today? Where are their heirs and the bearers of their tradition and their art? Sunk into oblivion. But we, a small tribe, oppressed and enslaved by them, we who were slaves here, creatures without culture, without art, without science or architecture—we fled from this and were purified by forty years of wandering and we built our civilization and then were exiled and scattered, martyred in every country, slaughtered, burned and plundered—and we are still alive. Today, after four thousand years I, the great-great grandson of those very slaves walk among their ruins, visit their tombs and admire the wealth and the culture that reigned here and that have been petrified by death.

And now some reflections concerning present day Egypt. The Egyptians today are not the heirs of the ancient Egyptians. They are a mixed nation. Not a vestige of their former splendor remains.

This week I went to an Egyptian theatre. The building was magnificent, in a modern Egyptian style. In the audience were the cream of society. Many Egyptians looked at me with a glance of mingled confusion and mockery. They took me for a drunken Englishman who had come to the theatre by mistake. When I left I felt full of homesickness for my own country. How precious, on that evening, was the memory of the "Habima," the "Ohel" and even the "Matateh,"* and the studio at Naan, too. What stale rubbish I saw that evening, what hollow emptiness—pure rubbish. Don't imagine that it was too difficult for me to understand. I understood every word—the essense of Levantism without any substance. But I refused to give up. I said to myself—that must be the worst of it—the chaff, instead of the pure grain. There are villages in Egypt, for most Egyptians are farmers. You must go to them, if you want to know what the people are like.

I don't remember how I changed the subject. I was writing you about my visit to Luxor and its antiquities. All this was done by thousands of slaves. Our guide showed us an encampment of miserable huts and caves in which some wonderful paintings are preserved. He told us that, on the basis of certain excavations, this was discovered to be where the slaves and the artisans had lived. They lived like slaves, separated from the community. The kings feared that after their death the tombs would be plundered of all their gold and treasure and so the work of the tombs was kept secret, and for this purpose the artisans were separated from their communities and kept in the position of prisoners. It is said that all the artisans were killed when their work was finished. I saw the great quarries from which stones were carried at distances of tens of miles. It seems

* *Habima* (leading Palestine theatre); *Ohel* (workers' theatre); *Matateh* (popular satirical theatre).

that these artisans used to carve marvellous pictures and inscriptions on the rocks during their free moments. As they were isolated and kept away from their families and women, many of the pictures on the rocks are pornographic. There are many pictures of cohabitation. All this is associated in your mind with what you know of modern Egypt in the twentieth century, with all the whoring that goes on practically in public.

March 19, 1942

When I heard the news concerning the mobilization of girls I was very moved and wrote about it to R. K.

I was in the capital when, on our way to the cinema, we met a Jewish nurse from South Africa. A group of us was standing in front of the entrance to the cinema, arguing about which film to see, when two South African nurses passed us. One of them stopped and asked eagerly, in Yiddish, whether we were Jews. She then told us that she was a Jewess from South Africa. As a result of the conversation she and her Christian girl friend and her escort, a sergeant, joined us and we went to the cinema together. When we got inside she told me that she had come to South Africa from Lithuania with her parents, when she was very little, seventeen years ago and that she had a newly-wed husband who was in the South African army and still stationed there. I asked her how she felt, as a woman in the army and her face became very serious. "I am married and I come from a traditional Jewish home; I went into the army for idealistic reasons. I was aware of the difficulties and dangers of army life in advance, but I still did not know what the reality was like. Do you know what it means to walk about for days and months with the feeling that all the soldiers that you meet undress you in their thoughts? It's a terrible atmosphere. Jewish soldiers, South Africans, are like this, and of course the others are still worse. Young girls without a strong character are apt to go downhill."

The curtain rose and we had to interrupt our conversation. During the next intermission she asked us about Palestine. She listened to us with enthusiasm and explained everything to her Christian friend. This was an interesting encounter and raised many questions in my mind with regard to the mobilization of women that is being planned at home. At the end of the film they went off with their sergeant and that was the end.

As I have already started to tell you something about this city I'll go on and describe several other visits I made. One night a few of us went to see Cairo's night life. We went from one night club to another. All the while I was haunted by a single thought: Good Lord! was all this rubbish invented by human beings? I understand that there must be some release for male instincts. But here? What depths of unmitigated bestiality! Imagine—dance halls, with painted whores sidling about in them, jazz playing; the whores dance with the soldiers, egg them on to drink and take their percentage from the sale of the drinks. And so it is in the next night club and the next and the next. After that we wandered about in the dark streets, feeling very depressed. Such a longing for our home, our work and our life together overcomes you in this city.

The next day we went to a cinema. First we went to a cafe and ordered something to eat. A dwarf, about the size of a three-year-old child entered. From his face, however, you could see that he was about fifteen years old. He had a large head and was dressed like a clown. He went from table to table, begging for pennies. Then he leaned over an English soldier and whispered into his ear, in a very masculine voice, the filthiest words imaginable. Outside was his father, or his guardian, waiting for the pennies that he would collect. Finally he left for another cafe.

In the cafe a radio was turned on. Suddenly everyone became silent at the sound of the news being delivered in a strange language. Finally it was explained to us that this was Greek. The owner of the cafe was a Greek. I thought to myself about this. The owner of the cafe was a Greek, but his cus-

tomers were New Zealanders, Australians, Englishmen and Palestinians. None of these could understand Greek, but he, the Greek, refuses to give up his language. He lets it be heard loudly. I thought of those Jewish shops we visited and my heart winced. . . .

There are a great many Jewish shops here, of different types. We entered one of them in order to buy some pictures. All of the conversation took place in English, but we spoke in Hebrew amongst ourselves and the shopkeeper heard us, but kept silent. As we went out he said slyly: *"Shalom."* We were amazed. He explained that he was a Jew. But he had no interest in this meeting with us. On the other hand there was the little shop where the shopkeeper didn't know what to do for us when he discovered that we were Jewish soldiers from Palestine. He was ashamed to take money from us. He actually clung to us. Once we entered a shop and the shopkeeper greeted us with a *"Shalom."* I tried to talk with him, but he didn't know any Hebrew. I tried Arabic instead, but this was no use either. Something about him made me suspicious. When we left I looked at the name on the signboard—a Greek name. The wily Greek had sensed that we, as Jewish Palestinian soldiers, would be eager to meet a Jew, and so he pretended to be one. So there *is* a place in the world where it's worth pretending you're a Jew!

March 21, 1942

After seeing the filth of the big city I had a great hunger to see something of the other Egypt. I wanted to see its real culture, its roots. I asked to see the National Museum of Agriculture here. I got on the tram and asked many people, beginning with a policeman and ending up with a porter, where the National Museum of Agriculture was. No one could tell me anything definite about it. Because of this I felt my ambition increasing: I must find the place—no matter what! The next day I left my friends who laughed at me for looking for

something like an agricultural museum in a city like this, and I went out by myself to search for it. On the electric car I noticed two very well-dressed young men, talking freely amongst themselves. Something about them made me think of a university atmosphere. One of them murmured something about *"Sham."** He described a visit he had made to the University in Jerusalem. I listened keenly. One of them said, "This Tommy seems to know a few words in our language." I couldn't control myself and smiled and said, "This Tommy can speak it as well as you can." They were confused for a moment and then one of them asked "Moslem?" "No, a Jew from Palestine." A conversation started between me and the one who had asked about Palestine. I asked him about the museum and he acted with great courtesy and graciousness. He accompanied me to the museum. On the way an interesting conversation developed. He admitted that there is a great deal of corruption in Egypt today. But there is a new Egypt, an Egypt that no one has heard of yet, a young Egypt that is learning the good things about the west—system, organization, efficiency. Behind his words I could feel the aspirations of Fascism in Eastern dress. My visit to the museum was a great experience—it was there that I saw Egypt, its industry, its agriculture, its manufactures, its canals, etc. I wandered about there gnawed by envy. This is the same envy that rises within me when I see the fertile fields of Egypt. But I'll tell you about that in my next letters.

March 26, 1942

This is my second *Seder* away from home and I feel very sad

This is my second *Seder* away from home and I feel very sad

about it. When I picture to myself how our dining-room looks on a holiday evening—with all the light shining in the eyes of the comrades—I am overcome by homesickness. It seems to me that this year there is a deeper meaning in this

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* *Sham:* Arabic for Palestine and Syria.

festival of freedom. For actually, we too, are at a point in history where we must fight for freedom, the freedom of our people and the freedom of man. If I were at home this year I would suggest that we renew an old folk-tradition on the *Seder* night, the tradition of Elijah's cup. We should set aside a whole table in the dining-room, set the same as the other tables, but with no one sitting at it. This would be the table for all the thousands and tens of thousands of people whose personal and national freedom has been crushed by the Nazis, while our very existence depends on their liberation and their joining us.

On the eve of the festival of freedom we, in the camp that is fighting for freedom, can have no rest because of the thought that we, too, are not pure; for the air is not clean of oppression and slavery in our own camp, for whose victory we fight. Nevertheless, we believe that the freedom of the individual and the nation will be the cornerstones of the post-war world.

May 1, 1942

Another holiday. Another day in the sad chain of holidays that I have celebrated away from home. How many are they already? Once I used to keep count of them, but now I have lost track. . . .

The first of May, 1942. A milestone. Last year I sat in a foxhole at Tobruk; there was a dust-storm raging around us and the cannon thundered. I wrote you a letter in honor of the holiday then, too. I think that that letter never reached you. It's a year since then. Then I still carried with me a little of the naivité that I had brought with me to the army. I wrote then that it was impossible that the world should go through such horrible agonies for nothing. At the end of all this a new world must surely arise, a new world in which there will be a brotherhood of nations and in which the life of our children will be different and more beautiful. It's a year since I wrote that. With a desperate grimness I look about me and seek for signs

of the new world that must arise from these ruins, and I do not find them. As for us, the Jews—what can we expect in that world?

Now for more prosaic things—the heat is terrible here today! Sometimes I simply feel that we won't be able to bear it for many more days. I have experienced the heat south of the Dead Sea, but that was child's play compared with the hot winds that we get here. The heat blows at us as if we were standing near an open furnace. In a tent that is closed against the sun you can't touch an object that is made of metal. It's no wonder that we all long to get out of this—even if it's to the front....

May 8, 1942

I have to stop writing now because of the awful heat. Towards morning, at about three-thirty, I'll go on with the letter. I am sitting here drenched in perspiration, twisting about so that my wet hand won't touch the paper as I write on it and my perspiration won't drop all over it, but I don't seem to be succeeding.

I'll stop now. Good night!

The guards awoke me a half hour later. It's nice and cool now.

Now I'll tell you something, within permissible limits, about the others here and myself. (I have been warned that I must keep to the censor's rules). First of all B. has been appointed as our sergeant-major and that is quite an achievement, an important step forward for our unit. This is the first Jewish unit that is completely Jewish. A few days ago the last non-Jewish officer left us. It's true that an English Jew was sent in his place, but nevertheless he *is* a Jew and he is studying Hebrew eagerly. A., from Kfar Giladi, is captain.

The day before yesterday we had a party for one half of the unit that is leaving us to form a unit by itself. We had the

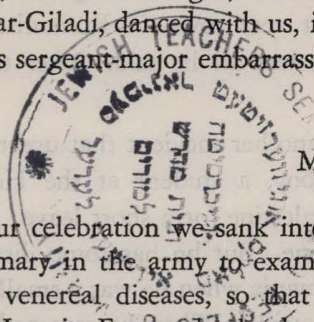
party out-of-doors. The boys gathered some palm-leaves and decorated the trucks with them and it looked as if we were in a little forest. All the soldiers sat in a large circle around a bon-fire—two days ago it was *Lag B'omer*—and the farewell party tied up with the holiday. It was a fine and inspiring evening and, at the end of it, a humorous piece was read. Among other things the feuilleton was directed at a Palestinian officer who is going with the new unit and who is hated by everyone. The poor fellow took quite a beating in it. It was the best possible farewell present that we could have given them. This may lead the officer to mend his ways.

In the meantime a large group of comrades from the *Kibutz* has turned up here. They are mostly from the newer settlements: Rvivim, Gesher, Hulata, Tzfon-Yam-Hamelach, etc. On Saturday evening all the members of the *Kibutz,* both old and new, assembled for a discussion. We sat in the dark, for there was no lamp in the tent. Outside there was a dust-storm raging and the tent creaked and trembled. We talked about the army and about home. We would like a group of us to carry the burden of Hebrew culture in the unit. This was a very interesting discussion between two "generations" of soldiers, between the "veterans" that have been here for over a year and a half, and the new ones who have recently come from Palestine and the *Kibutz.* Afterwards we sat in the dark and sang. So you see, we have changed our station and the men have been changed, but our homesickness is still the same, stronger than ever, and it is accompanied by a feeling of dread and fear of what is in store for the country.

May 22, 1942

This is the second *Shevuot* that I have spent in the army. Did you celebrate the Festival of the First Fruits at Naan? We wondered for a long while about how we would celebrate it here—for how can we bring the first fruits of the season in the

desert? We whitewashed our dining-room—the large tent—and decorated it with greens that we had brought from a nearby town. In the center we hung an inscription: "Those who sow with tears will reap in gladness." We read the passages in the *Agada** that relate to the holiday and someone played the flute while we sang in chorus. It looked as if this was a party in the *Kibutz,* instead of a party of soldiers. At the end there was a farewell speech by the commanding officer who is going on a short leave. He said some very moving things, about his feelings among us on this holiday and about how proud he was to be with us. At the end we broke into a *Hora;*† just the way we do at home. Outside, in the moonlight, we formed a circle and even A., from Kfar-Giladi, danced with us, in spite of the fact that his position as sergeant-major embarrasses him not a little.



May 23, 1942

The day after our celebration we sank into our stale routine again. It is customary in the army to examine the men from time to time for venereal diseases, so that they won't infect their comrades. Here in Egypt, the land of whoredom, it is particularly important. It is, of course, most necessary. But may the gods of military health forgive me if I speak heresy at this time. They lead a long line of soldiers into the captain's tent, order them to undress, and the medical officer examines each soldier to see if his organs show any symptoms of disease. But this is done so cynically and offensively! I have become accustomed to many unpleasant things in army life—but the way in which people are examined for sexual diseases! It's a strange and revolting world. The holiday feeling that I carried with me from yesterday disappeared entirely.

I want to tell you about some of my impressions of the last few days. One day we received some printed matter on the

* *Agada:* Homiletic-didactic element in the Talmud.
† See footnote on p. 63.

horrors that are being inflicted on our Jewish brothers of Rumania. There was a description there, among many other horrible scenes, of a procession of Jews who were being led to their death. An elderly woman loses her spectacles in all the pushing and confusion. The officer bends down, picks up her spectacles, gives them back to her and then continues to lead her to her death. A horrible scene. One of our comrades, a former resident of Jerusalem, was sitting beside me. He was exiled in Russia, was imprisoned in Siberia as a Zionist and also went through a great deal in Palestine. He was reading the same material with me and his lips trembled: "I have an old mother in that very town in Rumania. And she wears glasses, too." That was all he said. After that we could not speak any more.

And there was another incident that upset me. In our unit there is a gifted boy, a student at the Hebrew University. He went back to Palestine for a short leave. He has no family there and lives alone. But he has some distant relative. His parents died in Rumania when he was a small child and he was brought up by his uncle. When he returned from his leave I was startled at the way he looked. "What's wrong with you?" I asked him and he told me. When he was on leave he went to visit his relative, opened the door and found no one at home. Suddenly he noticed the furniture that had belonged to his uncle in Rumania, furniture that he knew from his childhood, for he had grown up with it. He looked at it with astonishment—perhaps he was mistaken. And then he saw a bronze horse on the table. When he was a child he used to play with the horse and he had bored a hole in its belly. He seized the horse, looked at it and found that very hole in its belly. In the meantime his relative returned and he learned from him that it was so, the furniture had just arrived from Turkey by boat. But his uncle, his aunt and their two children had not

arrived. They had drowned with the "Struma."* This was the last of his family and he had been waiting for them all these years, hoping that he might make his home with them. . . .

I have been taking a course in mechanics for the last month. Many of us here would like to perfect ourselves in some skill like this. We are dreaming of setting up a Jewish tank unit.

June 8, 1942

After the ten days at home I have returned with a feeling of depression: the dread of what will come. It's hard to leave home with the feeling that you are leaving it in danger and that you will be far away on the day of trial.

June 9, 1942

Today the dust-storm died down and we arranged an evening of record-playing in the library room. From time to time we borrow a gramophone from our commanding officer who has a fine selection of records.

Yesterday evening we engaged in some mischievous pranks. We nearly suffocated with laughter. There was an awful dust-storm and our tent collapsed, all covered with dust and sand. This is not unusual in the desert and there is nothing funny about it. We covered our trench with a side of the tent and lay down to sleep. Then we discovered that a whole army of mice had been startled in their nests and as they could not find a place for themselves they began to run up and down our blankets. This is quite usual, too, and nothing to provoke any

* The S.S. Struma arrived in Palestine early in 1942 with a cargo of 760 refugees from Rumania. Ordered by the Palestine government to return to its port of embarkation, it struck a mine in the Sea of Marmora and sank with all but one of its passengers.

laughter. Mice and fleas are our constant companions here. But in the meantime it turned out that one of the boys, a grown man and the father of a little girl, a quiet fellow, is terrified of rats. He ran outside, as frightened as a child. We calmed him down by telling him that they had gone away and he went back to bed, half-naked. On his sheet there was a nice little mouse, dancing around. So he rushed outside again. But we made fun of him, a grown man who had gone through the siege of Tobruk with honor, who had known the taste of dive-bombings frightened by the sight of a mouse! He became ashamed and returned to the tent. Then one of our ring-leaders threw a stone on his bed and frightened him again. Finally, after we had laughed until there were tears in our eyes, he barricaded himself behind his blankets, armed himself with a lamp and with the handle of a hoe and lay there waiting for the mice. As soon as they appeared, dancing on the floor beside him, he would get frightened and strike out at them with his handle. We went on throwing little stones toward him in the dark to startle him. This went on until after midnight, with shouts of laughter. After the noise died down I saw a whole company of mice dancing together in the light of the lamp. It was pretty to see. Finally we fell asleep and the mice climbed on to our beds without disturbing us.

June 12, 1942

I have been going through some military drill. A fresh encounter with guns and bombs. It is good to feel that you can master them. Yesterday we set up our tent in a *wadi.* The stakes don't stick in the rocks and the heat was devouring. We worked and toiled at it and finally succeeded in setting it up. Today there was a dust-storm and the tent broke down. So we had to sweat to put it up again.

June 15, 1942

I just returned to camp, slightly ill. The medical officer says it is sunstroke. The boys fixed up my tent and brought me food and refused to let me do anything at all. Such signs of friendship are precious at moments like these.

Now in the evening, the heat has decreased suddenly and it is pleasant outside. But all day long I have been thinking of one thing: stretching out on the floor of our room at Naan and sleeping for a whole week. My fatigue is awful. The heat is simply unbearable. Everybody is anxious to get out of here and to find some refuge from the heat, even those who have never been at the front and are afraid to face it. Sometimes, in the middle of the day you think: No! This can't be borne. But then there is a cool evening and you become soothed a little.

Today we were ordered to put on our gas-masks. An alarm was given at a certain time. Although it's not difficult to put on a gas-mask, it's not easy to do in this blazing heat. You become all covered with perspiration. It was strange to see our canteen full of figures in gas-masks.

In one corner sat a very young boy and wrote a letter. May he forgive me, but I leaned over and peeked at the first line: "Dearest Rachel!" A letter to a girl. And as time went on and the order to leave was not given, he went on writing his letter to his girl, leaning over it in his gas-mask. This is the way in which love-letters are written in our generation. What poet ever thought of that? Can you think of anything more incongruous than this picture of a love letter being written by a boy wearing a gas-mask? As time went on, I borrowed a book from one of the boys and looked at it: "The Poems of Rachel." And I sat down to read them, wearing my gas-mask. I have no quarrel with those gas-masks. I remember one morning at Tobruk, when one of the comrades tapped me on the shoulder and awakened me with a shout: "Gas!" How we

jumped into our masks then. And how terrible it was to see one of the comrades who did not have his gas-mask with him. So I won't blaspheme against it. Ours is the generation of the tank and the gas-mask.

Let me turn to another subject. We are beginning to create a good atmosphere in the unit again, in spite of the fact that most of the old-timers have been scattered. Some of them have returned to the camp at Sarafand. Some of them are in Palestine and others are at the front. Our ties of two years of friendship have been unravelled. But with a certain amount of effort, we are beginning to spin them again.

This week all the signalmen met with their officer. It was a very fine discussion. There was a moment when I felt back at home, in one of our settlements. We reviewed some of the urgent problems of our life here. Many of us spoke, and our major, too. When I see the men in our group I feel that it is possible to create a way of life in our Jewish units that will be different from what is usually accepted in the army. Our English commanding officer said that he, too, was proud of us.

On the next day, at our Sabbath gathering, we discussed the question of a newspaper for the unit. Eleven issues have come out already. We read passages from some of them and then a discussion began in which many participated.

When I think of what is going on now on the different fronts, I realize keenly how necessary it is for us to be strong and fortified in this uncertain world. If only you knew how sad the heart of a Jewish soldier can be, with the taste of two years of retreating in his mouth; if you knew how he feels when he hears about the Russian front, or about a thousand planes over Germany, or the counter-attack in Libya. Even though the scales are not yet decided in Libya, and no one can know what will develop there, you feel that our strength is growing and that we are learning how to use it, so that we may begin an attack against the enemy. This feeling is like a precious omen. Or perhaps it is the expression of something that is happening below the level of consciousness. You want

to seize upon anything that promises victory and the end of all this. For we are tired, very tired. Quite simply—a year and a half in strange countries, a year and a half of the desert, of distance and remoteness from home. If only we could see that the end is near, or even far, new courage would spring up in us.

June 16, 1942

The Jewish officers in our unit have been moved elsewhere and British officers have come in their place. There were days when we were proud of the fact that we were an all-Jewish unit, and now it has changed. But, in an order of the day we were informed that we had permission to wear "Palestine" on our uniforms. We had fought for this a long time. Now it is a fact.

The heat got worse today. It's more than a human being can bear. Many of the boys went to a nearby town on the banks of the Nile. There they rented a room in a filthy little hotel and lay all day on the cool cement floor. I undressed in the tent here and tied a wet towel to my back. An original method for writing letters home.

June 17, 1942

Yesterday the heat became too much for me and I had to stop writing. Today it's a little better. The heat has decreased, but there is a dust-storm on. The air is dark and heavy.

Today I listened to the "Soldier's Corner" program from Jerusalem and I enjoyed it more than I usually do. Such is the power of children. A choir from a school in Jerusalem was on the air. The children sang children's songs and the boys listened so eagerly, with happy expressions on their faces. We all sang together with the children. That was a wonderful and healing evening.

June 22, 1942

Bad news: *Tobruk has fallen.* The heart is oppressed. There is something personal for me in this loss. It is as if I felt it on my own flesh. For this place had become a kind of symbol of resistance to the storm. For me, too, personally, Tobruk was a testing-place. There I put myself, my nerves and everything that is precious to me, to the test, and it left its mark on me for years to come. It may be that I shall have to face experiences more difficult than the months of siege at Tobruk. But this was a kind of first love experience for me. There I first met with death; there death embraced me. In its shadow I suffered, laughed, wept and dreamed of home. There I was seized with a great fear for my home, for the country, for all of you. And now the city has fallen. Tomorrow it will be a year since I left it in an Australian destroyer.

Yesterday, on the Jerusalem radio, we listened to Moshe Shertok's call to the Jewish community.* Listening to his grave apprehensions, thoughts arose in my mind concerning what is in store for the community and how it will face what must come upon it. I am afraid to express what I have been thinking . . .

There are times when I analyze my own feelings, my weaknesses and my longings and I am overcome with shame. For what are my longings as against one's role in all this and the burden that you are bearing on your weak shoulders together with so many others? There are moments when you rise above the pettiness of your life, you are purified and you want only to sacrifice yourself for your people. There are moments that illuminate our "Vale of Tears" and show you what is the essence of our life. For what are our little sufferings in the great sea of suffering in the world in which the fate of our

* Head of the political department of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem.

children and their little brothers in the dark alleys of the Polish ghettos will be decided? As I was listening to M. S. I could not help imagining the expression on the faces of the regular café clients in Tel-Aviv. There, doubtless, they sat fashionably groomed, eager for pleasure, but in their eyes there was nothing but cynicism. It is awful when you consider the fate of a people and a community that lacks the binding framework of a state.

There is a controversy going on in our camp now. One of the boys wrote an article in our newspaper urging the immediate setting up of a Jewish tank unit. Some of the boys are dreaming of it. On the other hand, others say that we were mobilized as workers and drivers and not as combat-soldiers. There is an inner *Galut,** too, and it resists the Zionism of our active group.

July 1, 1942

Yesterday there was a dust-storm the like of which I have never seen before. In a few moments most of the tents had collapsed on the ground and the camp was lost in a terrific darkness. Our tent stood up, however. I went outside and tried to tighten the ropes on it, despite the dust in my face; as I was doing this sparks flew from under my fingers. Afterwards this was explained to me: the air was charged with electricity, which was released when the fingers came into contact with the rope.

After some moments the storm subsided and then a quiet rain of dust came down, as fine as cement-dust. As it grew lighter we could still hear the storm in the distance and we could see great columns of dust, as tall as five-story houses, moving about like giants in the desert. All of us looked like the devil. This morning we awoke with our eyes swollen and our mouths full of dust.

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* See footnote on p. 16.

July 15, 1942

I'm still complaining: it's hot, hot! It is night-time now, and I am sitting up next to the lamp, half-naked, with nothing on but my underpants and a wet towel on my back and I am covered with rivulets of perspiration. All day long we simply melt in the heat. The only refuge from this heat is in work. But in the evening, when you are free, you find no rest from it. There are still three or four months of heat like this in store for us. . . .

July 22, 1942

In the "diary" of one of our settlements I read a conversation between A. and the little children at school. I was very impressed by it and I am copying it out for you:

"Yesterday morning, after a meeting of the *Kibutz* concerning matters of security, we had a discussion at the school. We told the children that at first we hesitated to tell them that the Germans have a great many weapons and that they have pushed the English back and conquered a part of Egypt. We did not know if they, the children, could help us.

"I told them about the wars of Gideon and his victories. His men were few, but they were brave, devoted and fearless. That is why they conquered the Midianites who were more numerous, but more cowardly and fearful.

"The children asked that they be allowed to drill and that they should be taught how to use guns and to shoot well. When they were told that we did not have many guns and that the guns we have are large and heavy for them, they said that they must be trained now, or they would not be accustomed to it when they are older.

"We talked about the vacation. Then there will be more time for them to get used to many things—like getting up

quickly in the morning, helping their parents, and perhaps even fighting. The discussion was tense; we ended by deciding to have them exercise in getting up quickly, aiming stones at a target, etc. We would also teach them how to overcome heat and thirst.

"When we began to disperse, Michael (one of the children), remained and said: 'I'll tell you something. Even if I have to fight with a German boy who is bigger and stronger than I am, I'll fight, no matter what happens, and if I'll die or get wounded I don't care. . . .! I'll die and I'll be a hero; I don't want to be a coward. That would be awful.' "

This encouraged me, despite the painful significance of the story. . . .

August 3, 1942

Yesterday it was two years since I swore allegiance to the king. It is two years, and the end is not yet in sight. If those devils get some oil, the war will go on for years.

This week the comrade from Kfar-Giladi is leaving us. A few months ago he sent in his resignation as an officer. I wrote you about him in one of my letters. Being an officer was a burden for him—after all he was a member of a *Kibutz.* His departure leaves a sense of oppression in the heart. He will probably return to the army as a private in a short while.

August 7, 1942

Friday. I have been cleaning up in honor of the Sabbath. I have polished my shoes, shaved, showered and changed my clothes. Little pleasures, that are a preparation for the Sabbath. But the soul is not really ready for the day. On Friday evening the feeling of homesickness becomes overpowering. When will the end come, so that we can return to our homes

and children? The end seems even farther off than it was. Those devils are getting close to the Caucasus, and if they reach the oil wells, the war will go on for years. In the meantime days and weeks and months pass. We are again and again dispersed and separated to different corners of the desert. New faces and new people again. This Friday evening we are having a farewell party. Tomorrow the tent will be taken down and the day after these men will be in different parts of the front, at different ends of the Middle East. Such is our life. We are torn from our families and children, from our home and country and the ties of friendship that we weave are broken over and over again. You have to find new friends and weave a new web of friendship and when this is done you have to go forth again on your wanderings. . . .

Now I must stop and go to the farewell party. There will be three hundred men attending. Perhaps it will succeed in soothing our sense of homesickness.

August 12, 1942

I have just returned from a trip that took three days. One morning I set out with some other good comrades. We went to the Sudanese border by an express train to see the great dams of the Nile river. When the Nile overflows the gates of the dams are locked—there are 180 large gates there—and the waters of the Nile are gathered into a tremendous pond between the mountains. It contains milliards of square meters of water. Throughout the year, the gates are opened according to the need of the season and the surplus water that is collected during the rising of the Nile is used when it is low. I think I've already told you that the whole of Egypt is watered by the canals of the Nile river.

We travelled by express train, without tickets, of course. Consequently we travelled second-class, instead of third-class.

We found a dining-room there in which there was a young Greek girl, a blonde beauty. We sat in a corner and sang and made jokes, but anyone could see that each one of us was moved at the sight of the girl. She reminded us that other kinds of life are possible, that there are other places in the world and that there is meaning to a man's life in his own home. . . .

At the Egyptian border we hired a guide and set out in an ancient car to visit the antiquities in the neighborhood. Two thousand and five hundred years ago there was a colony of Jewish soldiers in this place. One of the ancient kings of Egypt asked them to settle there in order to defend the Egyptian border against the Nubians who used, from time to time, to attack the lands of Upper Egypt. The Jewish settlements defended the Egyptian lands. This was discovered by scholars and excavators. Our Egyptian guide showed us the remains of Jewish temples. He also showed us a place along the Nile where priests used to throw a maiden yearly as a sacrifice to appease the wrath of the rising river. We saw the quarries from which stones were carried thirty meters to be carved as statues. Then there are the wonderful dams everywhere. We sailed about in a little boat and anchored at the shores of little islands that were flowering gardens. We came to a Nubian settlement where little naked children dove into the water and swam alongside the boat to catch the pennies that were thrown at them. We visited the Nubian community. It is said that they do not know of stealing. It is also rumored that when a tourist visits them as a guest they offer him everything; the father of the house even offers his daughter to the guest for that night. How true this is I don't know.

After travelling down the Nile for a day we came to our destination: Kum-Umbo. This is an estate of two hundred thousand irrigated dunams, stretching out over eighteen enormous farms. This enterprise was set up by Jewish millionaires, and fifty thousand people make their living from it. Of course they are all Egyptians and only the management is Jewish. We were received like princes. We saw the water-works

that makes the height of the river rise or fall. The land is higher than the Nile here. The company set up enormous steam pumps that generate nearly two million cubes of water every twenty-four hours. Tens of thousands of dunams of sugar-cane are grown here. There are several sugar factories. The tracks of a small railway run through the estate. A French agricultural expert accompanied us about the plantation and explained things to us. After that we were invited to lunch at the company hotel. It was a royal meal. We marvelled at everything we saw, but our hearts were sad. This is how Jewish money is invested. How much could be accomplished with this money in our country. . . . The water works cost the company about two million pounds. At night we returned to our lonely camp. When we arrived we were told that Fish, a member of the unit had been killed in an air attack. He was always gay and cheerful and his songs and his music always raised our spirits.

September 12, 1942

The eve of the New Year. Three hundred guests came to our dining-room this evening. Besides the men in our unit there were Jewish soldiers from South Africa, big and simple-hearted as only Jews from Lithuania can be*; there was also a group of Palestinians from the navy, mostly from Haifa, in their white sailors' uniforms. They came from afar, from one of the Mediterranean ports, to celebrate the holiday. There were also some women from the services, among them some old-timers from our settlements. One of the men, a veteran from Ain-Harod who was in the Jewish Legion in the first world war, was pleasantly surprised to meet a woman comrade from his settlement. Both of them have sons in our defense forces. L., too, from Ain-Harod, one of the first pioneers of

* Most South African Jews are either immigrants from Lithuania or their descendants.

pre-world-war days, came to visit us for the holidays. Some of the boys from the Commando units, our Partisans, came, too, with a heroic record—and many doubts—behind them. There were some English Jews from the engineers, and some Jewish soldiers from the hospitals in the neighborhood as well as some boys from the Air Corps. Our dining-room was too small for all these people. Tables were set outside in the open air. The food was served on paper plates. It was like *Seder* night at home. On one wall of the dining-room hung a verse from a poem by Rachel: "Let us, with gaiety and heads held high, learn to breathe the air of mountain-peaks." However, there was not a great deal of gaiety in the program arranged for the evening. Uppermost at this celebration was our anguish at the suffering of European Jews and our fears for the fate of Palestine. One of the girls in the service lit the Sabbath candles. There was a speech and some readings from the section of the Pentateuch that is recited at the New Year. We sang together and the meal began. At the end of the meal everyone moved to the building where the cars are kept to see the playlet that was put on. Now people are beginning to dance. In the dining-room a group of comrades are sitting in the dark, singing, while one of them plays on a mouth organ. . . .

# DESERT VICTORY

## DESERT VICTORY

October 22, 1942

I am writing you from the road—into the unknown. It may be that there will be an interruption of about two weeks in my letters. Do not be annoyed by this pause. It will not be my fault. *Today we are going to the front.*

The company received this news well. The commanding officer had us appear for drill at noon and notified us that we were going out on active service. We will receive fresh supplies for the journey. The boys rejoiced at this, and the young ones were particularly noisy, partly because they wanted to hide the other feelings they might have had and partly out of youthful naivité and love of adventure. We the veterans, who have already experienced the front, did not rejoice, although we received the news earnestly. Now, we thought, the value of friendship will become truly precious again. Old friends who had been together at the front shook each other's hands and in this mute hand-shake there was a kind of promise that our friendship would stand firm and that the weak would find strong hands and shoulders to help them in their hour of trial. We clinked glasses and drank to friendship, and eyes looked into the eyes of friends and there was a warmth about the heart. The rookies stood around and enjoyed the sight of the veterans and their reaction to the news.

Something else shed a kind of radiance upon the atmosphere. Not a few of the boys among us have army papers marked B or C, with regard to the state of their health. It is customary to leave these soldiers behind when it is time to go to the front. But these comrades, and some of them are past middle age,

were full of resentment at this. They demanded permission to receive an additional health examination. When two English medical officers came to the unit for that purpose, they were amazed to see these boys fighting for their right to go to the front. They were deeply impressed by this and felt that they could not resist the pressure that was being put upon them by these soldiers.

We shall be leaving soon and we feel as though we will not fail in what we must do. For we are full of spirit for this battle. Can you imagine what it is like to be in an army that has suffered defeats for months? And now the first attack has roused a wave of enthusiasm among the ranks. The air seems to be full of approaching victory.

Something has happened at last. Perhaps I will meet again with the Jews in the Libyan Diaspora whom we left behind us. I shall always remember that lovely little town of Berci and the ancient Jew who gave me his moving sacred blessing. Perhaps it was this blessing that protected me during the months I was in the siege of Tobruk and at the front? When will I see them again?

October 23, 1942

This is the eve of the attack at El Alamein. These have been days of wandering and I feel as though I have been swallowed up by them. Only in the evening, when you curl up in your two army blankets and the wind whistles and the cold penetrates into your bones do you begin to think about the wonderful things that exist for you somewhere, so far away. You begin to think of your room, of your wife and children and of the winter winds that howl and break against thick walls. All this seems so far away, almost like a fairy-tale. But during the day all one can think of is the noise of trucks, the anxieties of work, etc.—you are absorbed in them and forget everything else.

It is two years now since I left home for the first time. Two long years! And now again, like two years ago, we are going out to the front; this time with no illusions. This time everything is clear to me in advance. Perhaps for this very reason, because all this is so clear to us, veterans—the bonds of friendship between us seem strengthened. We often sit together and sing together and drink beer until everything seems a little brighter and gayer. . . .

Yesterday I sat together with X. and we had a farewell talk. He is going to join another unit. We sat in semi-darkness and talked at great length. He told me about his longing for his child. I understood it so well, especially on the day when we have to go out to the front. After that we spoke at some length about ties with the *Kibutz* and both of us fell into a sad mood. . . .

But why should I make you sad now? It may be that days will pass and you will not receive any letters from me and you will worry about your good-for-nothing. But this time I feel full of hope that we will beat them down. It is a good feeling to know that you are taking part in driving the enemy back from the gates of your country. If only you knew how this exhilarates me. Tomorrow it begins. But in the meantime many of our best comrades have been sent to other units. I am the only one remaining of the group that came together from Tobruk. There is something saddening about this, particularly on the eve of the attack.

The sun has set and the world is sunk in darkness. I'll finish now. I don't know when I'll be able to write again—and perhaps not at all. This is a hallowed moment. In another three and a half hours the attack will begin and my own fate may be decided one way or another. In the shadow of death that is hovering over the very hills on the horizon that we may conquer by tomorrow the heart clings to its dear ones, to its dear and distant home. . . .

November 5, 1942

Do you know my daughter, where I am writing you from? From Germany! Do not be surprised at this! But this is not really Germany! Of course the proud Germans are always announcing that every tract of land that they conquer becomes Germany! I am writing to you from land that was under the Germans only a few days ago—and now it is *ours!*

We are pursuing the German armies who are fleeing before us. It is good that way, my daughter. We have pushed them far away from the place where they threatened our country. That danger is over now. But the job is not finished yet, my child. There is still a great deal of suffering in store for us before the day of victory. But here, in Africa, we have given them a real blow. If only you could see the German tanks all burned and their planes that didn't even manage to get into the air, you would be as happy as I am. And for this happiness we have to pay the price of longing—so long as our country is safe and our people are freed and redeemed . . . it doesn't matter, does it, my daughter?

If only you could see the German prisoners—too numerous to count. There are flocks and flocks of them. They are no longer proud and arrogant as they were. They feel lower than the lowest now. Yes, my daughter, war is a terrible and horrible thing. Horrible and degrading! But we did not wish for it. We did not start it. We went out to war so that our children, when they grow up, will not have to go through this horror a second time. We went out to war in order to defend our country and our work, to free our people from the dreadful fate which the cursed Nazis have forced upon them.

Yes, our hearts are pounding with the joy of victory. We are attacking them on one side and our American friends are attacking from the other. And after we clean Africa up we will go on and fight them in their own country, until we wipe out

this Nazi-Fascist plague completely. Then, my daughter, we will go home again. When I return we will meet near the dining-room and you will say to me: "Really, father, I missed you so much. But never mind, it was worth having all that longing so that we might share this moment." Isn't that true, my daughter?

November 5, 1942

I have heard that my friend Tate, the New Zealander, is among the dead. I can't rid myself of this thought. Jim, the old soldier, wept when he told me about Tate's death. His face, he said, was calm and he was smiling in the wonderful way he had when he was alive. His body was all full of holes; only his face was untouched.

Do you remember what I wrote you about that place in the mountains where the echo answered every cry seven times? Once I went there with Tate and a Bedouin friend told me this story: "Long ago, in this very place was the gateway to Allah the good and the merciful. It was not difficult to come before Allah the good. Then one day a sad and miserable woman came to Allah, because a wicked and cruel man had robbed her of her property. She came to him wounded and bleeding, and her wailing shook the seven heavens. Directly behind her came the plunderer himself, riding on a white ass. And Allah was angry that the gate was open to every wicked man that wanted to enter and He commanded His angel to close the gate and to put seven locks upon it. Now when a man comes to the gateway and cries, Allah!, the cry breaks upon the seven locks and returns to its owner." . . . I told this story to Tate and I asked him if he had a girl whose name he wanted to call. He smiled shyly and said, yes, he had a name that was dear to him, but here, it seemed to him, one should only call on the name of God. He was afraid that he might pollute the sanctity of that savage Bedouin place. That is the way he was.

November 8, 1942

Dearest daughter,

I want to tell you about a good friend of mine who was killed in battle a little while ago.

Before I came here, when I was in a region closer to Palestine, I became friends with another soldier, a New Zealander. His name was Tate. He was a kind and fine boy. He was not a Jew and he did not know any Hebrew. He came from a distant country, from an island called New Zealand. We spent some time together and became friends. One day Tate left for another place with his company. His captain promised him that he would spend some time in Palestine. He wanted to see Palestine very much. He knew you and Ron and Giura from the stories that I used to tell him about you. He asked me to give him your pictures. When we parted I gave him your address. I wrote to Naan then, too, and asked them to write me when he visited there. But I understand that he did not go to Palestine.

Some time after his departure I received a package from New Zealand full of all kinds of good things. Do you remember the box of chocolates that I sent you? That came from the same package. Together with this gift there was a lovely letter from Tate's mother; her name is Eleanora Tate. The letter was written in English. This package was sent to me in honor of Christmas, after her son wrote home about his friendship with me—and then, suddenly I heard the news of his death. I met a soldier who belonged to Tate's company and he told me that Tate had been killed in battle some time ago. He was killed by the machine-gun of a German plane.

If only you had known him! How good he was, how gentle and pure. So it is, my daughter. Many, many wonderful people are killed in this war. But at the end we are bound to win!

The price we pay for freedom is dear, but woe to us if we fail to win. That day will come, my child, the day of victory. It will come, although it seems far off.

November 10, 1942

Do you remember how everyone laughed at me when I said that we would beat the enemy yet, down to the ground? And now we are girding up our loins and pursuing them and they, the celebrated Germans, are being brought in in flocks, exhausted and bewildered and as crushed as sheep. One of our soldiers captures tens of theirs. Where then is their heroism? What about all the legends of their military exploits? All about us, on the battlefields are the dead bodies of Germans and Italians that are still unburied. The fields are sown with crosses everywhere. Do you know what is in our hearts as we wander about on what used to be enemy territory? Our hearts are full of joy all the time. We exult like children at the sight of German tanks that have been burned and smashed. But this is not enough. We are still advancing. Enemy soldiers seem to turn up on every side, making for the roads, hungry, depressed and asking to be captured.

Yesterday we camped on a battle-field. On every side we saw cars, cannons and machine-gun posts that had been burned. I set up my little tent alongside my car, put my blanket inside and afterwards I took out my radio, connected it to the battery in the car and listened to the "Voice of Jerusalem." Hurrah! The Americans have invaded North Africa! From now on they will be advancing toward us. Great days have come. We shall cleanse all of Africa of this filth! The dread of destruction will no longer hover over our country. If you could look at the sky and see the hundreds of planes flying forward, our planes, you, too, would be fortified and encouraged. Our strength has grown and increased. The days of Tobruk are gone forever,

when tens and hundreds of planes used to bomb us and not one of ours dared to come out against them.

I want to keep my promise. I promised that the next time I would come home on leave it would be from Tripoli. The Americans may get there before us. But, in any case, our fears for our home are lifted and we have blazed the way to victory. . . .

Yesterday I listened to the radio and heard the news from London. It is strange to listen to the radio from a battlefield. Near my car is a grave and the mound over it is still moist. On the board that is stuck into the mound is a cross and a German helmet. A Nazi went to his rest here—and near his grave sits a Jewish boy and listens to the radio from London without fear of the Gestapo—isn't it weird?

You write about the scarcity of working hands and you ask, by the way, if it would be possible to let some soldiers go, and me among them, for the sowing, for the season is "urgent." . . . Don't you know that here, too, the "season" is "urgent"? For we are busy with sowing today, too. If only there were ten thousand of our boys in the western desert today! It will no longer be easy for them to conceal our share in this. The Jewish motor units have gained praise of all kinds and on the day of reckoning it will be impossible for them to wipe it out.

There were casualties in two motor units. In a third, a Jewish captain rode over a mine in his machine and his fate is not yet known. One of our drivers also rode over a mine, but he managed to jump off the truck that was loaded with inflammable stuff and that went up in flames immediately. Some of our boys were attacked by enemy planes but managed to get through their initial ordeal by fire safely. Some of them had nervous upsets. But most of them came through all right. We have a young boy of eighteen with us who comes from Turkey. Suddenly he announced that he wanted to go home. As this was not granted he started a hunger-strike. He did not eat for three days. Today I took care of him, talked to him and won his confidence. I gave him a clean pair of socks and he washed his feet and

changed his socks; I brought him a can of pears and he ate with me and was soothed for the time being. I hope that he will get better.

The membership of the unit is quite new now. In the evenings, or at difficult moments, you sometimes long for good friends with whom you shared difficult times. They are all scattered now. Eventually I shall probably make new ties with these comrades, only now, in the meantime, there is no one with whom I can really talk.

November 11, 1942

Tomorrow I am going out in my car to look for Tate's grave. When I find it I shall set up a stone for him. When I have done this I'll write to the New Zealand High Command to ask for his mother's address. I'll write to her and send her a picture of her dear son's grave. Tomorrow I shall go out to perform this sad duty. His body is buried close to one of the bridges in the neighborhood. His comrades have probably set up a cross and an inscription for him in the meantime.

November 12, 1942

Our awe of German strength is all gone. They are so miserable as prisoners of war. Their arrogance is vanished. When they are faced with force which matches their own and is armed as they are, the legend of the "undefeated" German army is pricked like a bubble.

And we are gulping this joy in mouthfuls. It is good to see the swastika smashed and broken. In our cars marked with the Star of David we pass them and go on. The taste of revenge is sweet! It compensates for all the suffering and the difficulties.

We discovered something new in the letters of the Germans that have come into our possession in such abundance. The

boys who read German translate them for us. It seems that in most of the letters there is a tone of impatience with regard to the end of the war. The German soldier is tired. We read the letter of a German soldier on the Russian front to his brother in Africa. The man makes fun of his brother who is broiling in the tropical sun, but at the same time he complains of the Russian cold. We also found some proclamations in Arabic at El Alamein, signed by the Mufti of Jerusalem,* calling upon the Arabs in Palestine to welcome the Germans who are to conquer the country in the next few days.

November 13, 1942

This was a sad evening. V., my dear V., was wounded and has lost his leg. He is in a hospital now with an amputated leg. And H. Zeevi was killed. The war is not a joke. You think that you are ready for anything, but when tragedy comes close to you and visits your friends, sorrow devours you.

I wandered about looking for Tate's grave for many hours and I could not find it. There are a great many graves near the big bridge which was bombed and shattered, but all of them are without either a cross or any other mark. There is only a heap of stones on the mound and a steel helmet on it. As a result of this search I discovered something disgusting and horrible that the Germans did. I should not have believed it if I had not seen it with my own eyes. The Nazis dug up the crosses from the graves of Allied soldiers, painted them over and used them for their own graves. This was discovered by some of the boys who noticed the names of British casualties beneath the fresh paint on the German crosses. Who knows, perhaps

* The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Emin El Husseini, appointed by the British government in 1920 to the highest religious post in the country, was the leading figure in all anti-Jewish riots between the two World Wars. Long suspected of being an agent of the Axis powers, he arrived in Germany in 1941 after taking a leading part in the Nazi-inspired revolt in Iraq. He is now the commander of the so-called Arab Legion fighting with the German army.

this is what happened to Tate's grave. There is no limit to Nazi villainy. What would they not have been capable of if they had conquered Palestine? What could be worse than this desecration of soldiers' graves on the battlefield? One would expect even them not to molest the grave of a soldier who has passed beyond the judgment of man. This will teach us another lesson about our enemies. . . .

It was in vain, then, that I searched for a bag of cement for his tombstone. My dear Tate, the gentle, pure-hearted lad from New Zealand has been added to the long line of unknown soldiers. I feel a deep need to set up a memorial to him. But I would only be able to do this in my own language, a language foreign to him and his kinsmen. Tate was enthusiastic about our work in Palestine. I can remember his comments after reading some Zionist literature that I gave him. He said, then, "I cannot think of anything more worthwhile and admirable than the work that you are doing." This is how he was. But it is strange, I have forgotten his first name.

Please, look through my old letters and find his name there for me. Now you will understand why I am so sad this evening. If G. and Y. were here I should say to them, I am sad this evening, boys. They would sit beside me and would begin talking about one thing or another and so the sadness would pass. But they are far from here now. They are at the other end of the desert.

In their unit, too, one of the boys died in a strange way: They were driving at night and singing and they did not notice that a youngster had fallen off the truck. Three cars passed over his body and only the fourth one noticed it, but he was already completely crushed.

Well, I have written a great deal this time about the wounded and the killed and now I shall stop. Now young P. is playing on his cornet the tune called "The Flute" by David Z. —"There's a mysterious flute on the hills of Galilee with a

thousand notes." He's playing well. The notes are clear and sad and they cast a kind of pensiveness over the heart . . . It's difficult to write now.

November 27, 1942

Today I drove a long way in the officers' car. At first I rode with the captain, an acquaintance who came to visit us. After I had told him about Tate we went out to look for his grave. We wandered about for hours and found many graves without a name or a sign of any kind. Our supposition was correct then; the Germans did dig up the crosses. On the way I stopped two Senussi Arabs. I asked them where they were from. They were surprised to hear fluent Arabic from me. They said that they were from this neighborhood, from the village on the coast. I looked at them suspiciously, "What are you saying? This was a battle-front. It is two years now that there has been fighting going on here. How could a village survive this?" "Yes, sir," they said, "the villages 'went,' but we have remained here." On the way we stopped for a few moments near a German store-house that was guarded by South African Negro soldiers. We picked up a tin of tea and a little bag of rice and went on to the village. We examined the ground frequently to make sure that it was not sown with mines.

In the neighborhood of the coast we noticed a few stretches of cultivated ground in the ridges of the gullies. They were ploughed in the Arab fashion and sown with wheat and barley. Near the coast we noticed many animals, goats, chickens, donkeys and children. The women who saw the car coming vanished. I just glimpsed bright kerchiefs that fluttered in the sun and disappeared, as if swallowed up by the earth. When we came closer we discerned, in the *wadi,* among the rocks, the openings of caves. The whole village lives in the caves. Senussi Arabs emerged from them to greet us. At first they

seemed to be terrified, but when I greeted them with "Salaam Aleikum" their fear vanished. They took us into one cave and offered us some tea. We sat with them for quite a while and talked. They told us of how they were abused by the Italians and the Germans after the first occupation. The women of the village were carried off and violated by the soldiers. They murdered their wives with their own hands when they were returned to them, crushed and broken. When I heard all this I felt a great love for them. I felt them to be brothers in suffering. I admired their homes and marvelled at this desire to cling to the soil, even in the midst of this avalanche of fire. We left them in friendly fashion. We gave them some tea and some sugar and they asked us to take some chickens and eggs with us.

When I arrived at camp I found your letter and your parcel. The cakes and the apples were wonderful and many of the boys enjoyed them, too.

December 6, 1942

Yesterday we had a *Hanukah* party. It took place in a large machine-shed that was built by the Italians with a tarpaulin over it. There were a thousand of us from five of the motor units in the neighborhood. It was a very impressive gathering. At the end, as usual, a feuilleton was read and gusts of laughter swept the hall until quite late. It is good to see one's comrades laughing and it is good to know that we were able to bring this about and to give them some pleasure so that they could relax a little from the heavy strain that weighs upon them in army life. The rabbi, or military chaplain, was also present and he brought us some dreadful news of the Jews in Libya. He saw a sign near a road that said in Italian: "Jewish Group No. 1," and learned that the Nazis and the Fascists took all the Jewish males in Libya to the front as civilian road-builders.

No more than a few of them survived. He met the remaining few that had belonged to this unit and heard tales of horror from them. Most of the Jews of Berci, Derna, and Benghazi were hanged, shot or slaughtered. The remaining ones were dragged off. The aged man who had blessed me at Berci died shortly after our retreat; the young daughter of the Ben-Dusa family, whose guest I was, was carried off by the Italian army; the mother was raped by drunken Italians and was then stabbed to death and the rest of the family were taken to labor-battalions and no one knows how they met their death.

That is how it is, and we, in Palestine, what have we to complain about?

You write that you have learned how to hate. Yes, we must hate with our whole being. But to cultivate hatred, to live off nothing but hatred—nothing can be more terrible than this. The heart must be taught how to hate uncompromisingly, to hate profoundly, but to love at the same time. To love the good, to love man, to love our people. But there is no question of abstract hatred or abstract love. We must learn how to give everything we have, everything that is dear to you, the best of your life and your future in order to defeat the enemy and to save our people. This is how it must be. True hatred is nourished by love. One must be ready to go to one's death for the sake of life itself.

In your letter I read about the day of mourning at Naan. I am harassed by bitter thoughts concerning Palestine these last few days, but I have never felt the rightness of our life in the *Kibutz* as I do now that I am in the army. This is the way for us. There is no other. But we must have the strength to continue to bear this burden. When the day comes and ships bearing the remnants of our people cut across the seas, then only will the *Kibutz* be faced with the most sacred of its duties. But I believe that its latent powers and the fire of devotion that it possesses will help it to come through this test.

December 12, 1942

Do you know where I am writing you from? From an Italian ambulance that we captured. We thought of moving the office of our unit newspaper into it but tomorrow we are going out on a long journey again and we shall have to leave it behind in the desert. A pity.

This evening I boiled up a can of water and threw all of my underclothes into it. They boiled up nicely and I washed too in preparation for the long trip. It's good to lie down in bed when you're all clean. Nothing can feel better than this.

At dawn we'll be awakened by the firing of a machine-gun. Each morning we load an Italian machine-gun and fire a few rounds of ammunition into the air. It's a custom in all the sections of the unit.

Yesterday we drank some excellent Italian wine of which we had found a barrelful. Believe me, there's a need for this kind of thing these days. Montgomery, our general, gave the following order: "Boys! No more drinking. The canteens will stop selling beer and liquor. When we're all through I promise we'll have some real drinking." A very good, intelligent order. But apparently the Italians never heard of it and so they left barrels of wine in all their occupied territory. Sometimes we take pity on them. . . .

If you could see all the stuff that is lying around here. It is hard for Palestinians like us to see it. Ammunition-dumps, arms, machine-guns—all scattered in great confusion. The enemy left everything behind and fled for his life.

December 15, 1942

We are camping here for a while after days of wandering. This is just a temporary halt. We don't know yet how many days we'll be here. For the time being everything is going as it should. "They" are still being beaten. The legend about the undefeated German army has finally exploded. We are somewhat tired. The tense mind longs for rest, for a good letter from home and for something else. For what?

On our trip I saw something of the famous Italian colonization. This time we saw the estates abandoned by the settlers. They all left in the wake of the retreating army. The fields are still ploughed and sown, as if nothing had touched them. But the farmers and their families are gone and their houses are silent and empty. It is said that they were carried off by force. The enemy maltreated the Senussi so badly this time that the colonists expected nothing less than certain slaughter at the hands of these natives. That is why they fled. This is my conjecture. The Senussi are plundering everywhere now. It is painful to see it. Memories of Palestine keep accompanying me. If Palestine had been penetrated by the enemy, which God forbid, this is what might have happened, with one profound difference—that then it would have been our ruin and now it is the ruin of our enemy.

But it is hard for us, farmers, to see this fury of destruction. Chickens and cows wander through the fields and everything is ravaged. As we pass we sometimes take a chicken with us and there is nothing wrong in this under these circumstances. Some of the motor unit groups carry a chicken with them as a mascot. There are legends told to the effect that the group with the chickens came through everything safely. This creates a kind of competition with regard to the capturing of chickens. Perhaps the drivers will apply to the "Committee for the Welfare of the Jewish Soldiers" in Tel Aviv with a request for chicken

mascots. Sometimes, too, we get some good wine in former Italian-occupied territory. We get a little tight and forget the mud, the dampness and our weariness. We are all praying for the sun now. This mud makes life unbearable.

On my trip I saw places that have many memories for me, but the families that I longed to meet again are no longer there. Most of them are no longer among the living. The few that have remained are still fearful of the future. Then they received us with shouts of joy and triumph and the end of it was very bitter. Now they feel no assurance that they won't fall into enemy hands again. If only we could bring them to Palestine. . . .

If only we could. . . . When we appeared in Libya for the first time and went in a group to the synagogue, the Jewish quarter hummed with joy and happiness. They believed, innocently, that we had the keys to Palestine. Now they are beaten and wretched, and we have no word of hope for them. Think of the feelings of a Jewish soldier who goes to battle in order to save his people, but is completely helpless when he meets them, crushed and miserable.

January 3, 1943

I am afraid that my leter will be quite damp. Last night we had a terrific storm and our dug-out filled up with water. And so did all the other dug-outs here. All of our things are drenched. It's impossible to say how much of them we can still save; we'll see about it when the sun comes out. But I have one good quality that stands me in good stead in a calamity: just when the boys begin to feel disgusted and they begin cursing everything they can think of, my sense of humor begins to bubble up. This is what happened this time, too. During the night we began to scoop the water out of the dug-out in tins and I began to make jokes about it all while we were working. Gusts of laughter filled the air. Imagine this scene: we are all standing in the water with everything we are wearing all

wet and the cold penetrating our bones, scooping the water up in tins and shrieking with laughter.

But don't ask me to tell you how we passed the night. The water kept on coming in and we curled up in the higher corners of the dug-out and waited for the morning. In the morning we went into fits of laughter again. Everyone laughed until tears were in his eyes to see how his comrades looked and to hear the ridiculous rhymes that I composed for the occasion. We were filthy with mud and wet to the bone. When it grew light we went on scooping up the water. Then we laid some boards on the wet floor, but we had no dry clothes to change into. If the sun comes out tomorrow we'll be able to dry some of our clothes. When we get rid of some of this mud we'll feel better.

It's drizzling today. If we don't get rheumatism as a result of last night, then nothing can hurt us. But you must not remember at moments like these that you have a warm, dry house somewhere, with a bed made-up in the corner, next to a little window and that you can curl up inside the whiteness of the sheets, cover yourself with a warm, dry blanket and look through the window. It's bad to think about all this. For it's wet and cold here. There are wet ashes on your feet and your socks are soaked in mud and water. You must be patient. Perhaps the sun will come out from under the clouds and then we'll take off our shoes and wash our feet and our socks. But the sun seems to be fixed under the clouds and doesn't seem likely to reappear. The rain is still drizzling and patters on the tarpaulin that is over the dug-out. Let it patter, so long as it doesn't come in here.

Let me tell you about a recent visit of ours to a nearby town. This was another sad encounter with Jews. On that Saturday the local rabbi arranged prayers and two hundred and fifty of us attended. The town is very beautiful, but most of its houses are shattered and destroyed. There was a Jewish community of thousands here before the occupation but now there are only 250 left. They stood at all the windows and balconies in the Jewish quarter and welcomed us joyously with *"Shabat Sha-*

*lom."* Their faces were radiantly happy. The children clung to us with love. Formerly the community maintained a Hebrew school. Now we met the children, pale, with large sad, intelligent eyes. I hugged a little boy of about the age of Ron and tears choked me as he said: "Take me and my mother and father to Palestine." There was so much knowledge of life in his eyes—such bitter knowledge. That's a child who saw his uncle hanging in the street for five days. These children have seen a great many terrible things. For months they did not see the sunlight. At that moment I realized how happy our children are.

We went to visit some Jewish families. There was such sadness in their faces, such fear. All the Jewish shops have been plundered. One group of soldiers was accompanied by a little boy, the rabbi's son. He ran ahead of us and called: "Father—Jewish soldiers! Father, look, he has 'Eretz Israel' written on his shoulder." (And he was right. The wife of R. had embroidered "Eretz Israel" instead of "Palestine" on his shoulder.) The rabbi looked at the words and kissed the shoulder the way one kisses a *Mezuza.** While they were praying I got up and went out into the corridor. I searched for the family with whom I had eaten one Sabbath Eve in another city, but I couldn't find them. However, I met one of their relatives who recognized me. He told me that multitudes of the Jews in that city had been murdered and that this family was among them. More terrible than anything else is the knowledge that it is impossible for us to bring them to Palestine: this thought drives one mad. So in the joy of these encounters there is also much bitterness: How can we comfort them? Can we be satisfied with praying together at the synagogue? And where will they get the immigration certificates and the clothes and a loaf of bread?

I came back to camp with bitterness in my heart. I wrote to the executive committee of the *Kibutz* about bringing them

**Mezuza:* Religious talisman placed on the entrance door to traditional Jewish homes.

to Palestine. Will they be able to do something? It's a horrible feeling to know that we have freed this unhappy Jewish community but we can't open the doors of our country to them. This is particularly horrible for the Jew in uniform who entered the army for the sake of his people and his country. . . .

January 4, 1943

We got several crates of beer from somewhere and sat together in our dug-out and drank a little. For some reason it was a sad party. Some of the boys began to talk about their personal difficulties. The question of what would happen to our family life after the war came up. One of them told us about his life in Russia. There was a political prisoner there who was in prison for twenty years for Zionist activity and his wife waited for him all those years. His hair had turned white and still she waited for him; he used to sit with his friends among the prisoners and tell them about his wife's beauty and grace. And she waited for him for twenty years. . . . One of the youngsters talked about his girl. He had a girl and they loved each other passionately. He parted from her in great sorrow and went to the army. Then she went and got engaged to someone else. She felt that it was impossible to wait for him. Those were sad conversations, between drinks, with one's head growing heavy. . . . Today I feel sad. I'm anxious about V. I sent a letter to the hospital where he was and the letter came back. I sent the letter back again to another address and I haven't heard about it yet. There is a rumor that he died in the hospital. You know how deep our friendship had become.

There's an awful storm outside. Empty cans are flying through the air like feathers. We are huddled in our dug-out, for it's not safe to stick one's head out. We have lit a lantern and closed the door. It is pleasant inside, as if it were night time in the middle of the day.

January 5, 1943

This evening several of us discussed the question of what would happen to the tens of thousands of Jewish soldiers on their return home. For us, the men of the settlements, the question is not quite so difficult. At least we have homes to return to. But there are thousands among us who have nothing to return to and who have been cut off from everything. Will I be able to return home and to live tranquilly while thousands of my comrades of the war years will be wandering about in despair? We are familiar with the terrible consequences of such conditions in other countries.

January 10, 1943

I began to write you a letter this week, but I did not have the strength to finish it. I have been in bed. I experienced a night of horror such as I have never been through in all my life. Now I feel somewhat better and I'll try to tell you about it.

In the neighborhood of the town near which we are stationed there is another Motor Unit of which G. and V. are members. (By the way, there were a number of rumors abroad to the effect that V. had been killed.) When I learned of this I decided to go and visit them. I knew exactly where they were and got a lift in the direction I was going from an English car. When I got out of the car I was about a quarter of an hour's drive away from the bridge near which the Unit is stationed. In the meantime the evening drew on and the shadows grew heavy. I stood and waited for a car to come along, but as none came and the bridge did not seem too far away, I began to walk in that direction. I cut across a field in order to make a short cut and, on looking about me, decided that the field was free of barbed-wire fences and probably clear of mines. Suddenly, however, the sky

grew dark and rain began to fall. I couldn't see at all. I regretted that I had strayed from the main road and decided to get back to it. But somehow I had lost my sense of direction. I walked a long way and couldn't find the road at all, and the rain came pouring down, wetting me to the skin. I comforted myself by saying—never mind, it's not too terrible, so long as you manage to see V. In the meantime I found that I was sinking into the mud and still nowhere in sight of the road. I was surrounded by solid darkness, without a gleam of light or a sound of life.

After quite a long while I ran into some barbed wire. I touched the fence and heard the clatter of small cans that were suspended from it. For a moment my body seemed to have turned completely cold; this is the usual warning against a mine-sown field! And I wasn't even sure on which side the mined field was—where I was standing or on the other side of the barbed-wire. I remained standing where I was, afraid of moving. For a moment I thought of falling flat on the ground and remaining there until morning. But I was completely soaked and my heavy coat was drenched with water. Luckily I had taken my new sleeveless leather jacket with me. I was afraid to lie on the wet ground for I felt as though I might get pneumonia. What could I do? Should I remain there for the night? Or should I walk along the barbed-wire fence? I knew that the mine-laying engineers plant their mines along the fences too. I leaned over, felt along the fence, found the nearest pole, felt the ground, crawled along on my hands and knees and felt the area around me. But I did not lose my ability to think clearly. I considered all kinds of plans. In the meantime it got a little lighter and the stars appeared. I gathered that the wind was blowing the clouds away and that perhaps it would get light enough for me to see the barbed-wire fence clearly. I stood there and waited. The wind blew strongly and I stood there, wet and shivering. The sky did clear up and I noticed a dark shape on the other side of the fence. I thought that perhaps it was a hut and that I could get into it and sleep there

until morning. I crawled along on all fours, groping about me to see if there were any mines around, digging into the mud to see if the ground had been broken or not. In this way I drew closer to the dark shape. Now I could see what it was: a tank. A horrible stink seemed to be exuded by it. I came close to it, felt it—yes, it was a large tank. I reached up to the turret and fell back in the face of the horrible stink that came forth. I wondered at the fact that the turret was not open at the top and then I tried to open it, but it was closed from the inside. I understood then that the bodies of the tank-drivers were still inside and that the smell was emanating from the putrefaction. I decided to sit down on the top of it and to wait until dawn would break. But the wind was blowing and seemed to freeze me to the bone. I felt around the sides of the tank and discovered a crack in it. I tried to squeeze my hands into it and finally I managed to put my head inside, but such a wave of putrefaction struck me in the face that I nearly fainted. I climbed back on top of the tank with my head reeling and began to vomit. I lay there vomiting for a long while, with the wind whistling along the transom of the tank, wailing as if there were a live creature inside. I still felt quite clear-headed and I began talking to myself. I said to myself that I had gone to inquire about my friend V. and that he was probably still alive, and I will be given there a cup of tea and a warm bed. I talked to myself for a long time. I wanted to hear my own voice instead of the horrible wailing and screeching of the tank. Suddenly it seemed to me that the turret had been opened. I felt myself covered with cold perspiration. I seemed to see the dead bodies of the enemy emerging and dragging me into the tank with them. This was the most dangerous moment of all. Out of terror and a temporary derangement of mind I was capable of jumping off the tank and running into the field where I would most certainly have been torn to bits by the mines. But something stopped me from doing this. I remember very clearly that I began to dance about on top of the tank, shrieking like a madman. I screamed until my throat gave out. Then I lay

back on the tank with my consciousness numbed and dim. And then the shrieking and wailing of the wind in the transom began to drive me wild again. I slipped off the tank, fell onto the ground in the mud and still my brain kept whirling. Suddenly I felt overcome by a wonderful feeling. I saw you and the children and you talked to me continually, saying: "Be quiet, now, be quiet. Don't lose control of your senses. Keep still. Soldiers have to bear harder things than this. But remember, you mustn't run into the field. Lie here and rest, lie here and be still." Then I burst into tears and wept like a child. And when I stopped weeping, I began to crawl. I remembered that the path that the tank had followed had to be free of mines. I crawled along the ground in the wake of the tank until I reached a large rain puddle. I lay down in the puddle, lapped the water with my tongue, like a dog, and began to vomit again. After that, as if moved by a sudden decision, I got up on to my feet. As I stood up I noticed a faint light in the distance. I went toward it, with a kind of numb indifference. I seemed to hear peals of thunder ringing in my ears and my brain felt quite empty. I reached the light and found it to be a lamp on the highway. I lay down on the road and when I awoke I found myself in a tent in an Indian military camp. There they took good care of me and I fell asleep again. In the morning they brought me back to our camp. When I got back I felt the need of telling you about this night and revealing something of the horror that has been hovering over me. But I could not do it.

When I analyze what happened I realize that I must have got into a field sown with mines that had not yet been cleared by the mine-sweepers. That is why the dead bodies had not been taken out of the tank. What will you say of your soldier now? He's a lucky man, after all. If he did not go mad on top of that tank it's a sign that he'll come through everything. Even now some of the macabre visions of that night visit me in my dreams. But the boys are taking good care of me. And, above all, V. is getting better. I shall see him soon. . . .

January 23, 1943

*Today we took Tripoli.* I'm hastening to write you about this, even though it's hard for me to write. I have never felt so full of happiness as now in all the time that I have been in the army. Do you realize what the fall of Tripoli really means? The whole fabric of the Italian conquest has fallen apart now. From now on the enemy's luck will be against him, like a wheel without a hub that is rolling backwards. And like a hubless wheel too, it is most dangerous, but it cannot roll much farther. These are days that compensate for all we have been through. And I, who have been feeling depressed lately because of that horrible night that I went through, now feel as though all that horror was well behind me. Tripoli has fallen! It's true that I promised you that I would come home on leave from here, but I'm still not sure if I can keep that promise. We shall be pursuing them. I'm far away from you now, but I shall soon be even farther. But don't be frightened of this distance. The greater it is, the nearer I am to coming home. Perhaps—and I should consider this the greatest possible happiness for us—we shall be the first to invade Europe. Everything is possible. We have a wonderful fellow with us—Montgomery is his name. We're willing to go as far as Berlin with him. Don't laugh at this. I'm not dreaming dreams and I know how long and blood-stained the way will be, but there are a few moments of happiness left us in this world. Today is a holiday for us. It's true that we have no cigarettes or beer, we eat biscuits and bully-beef and the nights are cold—but it's warm around the heart now. Nice and warm.

One of the drivers stationed in the neighborhood told me that a few days ago, as he was watching a plane in the vicinity, he had the following experience. It came down and after it had landed a boy came out of it and walked up to him, saying: "Is that a Star of David? I'm a Jew, too." He was a Jewish airman

from America who had noticed the Star of David on the side of the automobile as he was flying and had come down to meet a fellow Jew. At the end of the conversation he got back in the plane, a little observation plane, and took off. We have had not a few moving encounters with Jewish airmen from America and from Greece. When they see the sign of the Star of David they are very moved and reveal that they are Jews.

January 27, 1943

Don't be angry with me, my dear ones, for not keeping my promise. I promised that I would come home on leave from Tripoli, and now I have to postpone it—for how long? I can't say. I seem to carry a burning fire in my heart that wants to push onwards, to the jungle of horror in the north. It's not too far from us now—the sea-coast of our enemies. From the coast the road leads to the Brenner Pass—and from there. . . . For two years I wandered about in the desert without seeing a mirage. Now I seem to see one nightly. Don't think that I've really gone out of my mind. I want to come home by the longest possible route. I want to come back riding in a German "Mercedes" through the continent of Europe, through the Balkans, Turkey and Syria. Shlomo* and I will take turns driving and Uri† will play for us on his cornet

Can you understand the feeling of a Jewish soldier who has wandered far away from his home and has been covered with the dust of the desert for two years, his heart longing for some reward for all this—and victory looming ahead of him like Mount Nebo in the distance? Bitterness, a sense of helplessness and confusion have been his portion hitherto. And now he suddenly feels as though he has grown wings. That rotten Fascism whose ports and harbors served as places of

* A friend and fellow-soldier, a prisoner in Germany.
† Another prisoner of war.

refuge and encouragement to the gangs of Arab terrorists, who turned our home into a hell for four years,* is now dissolving before our very eyes. The fall of Tripoli calls for a summing-up. But the heart is not eager for summing-up; it longs for a *beginning.*

And even now, with all the exultation of victory, you gnash your teeth in mute fury. All our work in the battlefield is muffled and silenced. It is forbidden to mention it. Our share in this is merely hinted at, is deliberately silenced. Thoughts even sadder than these gnaw at your heart and torture you. Jewish communities have been freed from the enemy. But will the Jewish community in Palestine be permitted to reach out a hand of brotherhood and wipe away their tears? Will they permit the Jews of Palestine to reach out a helping hand to the children of the Diaspora, robbed of their childhood, so that the wounds of their bodies and souls may be healed? Who can tell? Thoughts still heavier than these brood over the heart. Even if we do what we long for, invade Europe and meet with the sorrowful remnant of our people—what then? After all, we are only soldiers. What little we can do—we will do. But our homeland—will it reach out supporting hands to save them—and while there is yet time?

January 28, 1943

We have organized a campaign for the fund to save the children of the European ghettos, and we have collected 500 pounds. We also collected a few pounds for a local Jewish family that is destitute of a livelihood. The father wants to open a shoemaker's shop but he hasn't the money for this. At first he refused to accept the money, and when he was finally persuaded to do this he announced that he could only take it as

* The Arab riots of 1936-39.

a loan. The happiness that we brought to that family is indescribable. They have a little girl about as old as Dvora, and she kissed my hand out of gratitude. I carry this kiss about with me like an amulet.

In my trips I visited a beautiful city on the sea-coast. I drove there in a little car with a captain who is an acquaintance of mine. We drove down from the mountains to the city on the coast with its white and empty houses. It's hard to describe how depressing the sight of any uninhabited city is. We entered one of the houses, lit a can of water in the kitchen and made ourselves some tea; then we fried some meat on a tin plate. The sea-waves resounded outside the house, a storm raged and rain pattered down on the window-panes while we sat beside the fire and ate to our heart's content. And my thoughts turned to you, far away. . . .

The next morning we set out at dawn and on the way we got caught in the rain. The road was very slippery and unsafe. We passed through stretches of Italian colonies again and visited the remains of an ancient Carthaginian city with temples and houses and city-walls. There we decided that after the war was over we would bring our wives to this place so that we might show them all this beauty. Close by the ruins is a large Italian wine-press. Senussi soldiers were standing guard there —Libyan natives in the British army. We knew that we wouldn't be able to get any wine without a permit so I suggested to the captain that he write a note in English and sign it "Rommel." He wrote a note as follows: "Please give this corporal a small barrel of wine, (signed) Rommel." I presented myself before the Senussi captain, but discovered that he could not read my note. He asked me what it said and I told him that it came from General Montgomery. He received me with great awe and set a small barrel of wine on the car. The captain sat in the back of the car, curled up hiding the stars on his epaulettes while he tried not to explode with laughter. On the way we drank to each other's health and laughed heartily.

January 29, 1943

My dear little girl,

I have just received your letter with the dried flower in it. Because I was happy about it—this letter and the flower that you remembered to send me,—I wondered what I could send you in return. Finally I thought of something: I would write you a letter and my friend S., the soldier, would add some illustrations in the margins. Now if you like this letter you'll have to thank the artist for it.

You write me that a wolf broke into the sheepfold. So it is. And into the sheepfold of our people a wolf has burst too. We, the soldiers from Palestine, are happy to do our share in hunting down the wolves. And now we are really beating them. This week Tripoli fell into our hands. In Tripoli there was a big concentration camp filled with thousands of Libyan Jews. They were freed, and now they are waiting, as we are waiting, for immigration certificates that will bring these unhappy brothers of ours to our country. If you could only hear, my daughter, the things they have to tell of what those Nazi beasts did to them, your chin would tremble as it did when I parted from you. . . . It's horrible to hear, but it was even more horrible to experience the things that they have gone through.

Tripoli is a large Italian port in Libya. And now that Tripoli has been taken, Italy hasn't a place she can call Italian in Africa. The Italians came here many years ago and conquered the country by force and bloodshed. They drove out the Senussi, the inhabitants of the land, uprooted them from their soil and set up farms for their own people here. Now everything has been deserted. The Italian farmers fled some time before we arrived, for they feared that revenge would be taken upon them. Now we ride through these colonies and farms that are beautiful, but all deserted. On every house or barn, on every fence, there is printed in large letters: "DUCE!"

"Duce" means "leader." We too have leaders whom we respect. But we shall never write their names on the walls. This is what the Fascists and the Nazis like to do. Now we walk about here with feelings of great joy. But when I see farms and cultivated land that has been deserted, my heart winces with pain. I keep thinking of one thing: if we had not stopped them at El Alamein, who knows if our farms and settlements would not look like these. . . .

We have taken Tripoli, and in this way we have destroyed the wicked rule of the Fascists in Africa. But they are still retreating to Tunisia. And in Tunisia the German army is fighting the Americans who have just invaded Africa. Now we must go on and beat this army, too. We shall attack them from Lybia and the Americans from the other side and the Free French on the third side so that there will be no escape for them. They will only have the sea left. But there we will have sailors and seamen waiting for them and they won't let them escape.

So you see, my daughter, things are getting better! In Russia many brave soldiers, and among them thousands of Jews, are striking at the enemy with fury. They will take their revenge in the end. Stalingrad, which has been besieged for many months, has turned into a cemetery for its conquerors. In Stalingrad many little children, little boys and girls of your age, fought against the enemy, too, and they, the heroes of Stalingrad, are slowly driving the enemy back, street by street and house by house.

The day is not far off when all of us, all the United Nations, will reach Berlin. When we get to Europe we will free our Jewish brothers there. We, the Jewish drivers, carry a great dream out in our hearts—that we will be able to bring our brothers from Europe to Palestine in our trucks.

In the meantime the winter rain is drizzling and we are sinking into the mud. All around us it is wet and damp and difficult. But what is our suffering compared with the suffering of our brothers in the Diaspora? Very little. And you, my

daughter, if you want to help your father who feels cold and damp on his wanderings, write him letters. When he gets a letter from you his heart feels warm and the warmth spreads all over his body so that he does not feel the cold and the damp.

February 10, 1943

Let me tell you about something that upsets me a great deal. A few days ago while we were on the road we entered Benghazi. I wandered about the alleys of the city in order to find some paper for our newspaper in the abandoned Nazi offices here. I met a Jewish boy who promised to bring me to these offices. Finally we reached a large courtyard and there the child pointed to a raised door, "This was the office of the Italians!"—I piled up a heap of papers in bundles near the door. While I was working there a young girl came through the courtyard, a girl of about eighteen, amazingly beautiful. When she saw me she seemed to become rooted to the ground. Her whole body trembled and she fixed terrified eyes upon me, as if I was about to slaughter her with an axe. She seemed to be trying to say something but her throat was choked with fear. At that moment I heard a woman call from a window in one of the houses, "Sarina, where are you?"—I understood then that she was a Jewess, and I said to her in Arabic, "Good day, Sarina, I am a Jew." But she continued to tremble with fear. While I was still standing there in this way a woman of about fifty rushed up to us in a panic, placed herself between the girl and me, her eyes racing about in their sockets as if she were demented, her hair wild, and began driving me away with shrieks and curses. I tried to calm her, assuring her that I am a Jew—but in vain.

The little boy was waiting for me at the end of the courtyard. I went up to him and stood beside him, listening to the echo of the shrieks as they followed me. The boy stood there in confusion, with eyes fixed on the ground. He told me the story. This woman had had twin daughters, Sarina and Victoria.

Victoria had been abducted by German officers and had disappeared. That was why the mother was so fearful for the fate of Sarina and the sight of a soldier sent her into a state of terror lest this daughter, too, would be taken from her. I did not return to collect the paper that I had prepared there. The voice of that Jewish mother still follows me as if in a nightmare. I discovered that many girls and women were carried off to brothels for German officers.

February 17, 1943

I received your letter of *T'u B'shvat.* I see that you have found what was missing. Once you used to lose the commas and periods in your letters—but this time they are all there. Good girl!

I'm glad to hear that they have taken the plaster-cast off your hand. It's good to feel your hand free after it's imprisoned like that, isn't it? Here I meet many Jewish children who are happy for the same reason. For four years their hands were chained. Not in real chains, but in the chains of hatred and murder, and humiliation. They had to hide in the houses and were afraid to leave the doors of their homes. Now we have beaten the Germans and the Italians and our people are saved. The children run about the streets, free and happy. Every one of our soldiers who visits the Jewish quarter finds children clinging to him, holding his hands and eager to walk about the city with him. These children are our good friends. Their parents, too, welcome us with a blessing and with joy. In one of these houses I made friends with a little girl of five whose name is Eliza. She is very pretty. I showed her your picture and she asked if she could be your friend. Do you agree? She asked me, too, if I would bring her to Maoz. She wants to live in Palestine. She sang me Hebrew songs from Palestine so that I could see how much she wanted to go there. She sends you and your friends regards.

# BROTHER MEETS BROTHER

BROTHER MEETS BROTHER

# BROTHER MEETS BROTHER

February 19, 1943

I have accumulated so many impressions in this interval. But for the time being I will restrain myself and write you about the most precious experience of all—my encounter with the Jews here.

First let me tell you about our trip. In our convoy we had some African Negro soldiers. At each stop they would spill out of the trucks and in a few moments the ground would be dotted with small tents. Each two soldiers had a little tent. They used to look at us, the drivers, with envy, for living inside our trucks and being able to use electric-light while they had to crawl into their tiny tents. The rain that poured down on us for the first few days of our trip, caused them great discomfort. They dug themselves in under the cars and often the car would be stuck in the holes and pits that they had dug under it. The trip was difficult and tiring. For the most part the road was blocked by big trucks transporting tanks. On either side of the road strips of the highway were still sown with mines. Often you could see a cross stuck into the middle of the road, to mark a driver who had swerved to one side and been blown up. It was impossible to bury him in the fields which were full of mines and so he was buried on the road, close to the cement strip. A big sign was stuck over his grave reading: "Blown up by mines; attention; drive carefully."

For the first few days the rain came down without stopping day or night. This was a test in driving for me, for I had not done any for a long time. I discovered, to my joy, that you don't

forget anything that you have once learned properly. We drove from early morning until dark, and sometimes even in the dark, for all the area was sown with mines and it was dangerous to stop in most places. Only a few places had been cleared by the Royal Engineers and were marked as special stopping places. As long as we did not reach a field marked "Free of Mines" we were not allowed to stop. Good Lord! The mines that the Germans left behind. They must run to millions. You can drive for days and see no end to them. They bore fruit too—for the sides of the roads are marked with graves, ours and theirs.

Gradually the landscape changed. The sun shone; it was spring weather. The fields became green and smiling, exhaling a wonderful fragrance. It was glorious. The landscape reminded me of the Sharon Valley at home, with its light soil and its vegetation and flowers.

One night we stopped in an area that was free of mines. It was a fragrant spring evening. Not far from where we were was a barbed-wire fence with cans marked with skulls and crossbones, a warning that this field was sown with mines. The space that we camped in was ploughed and trodden by the wheels of cars and trucks and the flowers in it were all trampled. On the other hand, the field surrounded by barbed wire, untouched by a man's foot or a wheel, was full of fragrant spring-blossoms. We stood near the fence with our eyes skimming over the beautiful field and our nostrils drinking in the wonderful scents of the flowers. The mines had been sown there before the rains and the flowers had just begun to bloom. Among the flowers you could see the yellow metal of the German mines gleaming here and there. The heart was filled with the desire to stretch out on the field and to roll among the flowers, as children love to do.

I stood there musing. Here was a new subject for our poets: death lurking in a field full of beautiful flowers; waiting with bated breath, like a serpent, for his prey. Can anything seem more horrible than this sight of death among the innocent

flowers? They intoxicate you with their perfume and seem to lure you, saying: Come, climb over the barbed-wire and throw yourself down on this enchanting rug. . . .

That same night I witnessed a wonderful scene. The Negroes had gathered together and we were there too. We began to sing some of our songs and they became very enthusiastic about them. We asked them to sing us some of their songs. They settled themselves in a half-circle and began to sing a song in several voices. It was wonderful singing. This was a solo sung with an occasional chorus. Then they began to dance. We clapped hands in time to it and they continued to sing in response to our admiration. We sat there until midnight, as if we had been enchanted, listening to their strange and wonderful singing. Finally one of them got up and said in English, "Before we go to sleep we would like to sing our hymn. We ask you to rise and to uncover your heads." We rose and heard their concluding song standing. Their hymn is not sung in the usual way. One of them chants something and the others repeat his words in song. He reads something out of their prayers and the others shade their eyes with their hands and sing. Their hymn is like a chanted prayer—quite wonderful.

Yes, I forgot to say that while the chorus was singing one of our boys, B. Y., who has a very good voice, came close to them and caught the melody they were singing. They tiptoed up to him silently to listen to him humming, for he had caught on. At the end of one verse they raised him up on their shoulders in enthusiasm. Ever since we have called B. a Negro name—Mephuta.

After the singing of the hymn we scattered to sleep in the different trucks. But I think that not one of us slept that night: the scent of the flowers, the singing of the Negroes and, above all, the spring night. These Negroes are simple, primitive people, and the relations between them are very fine. Some of them are socialists and know a great deal more than we can tell from a single hurried meeting. Some of them have visited

Palestine and know something of our problems. Many strange and different worlds touch in the life of an army.

On the next day we visited another Italian colonization area. Here the villages were not abandoned and the population had not followed the retreating army. After months of not seeing a European child it was pleasant to see white children, or a mother with a child in her arms. But still we mustn't forget that they are our enemies. At noon we stopped for a meal. In front of us was a vegetable plot and in it an old man, an old woman, two girls and a boy were busy weeding. I stood near the fence and watched the idyllic picture. The old man invited me in, "Come in, Signor!" But something in me protested—the murderers of my people. And I went away.

That evening I met at our stopping place some Libyan Arabs. They were selling eggs. I talked with one of them and asked him about the relations between them and the Italian colonists. He assumed an angelic expression and said, "Everything is fine; except that every night another family is found murdered." I don't know why, but for some reason I associated this with our position in Palestine and a spark of hatred for this innocent-seeming Arab sprang up in me. I reasoned with myself, saying —these Italians oppressed the Arabs mercilessly. They used to take the headman of the villages that refused to submit and would throw them out of aeroplanes into their villages. But still something in me resisted.

There is a great deal of poverty in these colonies. Only the architecture is very fine. Each house has a little out-door porch; you enter by way of a little hall with benches built into the walls on either side. We have still to acquire this rural tranquillity that leads the farmer to sit on his little porch or terrace at the end of his day's work, so that he may rest his eyes at the sight of the sun going down. I am sure that these little porches in these villages are the background for much of the folklore and folk-tales that spring up here. I am sorry that we have so little of this.

Finally let me tell you about my most precious experiences on this trip—my encounter with the Jews here. As we passed through a little town in our cars marked with the Star of David both in front and in back, we suddenly saw people dressed in European clothes shouting to us in excitement, *"Shalom!"* I stopped and two boys jumped on to my running-board. *"Shalom, Yehudim!"** they said and we shook hands. Their first question was, "Do you have any newspapers from Palestine?" I searched around in confusion and finally found a copy of *Hegeh* (I use it to teach one of the refugees Hebrew) under the car-seat, and gave it to them. One of them took it with his eyes shining, looked at the Hebrew letters, kissed the paper and said with moving sincerity, "We shall read this aloud in the synagogue." I think this must have been the first time that a secular newspaper was kissed in distant North Africa. Behind me the trucks were blowing their horns and I was unable to hold up the convoy any longer. All along the street of this little town stood Jews cheering us with, *"Shalom, Yehudim!"* and waving their hands in excitement. The eyes of many of the older people were moist with tears and the children shouted with joy. Our hearts were warmed by all this. But all this was only an introduction to what was to happen to us in the big city, from which I am writing you.

There are twenty thousand Jews in this city. The streets that we drove through were loud with cries of joy, cries of *"Shalom."* Ecstatic greetings were pouring upon us from all sides. We felt as if we were dreaming all this excitement. We drove straight through the city to the outskirts, let the Negroes get out and camped there. I went back immediately to the city, in search of Jews. At the gate to the city I met a man wearing spectacles and I approached him in Arabic, "Where do the Jews live here?" He answered in Arabic that most of them live in the Jewish quarter, and he looked rather startled. I suspected that he was a Jew. However, I hesitated to ask him about this

* *Shalom, Yehudim!* (greetings, fellow-Jews!).

and went on in Arabic, "Where is the nearest synagogue? Could I go to worship there?" At this he smiled and asked, "Are you a Jew?" Then he looked at my epaulettes and saw "Palestine" there and shook my hands with a warm *"Shalom Aleichem."* From then on he did not leave me alone. Simon L. is his name. I went along with him and he told me in fluent Arabic about the Jews of the city. He explained that wealthy Jews had built the suburb we were in and that poor Jews used to rent rooms there to escape the bombings. In the days of the German occupation there was a joke circulating to the effect that the Allies would have to save them from the Germans, the Italians and the British Air Force. . . . I went with him to his house. There we found his wife, his sister, two younger brothers and a little daughter of five called Eliza. All of them, except for the mother, speak Hebrew fluently. Little Eliza didn't leave me alone for a moment, singing me Hebrew songs and laughing with joy. In the meantime two neighbors came in. I was amazed at their fluent Hebrew. It seems that most of the Jews of Tripoli know the language.

It was hard for me to get up and leave them. They simply did not let me. I promised that I would return shortly. I would only go to tell my sergeant that I was going to spend some time with the Jews in the city. But Simon refused to let me go alone. He accompanied me to the camp and I spoke to the sergeant there and came back. When we entered the house the table was set and the family was sitting and waiting for me. I saw some of the neighbors coming in with pots and realized that they were helping the mother to prepare a fitting meal for the occasion. I knew that this was not to be one of their ordinary meals and that they were not in the habit of eating their fill. But there were all kinds of delicacies at this meal. After the dinner many of the neighbors came in. I talked to them about Palestine and I gathered that they had heard nothing about the fate of our people in Europe. I told them about the atrocities the Nazis committed upon the Jews in occupied countries. How intently they listened! After that they opened their hearts and told of

what they had been through. Simon L. asked that all of the Jewish soldiers come to the Jewish quarter on the next day to have their Sabbath meal there. I told him that there were sixty of us. He replied, "We'll divide you among us. Every family will take a soldier." Thus I sat with them until it grew late.

From their tales I gathered that the Jews of Tripoli were also due to be carried off to the concentration camps in Tunis. And probably these twenty thousand Jews would be dead today if Montgomery had not attacked before the Germans were able to complete their plans for the liquidation of the Jews. It was from them that I first heard of the concentration camp for the Jews of Cyrenaica in Jiddo. This camp was erected two hundred miles deep in the desert. There the last remainder of the lovable Jews whom we met a year and a half ago in Bardia, Tobruk, Derna, Berci, Benghazi and other places were gathered. They also told me that there were at present about two hundred refugees from the concentration camp in the city. During the retreat some of them tried to escape into the desert. The Italian guards shot them while they were escaping, but two hundred of them succeeded in reaching Tripoli. As for the rest—no one can tell what happened to them. The Allied authorities announced that typhus fever was rampant in the camp at Jiddo and that it was quarantined—that nurses, doctors, food and supplies were sent there and that the internees were found to be without any food or water and in a dreadful condition. The authorities also announced that all the exiles would be returned to their homes. But the Jews of Tripoli, at least those with whom I spoke, had heard nothing of the fate of their brethren.

When I left them I promised Simon that on the next day, when all of us would come to the city, I would visit him in his shop. He promised to introduce me to a relative of his who had escaped from the camp at Jiddo and that she would be able to tell me in detail what had taken place there. Earlier I had written to the executive committee of the *Kibutz,* insisting that they contact all the relevant organizations in Palestine in order to

organize some help for the Jews of Libya. However, in the evening, as I was still visiting with the L. family, a neighbor came in with a copy of *Davar** that he had received from one of the Jewish longshoremen who are stationed in the city. The letter that I had written about the Jews of Libya had been published in that issue. It was read aloud in public in the synagogues and proved something of a balm in their affliction.

I heard many wonderful things that evening. I heard legendary stories about our exploits—the exploits of a Jewish Motor Unit that managed to save the lives of hundreds of Jews, bringing them in military autos to Tobruk or to the Egyptian frontier. Legends. I heard, too, of a Jewish soldier who brought the registry book of the congregation of Tobruk to Berci, who saved a Jewish family from drunken soldiers and received the holy blessing of an old Jew. The stories were embroidered with imaginary details, as is the way with unhappy people who transform the most simple acts into epic deeds. I realized then that every one of our good deeds, every act of brotherly solidarity was engraved in the memory of these people. Their children will be brought up on these stories of brotherly love.

This morning a group of us went out to the Jewish quarter. At the entrance we saw a sign saying, "Out of Bounds." I went up to one of the military police with a red cap and told him that we were Jews from Palestine and that we wanted to visit the Jews in the town. He consented to this immediately but cautioned us to "behave properly." Only after this did I hear that some colored soldiers had burst into some Jewish houses and had violated a number of Jewish women; that was why the sign had been put up. I heard farther that the unit of the Jewish longshoremen from Palestine here had organized a guard for the Jewish quarter at night, although they were not granted the permission of their British officers. In this way the Jews were saved from possible unfortunate incidents.

In the Jewish quarter we were simply carried through the streets. Such joy! On every side we heard greetings of welcome.

* See footnote on p. 60.

I felt the way I had on the day that I returned from Tobruk to Naan, a year and a half ago. We went into Simon's shop and found it almost completely bare of merchandise. Simon knocked a few of the tiles out of the floor and pulled out a tin can in which was hidden a "blue box" of the Jewish National Fund.* He put it down on the table, his eyes shining with excitement. We opened up our purses and filled the precious box, that had to be kept secretly under the Fascist regime. We wanted to buy some things from him but he refused to take money from us. We had to insist strongly before he would agree to accept it. And so it was wherever we came. We entered a restaurant and ordered food. The room was crowded with people. On the table were cups with Hebrew letters on them saying, "Jews! Speak Hebrew." The Jews of Tripoli had ordered these cups from Italy before the war. What a wonderful type of Jew! After our meeting with the cold, assimilated Jews of Egypt, our hearts were full of gratitude to these Jews. We got up feeling somewhat intoxicated, and when we tried to pay we were refused again.

After this I went with Simon to see his relative. I don't know what Simon had told her, but this unhappy woman took me for some important personage who could help her. She told me what her family had been through in the past two years. They had been driven out like animals and had wandered from Tobruk to Derna and from there to Berci and from there to Benghazi. Ten months ago they had been chased out of Benghazi to the concentration camp at Jiddo. For ten months they had been imprisoned there without food, water, or soap, in sickness and misery and in unbelievably crowded conditions. One hundred and thirty people died there. The Jewish community of Tripoli helped them with fifteen Italian lira a week—fifteen piastre per person. They sold everything they had with them to their last shirt and they wore nothing but old sacks. With the

* Jewish National Fund: instrument of the Zionist organization for the purchase of land remaining the property of the nation and leased to settlers. Most communal and cooperative villages are settled on the land of the J.N.F.

woman were her husband and two daughters. Her married daughter, whose husband was murdered, is about to give birth. When the Italian guards fled during the retreat the whole family tried to run away. While they were escaping the remaining guards shot at them and this woman became separated from the rest of the family. It seems that the others did not succeed in getting away. In any case they had not reached Tripoli. She seized my hand and kissed it and asked for mercy: she wants to go to Jiddo, to the concentration camp and she wants me to give her a note so that she won't be stopped on the way. She's ready to go there on foot, for her daughter is about to give birth, and how can she fail to be with her at this hour?

What could I tell her? Simon burst into tears, as did another old man who was there and I, too, could not restrain my tears. I tried to calm her and told her that the troubles were all over now, that the refugees would be returned to their homes, and that perhaps they would find a way to come to Palestine. In the meantime the situation at Jiddo had changed. Doctors and nurses and medicine had been sent there and good people were taking care of the refugees, so she must calm herself. I explained that I was only an ordinary soldier and that I couldn't give her a note that would help her. She went on weeping and asked me to go to my captain, to let her go with me. He would surely give her a pass. . . .

I was helpless. I stood there as if I were guilty before her. I patted her wrinkled, gnarled hand and tried to comfort her. When she calmed down a little, realizing that her requests could not be complied with, she began to tell us, through her sobs, of what they had gone through in the last ten months. A desire for revenge springs up in your heart and fills your entire being as you hear of the tortures that were inflicted upon them. You begin to see everything in a new light, crueller than before. This can drive you mad.

It is three in the morning now. This evening we had a party that I'll tell you about. But all the while the memory of this woman would not leave me. All ideas of revenge pale before

such horror. What revenge is there that can make up for all this? Sometimes I think to myself that we are all miserable villains before this unhappy woman, Sabina, the wife of Zaccai Levi. This meeting left a dark stain on me that I will not easily erase.

Afterwards we went out with Simon, who had closed his shop, to visit the synagogues, some of which are very old. What poverty is glimpsed among these houses and alleys. A long line of people stood waiting outside a bakery for loaves of bread and rolls for the Sabbath. A little girl stood there, bathed in tears. Her Sabbath loaves had been forgotten and burned. She was a pretty little girl, about Dvora's age. I took the child aside and tried to soothe her. Between us we collected some money and put it into her hand. At first she looked at us suspiciously, but when I leaned down and put the money into her hand, she was startled and kissed me loudly on the cheek. What a precious kiss that was! The whole street enjoyed it with us. Those waiting in line near the bakery beamed with happiness.

Those were very precious hours. We wandered about the streets, our faces shining with excitement. One of the soldiers, A. M., came up to me and said, "Listen, I simply want to cry now, my heart is so full." I understood him very well!

At the synagogue we met some old women who were cleaning and scrubbing the house in honor of the Sabbath. When they saw us they showered greetings on our heads and we heard their mumbled, motherly blessings. Laden with impressions we returned to the camp that evening and from there we went to visit the Jewish suburb on the outskirts of the town. Finally we came to the synagogue. We stood on the veranda outside and took part in the prayers. The children—how beautiful they are here!—clung to us, and many of us stood there during prayers with our hands on a child's head.

After prayers we were divided among the different families. They actually fought over us. At the end some families were

left without a soldier to take home: "Why should some have two and I none?" When they received one they asked again, "Why should they have two and I only one?"

Finally after some coaxing and good-natured laughter everything was straightened out and we scattered to our different families. B. and I were Simon's guests. Before five minutes had passed a family that had been left without a soldier came and joined us. They simply added some more bowls and another table and we ate together. . . . They didn't want to eat alone.

The meal was fit for a king. Sometimes my mouthful would stick in my throat when I remembered that this was the ration of weeks. Sabbath hymns were sung. B., who was with me, sang in his melodious voice and entertained the family. Little Eliza sang us the "Song of the Port" and "Hatikvah." The mother's face was radiant with happiness and she murmurmured in Arabic, "I have had many joys in my life, but never one like this evening."

My letter has grown lengthy, but I have not finished telling you all about it. It's three in the morning now. I am sitting in the car and writing this letter. The other boys are sitting outside singing, or lying in their beds. The boys who are singing say that they can't fall asleep. We have had so many rich experiences in these last few days.

I'm tired now but I shall go on with this tomorrow. I can only say this now: all our suffering, mine, yours, the children's, our longings and our loneliness are as nothing against these realities, when you meet them face to face. Daily we read in the newspaper about what is happening to our people overseas, and the imagination recoils in the face of that horror,—recoils and seems to flee. Only when you actually meet with it, and even only a small part of it, do you realize with all your being that there is a great and solemn obligation that stands above your personal needs.

February 22, 1943

I owe you a debt. I haven't finished telling you about our evening in the Jewish quarter and I shall go on with it now.

After the meal all of us gathered in Simon's house. The house was too small to contain us all. We sat on the floor of the big room. We sang Palestinian songs and our hosts listened earnestly. We sang old songs mostly, because many of them are acquainted with these.

One of the boys got up and asked in Arabic if everyone would understand him if he spoke in Hebrew. Everyone agreed to this. He told them about the tragedy of our people in Europe. His words were interrupted by quiet weeping, sobs and exclamations of anger. They had heard nothing of this. From many corners we heard: "Horrible! Horrible! Even we did not have to go through so much!" . . . He told them what had been done in Europe and that the only hope for our people in all this horror was *Palestine.* He told them that Jews in Palestine say now, "If I forget thee, O *Galut**—may my right hand lose its cunning", in addition to the ancient "If I forget thee Jerusalem." He told them about what had already been achieved in Palestine, about the riots, about the new settlements, about manufacture and industry, about our self-defense. He told them of thousands of Palestinian Jews who had joined the army to defend the country. He spoke in particular about the illegal immigrants. He explained that the keys of the country are not yet in our hands. He spoke of the ways in which Jews have come and are still coming—and will come to the country of their hope. . . . His audience listened tensely. Their eyes shone and their fists were clenched in response to his words.

At the end an old woman told Simon, regretfully, that she had not understood everything. Simon translated the speech

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* See footnote on p. 16.

into Arabic. Afterwards Simon talked about the Jews of Tripolitania. He talked of the Eliezar ben Yehuda Society,* about Zionist activity, about their brilliant past, about the Hebrew evening school, about their active community life, the war-years, their isolation from the rest of the world, persecutions, the law forbidding shops to be closed on the Sabbath and the public whipping of those who refused to obey the new law, before a crowd of thousands of spectators; about people being carried off to work-camps, about the diabolical plan to have all the Jews of Tripolitania put into concentration camps in Tunisia. Simon went on to say, "But when we hear from your lips of the horrors perpetrated upon the Jews in Europe, as we hear of the fate of our people, a bitter pain fills our hearts. How we fear for the Jewish communities in Tunisia." When this young, thin Jew, with the glasses through which his eyes peer with sadness, finished speaking, all of them stood up, turned to the east, to Jerusalem, and sang the *"Hatikvah."*

When our hosts learned that we were leaving on the following morning they insisted that we come to drink coffee with them before we left.

February 25, 1943

You have asked me for a detailed letter about the Jews in Tripolitania and those in the capital city. I could write and write if my pen obeyed me completely and if I were able to express everything I went through in my encounter with these Jews. Before I begin telling you about this, I should like to define the scope of my description which according to what I hear may have become confused in my recent letters. The Jews whom we met up until recently were Libyan Jews—or, to be more exact, the Jews of Cyrenaica. From Benghazi on, the country we covered is Tripolitania.

* Eliezer ben Yehuda was the father of the movement for the revival of the Hebrew language as a spoken tongue.

I first met with the Jews of Tripolitania here. This was, indeed, a precious encounter. I had not imagined or expected that I would meet with brothers here. Two and a half years ago, when I left Palestine, I had a dread of foreign lands. When I went to Egypt I tried to comfort myself by meeting with the Jews there and met with disappointment after disappointment. With the exception of a few rare families we found in Egypt nothing but coldness and indifference on the part of the Jews there. My self-respect as a Jew was wounded. When I passed the Libyan border two years ago during the first attack, I was full of expectation at the thought of meeting my brothers in Libya. At first we met—not Jews, but the ruins of their communities. At Tobruk, which we entered after the first conquest, all we could do was to cleanse the synagogue that had been polluted by the enemy and hold Sabbath prayers there. We found no Jews there at all. When we met them later at Derna and Berci, we were surprised to find warm, live Jewish hearts beneath all the ruins and the horrors of war. Shortly afterwards we retreated and were besieged. This time as we penetrated into territory held by the Nazis and Fascists we encountered the ruins of Jewish communities everywhere. We realized that these Jews had paid too dearly for the warm welcome they had given us two years earlier. I'm telling you all this in an introductory way so that you'll understand how surprised we were to meet Jewish communities that had not yet been driven away from their homes. They had suffered horribly but had not yet been exiled. They, too, expected to be sent to the concentration camps at Tunisia, but the Germans had not expected us to attack so soon and the preparations for exiling the Jews were not yet completed. We met these Jews even before we reached Tripoli, and we were immediately engulfed by this brotherly affection that warmed the heart.

I walked about, bewildered and moved by all this, thinking, why should the Jews of Tripoli possess what the Jews of Egypt have lost so completely? Where did they learn this Jewish brotherliness? Whence do they draw their happiness at meeting

their brothers? What saint or wise man is responsible for this? Who was it that taught them to love the Jewish tradition and to long for our country?

March 8, 1943

You envy us, because we are seeing action, because we have the opportunity to "show what we can do—to harness our ardor to the pressure of action." As for us (I do not exclude myself), a feeling of dissatisfaction gnaws constantly at the roots of every good feeling we have. When I see the tank-drivers daily, sitting on top of their turrets, as the trailer carries them to the fronts—and I, as a Jew, am obliged to remain just behind the front-lines and to supply them with ammunition, a sense of shame and humiliation burns in me. When I see Indian and Senegalese soldiers driving armored cars to the front-lines I know that I am not among them because of some damned political calculation. I know that we are better fitted for such tasks. But we are not allowed to. . . . Something else has caused the fire of anger and resentment to flame higher lately:—have you heard about the concentration camps in Algiers that are still in existence? The Jewry of North Africa have been liberated, but the walls of misunderstanding and indifference still stand firm and no one has shaken them.

But why should I weary you with misery? You have enough where you are. Let me tell you about something good. Several soldiers' newspapers have been appearing in the Jewish Motor Units. There is "The Jewish Soldier", "The Well of the Desert" and others. Now we have arranged to have one newspaper for several units that are active in this district. It may be that others will join us as well.

And among the good things that I should tell you of is the Hebrew school that has been organized in the city near which we are stationed. All the children of the Jewish community who have gone without school for years are studying at this school and our comrades are teaching there. We are also going

to centralize the funds that have been saved and it may be that we will be able to organize some help for the Jews who have been freed from concentration camps. That will be a little comfort in the bitter state of mind that we have come to.

March 18, 1943

I have just received your letter with the drawings of the cypress in it for my friend the painter. He is not with me now, but even if he were, I should have asked him to let me have it, and he would probably have agreed. I have hung it up on the wall, and I tell all my friends about you and your school-mates at home.

I was very happy to receive your letter. Do you know why?

During these last few days I have been visiting in the Hebrew school that we, the Jewish soldiers, organized in the nearby city. There were many Jews living in this city, but only very few of them were saved from enemy hands. Many of them were exiled, and many others were murdered. We saw the children in the streets, pale and thin from hunger and suffering. It is three years now since they went to school. We went to our Jewish brothers and said to them: We want to set up a school for your children. They were full of joy at this. We looked for members of our units who had been teachers before they had entered the army. And so we opened a Hebrew school in this country that has been freed of the enemy. How happy the children were to go back to their lessons. At first the little ones were afraid of us. They were used to seeing murderers in uniform—the German and Italian soldiers. But after a few days, even the very little ones knew that we were not murderers in soldiers' dress, but brothers in soldiers' dress.

They study at school for half a day, from morning until noon. At ten o'clock they get a light meal. We share with them the canned milk that we get, and also sugar, jam and tea.

When I visit the school and see seventy little boys and girls, with sad and yet happy eyes, I miss you and Ron and Giura.

March 21, 1943

In one of my letters I told you briefly that we had set up a Hebrew school in the city next to which we are stationed. Each one of the units offered a member as teacher. Four teachers organized the school. The children, bewildered, depressed, and melancholy, were taken in hand by these boys and put into school, after three years of absence from their studies. Every day at ten o'clock they are given a meal. We obtained tea, sugar and milk, flour for white bread, jam and margarine from our units. If you could see how those children eat! It is the only decent meal they have during the day.

And now, three weeks after the school was started, they arranged a *Purim* play and invited us, the soldiers, to attend. The play took place in the hall of a Fascist bank, the very bank where long lines of beaten Jews were corralled, before they were taken to the concentration camps. The hall was packed full. The head of the community opened the gathering with a blessing and welcome. He spoke in Hebrew and his speech was translated into English. After that the English colonel, commander for the whole district, spoke. He praised the Jewish units that had helped the government in the solution of local problems, etc. Finally a boy of fourteen got up on to the pleasantly decorated stage and said: "The children of the school at Benghazi will now present their *Purim* program to the Jewish soldiers. After three years away from their studies the school was set up, and it is now three weeks since it was opened. Therefore our program is short and modest. But we want the soldiers to know that it is offered them in love and affection. This is a *Purim* gift from the Jewish youth of Benghazi to the Jewish soldier." The curtain was raised. At that moment I thought that I was back at Naan, at a play given by our school and our kindergarten. We saw a scene that had been composed by one of our comrades, a teacher. Children are playing at *Purim*

games. Their mother comes in and sends them to sleep. The children lie down on mattresses and fall asleep. The light grows fainter and there is semi-darkness. In the distance you can see the hills of Galilee outlined on the horizon (the decoration was painted by one of our comrades). Behind the scenes a beautiful woman's voice is heard singing, "There are melodies in the mouth of a flute." (The singer was the wife of the head of the community. One of the boys, a teacher, had taught her some Palestinian songs for the play). While she is singing the children are sleeping. Palestinian children enter with palm-leaves in their hands and bands across their foreheads bearing the names of the different settlements in Palestine. They stumble over the sleeping children and ask, "Who are they?" Then the biggest girl among them says, "Do you not recognize them, children? They are our brothers, the children of the Diaspora who have been persecuted by the enemy. We have been waiting for them impatiently, waiting for them to come to us so that together we may rebuild our ancient homeland." One of the children says bitterly, "In every generation there are Hamans who rise up to destroy us—why should we not take the children of the *Galut** and bring them to Palestine so that they may live with us and be happy?" A second child answers, "Patience, children, the gates to our country are closed and the keys are not in our hands, but we have sworn to ourselves that these children shall find a home among us, in their homeland, in the hills of Galilee and in the valleys of Jezreel. We shall not rest or sleep until the remnant of Israel shall return to our motherland." Then the Palestinian children begin singing, "Anu Banu Artza" ("We have come to our land to build and to be rebuilt there.") Near me stood the father of one of the little girls who was acting; he was weeping quietly.

The play went on. Suddenly one little boy whispers, "Sh-sh—they're waking up. The children of the *Galut* are awaking." They rub their eyes and ask: "Where are the children from

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* See footnote on p. 16.

Palestine?" Then the mother enters again and they tell her that children from Palestine have been visiting them. The mother is surprised and astonished but they insist that it was so. One little girl says, "They sang us one of their songs and they swore an oath that they would bring us to Palestine quickly." Then the mother says, "All this was only a dream that you dreamed, children. A beautiful dream, a holy dream about Palestine. It is true that the children of Palestine are waiting for you, and you must learn Hebrew well and be good and strong and perhaps we will all celebrate next year's holiday in Jerusalem." Then she asks, "What was the song, children, do you remember?" And the children burst into song, "We shall come to our land to build and to be rebuilt there!"

Then the audience, with hundreds of Jewish soldiers among them, rose to their feet suddenly and sang with them, "We shall come unto the land to build and to be rebuilt there!" When the lights were lit in the hall many of us were ashamed to lift our heads because of the tears in our eyes. . . .

The program continued. Soldiers and children took part in it alternately. Finally all the school children went up on the stage, stood opposite the soldiers and *"Hatikvah"* burst from their throats with fervor and enthusiasm. When have I ever sung it that way?

April 29, 1943

The eve of the *Seder.* Midnight. To tell you the truth I got a little drunk. All the boys are drunk now. Many of us feel very sad this evening. We arranged the *Seder* out of doors in the courtyard of an Italian farm, by moonlight. It was forbidden to use any lights. We drank and sang a good deal this evening. A group of us sat together, those of us for whom this is the third *Seder* away from home, and poured out our homesickness in singing until we were tired.

# BETWEEN TWO DESERTS

## BETWEEN TWO DESERTS

May 13, 1943

I am writing to you from a new place. You will understand where it is from my address. It is very beautiful here, in many ways. The fruit-trees are blossoming now and their scent is intoxicating and calls up memories of spring evenings at Naan, when the orange-groves are in full bloom. Perhaps that is why the distance away from home seems so depressing. Until now I was still on the same continent and I met Jews everywhere. I could use the Arabic language everywhere I went and I still felt connected with Palestine. This time it is altogether different. I am struck dumb, for the language used here is foreign to me. No one knows Arabic here, and there are no Jews here. This is the first time in my life that I am in a place where I have no language. For the first time I have encountered strange vegetation and a landscape that is foreign to me. Jews are completely unknown here. In a kind of broken pidgin English (I try to use it for conversation . . .) they ask me if the Jews come from the isle of Japan.

I have only one comfort in this place, but a very concrete one: *our proximity to the opposite coast.* This is the only compensation for my feeling of loneliness and distance. But some doubt is mixed with this consolation too. Will not the ill winds that are blowing from Jerusalem triumph, forbidding us to be seen anywhere?* The end of it may be that we will watch the opposite coast but that when the day comes for action we will

* Reference to increasingly hostile attitude of Palestine government with regard to Jewish mobilization in the army and other matters.

be ordered to remain where we are. These doubts and fears gnaw at me continually. But the days to come will prove whether I have taken the shadows of those hills on the horizon for the hills themselves.

. . . Before shipping out we managed to celebrate the First of May. Even though we of the labor movement are in the majority in the unit, we did not wish to force the others to celebrate a holiday that they did not feel was theirs. So we met in the shade of a eucalyptus grove, in the corner of an Italian farm, and celebrated there. On the lapels of our army shirts we wore red poppies that we had picked in the field, and we read and talked of the vision of the future for the worker.

I won't write about us now. We have all been anxious about our friends who were lost at sea.* Among them are names that are so dear to me that I am afraid to utter them. I can't write you about everything. You may have heard of what happened to D. B. from Maoz, A. from Ashdot, M. Z. from Naan, P. from Degania Beit and others. They should have joined us but. . . . However, we don't know the exact number of the losses and who was saved. Perhaps you can write me about this.

Please write me frequently. Tell us about what is happening at home, in the movement and in the *Kibutz.* Send us anything you have that is printed or mimeographed. And write me immediately about what you know of our friends about whom we are so anxious.

May 14, 1943

My dear little girl,

Now you will get a letter from your father with pretty new stamps on it. By this you will know that your father has found his way to another place. Now that the sea lies between you and me, I miss you more than ever.

* Early in 1943 a group of Jewish soldiers, most of them members of communal settlements, were lost at sea when the ship on which they sailed was torpedoed by a German submarine.

I am on an island now. It's strange to live on an island. But I'm not a Robinson Crusoe and have not encountered any wild cannibals. However, the cannibals are not far from me. Not very far at all. They are on the opposite coast, that is very near. About as far as from Maoz to Ashdot-Yaakov, and perhaps a little bit more. That is where the Nazi cannibals are, who have been devouring our people. At night we can hear the explosions of the bombs that our airmen are dropping over there. You can only hear this when the air is very quiet, and the sound is as pleasant to our ears as good music

This island is very beautiful. There are marvellous bays here and everything is quite fascinating. But we shall be very happy to leave this island and to meet with those cannibals face to face. Perhaps we will succeed in saving some of the remnants of our people. And we shall certainly beat them! You remember that when I was home on my last leave, about half a year ago, I was somewhat sad. Then our enemies had reached the gates of Egypt and were threatening our country. I was very sorry to leave our country then and to go away to strange places. But we beat them and chased them all the way to Tunisia. Only yesterday the battle at Tunisia was won. All of Africa is cleansed of these man-eaters. Now we have to penetrate into the lair of these beasts and to strike them a mortal blow. Then, if we strike the savage beast that is called Nazi Germany a final blow, so that it can never rise again—then you and I, dearest daughter, will go out for a long hike through our country. You can prepare a clean white shirt for me for the day of my return. Do you agree?

May 18, 1943

On the eve of embarkation I went into the city to say good-bye to the L. family, with whom I have become very close and affectionate. The father is a wise man and his young son is very intelligent. The mother speaks only Arabic, but she is a

typical Jewish mother, full of motherly kindness. I didn't want to tell them what our destination was, for we are forbidden to do this. I told them that it was likely that we would be shipping out soon and I would probably be so busy that I wouldn't be able to come back to say goodbye. The father understood and said, "We know that you're a soldier and that you're not allowed to tell where you are going, but we understand that you will be leaving soon." He went over to the door, took down the *Mezuza** and put it in my hand. "Take this with you on your way. You have been like a son to us. Watch over this *Mezuza* and the Lord will watch over you and keep you from harm. May you bring to the Jews of Italy the great happiness that you have brought to us, in Tripoli." We parted with much feeling. I kissed the mother's hand as if I were her son. The father embraced and blessed me. When will I ever see them again? And will they be able to come to us in Palestine?

May 21, 1943

Your letter, the leter of a Jewish girl in the army, brought me both joy and sadness. Your description of our country in the spring season awoke such homesickness in me that it was physically painful. It is two and a half years now that I have been wandering about in strange countries, and it is eight months since I had my last leave at home. I have a little girl, aged ten, who writes me letters full of longing, and a son of six who writes me letters (he dictates them to his mother) in which he asks with innocent obstinacy, "Why don't you finish with those Germans and come home now?" I have another boy, a baby of three, who was born after I was already in the army. He scarcely knows me and he, too, protests to his mother that "Giura wants a father like all the other children." And now your letter comes, describing our life at home and unwinding

* See footnote on p. 151.

the spool of my memories and longing that I usually try to cover with a bit of mockery. . . . But don't think that I am angry with you for having aroused this homesickness in me. God forbid.

I was saddened at reading the second part of your letter describing conditions in the women's army unit. So it is. No one knows better than I do the feeling of bitterness that results from living among a multitude of people who seem like grains of sand. It is a kind of nightmare. I have had this feeling for long periods at a time, but I think that we have overcome it to some extent.

Those of you who have volunteered out of a sense of national duty must keep together and form a kernel that will act as the conscience of the unit, so that you will radiate a sense of community and comradeship about you that will draw the weaker, less rooted ones toward you. So it was with us. Many different types who were without a sense of country, home or people became absorbed into us and learned to share our interests and aspirations. This happened because we, the rooted and conscious ones, held firmly together and knew where we were going—because we refused to be drawn into the apathy that army life creates.

May 23, 1943

Today is *Lag B'omer.** Do you know what I keep thinking of today? Ever since morning, the memory of *Lag B'omer* three years ago, my last *Lag B'omer* at home, when we lit a great bonfire and danced a *Hora* with our children on our shoulders, has been filling my mind. Does Ron still remember that *Lag B'omer* when I danced with him sitting on my shoulders? Like every other holiday, I am full of homesickness for you today.

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* See footnote on p. 62.

And life rushes by us here. It is so strange to us. The sky, the people, the language—all are strange and foreign here. Sometimes you feel that you are becoming a stranger to yourself . . .

I am weary, after three years of being away . . .

May 30, 1943

There is a heavy storm outside and I feel very depressed. When I feel depressed I try to escape from it by writing to you. Yesterday we received the lists of the names of our friends who were drowned. They were good and close friends. It was in vain, then, that we wove a web of hopes and illusions for their sakes, hoping that perhaps they had been saved or picked up by other ships . . .

We have been bereaved of many dear comrades and among them friends to whom I was attached by very close ties. The thought that they are gone forever fills me with a kind of horror. We went through so much together and shared so many burdens. We experienced the bitterness of the retreat and the joys of victory together and we shared our pangs of distress at the weakening of our ties with home.

Where is my dear friend, H. C., with his deep feeling and his delightful sense of humor and gift of expression? You probably will remember his name from the pages of "The Jewish Soldier."* We had grown to love each other. And P., from Degania Beit, the good, honest heart whom I learned to love in my first days in the army—and tens of others. One hundred and forty of our boys were drowned that night. Many of them had wives and children, families and parents. Cursed war! But something else oppresses me: *we* were supposed to embark on that same night. The whirligigs of fate.

* *"Hahayal Haivri":* Newspaper of the Jewish soldiers, now published daily in Rome.

Forgive me for being so sad and for writing you this way. What can I do? This evening I sat down in a corner of our newspaper office. On the table in front of me lay the list of names surrounded by a black border. The boys came in, one after the other, quiet and stunned. One comes in, and when I give him the list silently, he sits down, and is silent—and so with a second and a third. There were many of us and all of us silent.

A young boy came in and looked through the list for the name of his friend. He himself escaped death by a miracle on several occasions. The list dropped out of his hands and he whispered, "B's gone. I once gave him my girl's address—so that he would write her if I should be missing. And now *he* . . ."

Another one came in with a hidden fear in his face. I knew why. He had a brother on that list. I looked at him steadily and he looked back and understood. He took my hand that was lying on the table and pressed it, his eyes full of tears. He pushed the list away as I gave it to him, saying, "I know. I could see it in your eyes." . . . And he, too, sat down among the silent mourners.

Forgive me. It is true that we are members of a movement in which death has been our constant companion. Why should we cultivate these feelings? But when we lose comrades like these, we realize how few we have who are fully ready for the trials of the present and the future. How few. And when you lose so many out of so few—a dread of the future comes over you, and weighs on your heart. . . .

June 7, 1943

Thank you for the package. I'll be frank with you—it is easier to be at a distance—it is thanks to you that I can renew the feeling that is the most precious of all—the feeling of a tie

wih home and the *Kibutz,* my home and that of many of my comrades. Your letters and your concern have reached many of them who are here with us.

Today was a sad day for me. I hope I won't seem ridiculous when I explain why. Today I received my son's first letter. My daughter is a great letter-writer and her letters arrive faithfully. But today I received the first letter from my son. When you leave a little boy of three at home and you receive a letter from him at the age of six—quite suddenly—you realize that years have gone by in the interval. And these three years of absence from your children leave a scar on you. Let me tell you a few of the thoughts that go through the mind of a fellow like me while he is passing through such different experiences, when he thinks of his family and says to himself: my children. In those years of longing for their father, a soldier far away, they create in their childish imagination a father surrounded by a kind of halo. I don't know how the soldier that will come home will match the father they have built up for themselves. Will I be able to measure up to this father of theirs? So it is with me, too. I dream about the *Kibutz,* from this great distance, and it seems like an enchanted world, like a fairy-tale. But when I return—won't I be disillusioned by the grim reality?

I have been reading some of the letters that soldiers have received from Palestine, and I have become full of fears. I was not surprised by what has been disclosed to many of you at home. I don't know why it is—but I have always had a skeptical attitude towards our allies. This may be owing to the fact that I was in uniform when the "Patria" was sunk, or because I left comrades behind me in Acre who were no more criminal than I, and who were paying for all of our "guilt."* Nothing will surprise me, fundamentally. But in these letters to the boys here there was something that shocked me. It appears that many, and even the best of our comrades have lived on illusions for years. Hence, their breakdown at this point. The sooner that disillusionment comes for such as these, the better. We have

* See footnote on p. 11.

always known that "the charity of the nations is but sinful," and that "only your own hand will help you," is a lesson that generations have taught us. But when will we learn to *live* according to this lesson?*

Here we live in a new and strange world. Everything is alien to us here, even the summer-rain—it depresses us. And worst of all—I have no language here. It seems that one has to get used to really being in a foreign country. For three years I wandered about on my own continent, after all, but here I feel as if I had been uprooted into another world.

June 12, 1943

You should see "Desert Victory." It's a fine picture and worth seeing. But there is a sting in it. There is no mention whatever of us, the Jewish soldiers in the desert. It would be more correct to say that we were *deliberately* eliminated from it. Even our allies look at us askance and refuse to recognize our share in the battle. Our fate is to be invisible. God forbid that the world should hear of the part that was played by Jewish boys from Palestine in defeating the enemy. Every episode that we took part in was cut and *omitted.*

June 15, 1943

Do you know, dear daughter, that you made me very happy when you wrote me in your letter that you realize that a large group of children is "not so terrible?" I have always been afraid that our children will get used to their own little group and that they will never want to live among a larger group of children. We want millions of Jews to come to our country.

* See footnote on p. 189.

And so we must learn to love a large group and our children must learn to live that way and to want many people at Maoz, at Naan, and in every settlement. It is not fair for us to be small, with few children and only a few comrades. Our country is very small and we have to welcome many Jews from the Diaspora into it, after we free them from the Nazis—and we have to learn to love very many people. Isn't that right, my daughter?

Today we heard on the radio that our brothers in the Warsaw ghetto are still fighting. It is a terrible thing, my daughter, for they are fighting almost empty-handed against tanks and planes and cannon and machine-guns. It is terrible to think that a battle for life and death is being waged there and we are so close—but cannot save them.

June 23, 1943

Together with your letter I received some newspapers with black borders. How is one to bear all this? Lord God, what a human desert is this around us.

I sat in a cinema and watched the film. This was a social film produced by Bevin, a film that revealed the depth of poverty and squalor in which much of the population of England lived before the war. All around me English soldiers were sitting. good, simple boys, from poorer classes themselves and they recognized each alley and each district that they knew with shouts of excitement. But they remained cold and indifferent to the painful problem that Bevin tried to present in these pictures of misery. I, even though this film was not about my home or my people, was more moved by it than they. They were disappointed by it. When I saw them so indifferent even to their own problems, I felt less angry with them and my feelings of resentment were lessened somewhat. You'll probably think me strange for considering everything from this one point of view.

But that's how it is. Ever since we left the Jewish communities in the territory that we conquered, I have been oppressed by a sense of being a stranger and an alien. Besides this, there is the horrible news from the hell in which the Jews of Europe are imprisoned, news that nearly drives one insane. You ask, what would Brenner* say today? I feel that if a normal human being, an average Jew does not learn something new and profoundly painful today—there is no remedy for him ever. It would be a sign that one sense, an important and precious one, had atrophied.

I read that the *Kibutz* called a memorial meeting at Yagur in honor of Zivia and Tosia and their comrades in the Warsaw ghetto.† Did this meeting take place? Tell me about it. You ask in your letter: How did we come by such people? I am certain that there are many among us who are like them. Only the ashes of years have covered the fire and kept it down. I feel that in the light of the heroism of the rebellion in the ghetto many tens of thousands of sisters and brothers to Zivia and Tosia will rise and follow in their footsteps.

June 30, 1943

You made me very happy, my daughter, with your letter. Thank you very much for everything. Your picture with the plaster on your hand is very good. Only the picture of the others is a little blurred. You probably pranced about like young colts and refused to sit still for a moment—and so the picture was blurred. And thank you for your lovely painting. Only it

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* See footnote on p. 98.

† Tossia Altman and Zivia Lubetkin—two young girls, leading members of the Zionist Pioneer Organization (*Hechalutz*) in Poland, were among the organizers and commanders of the revolt in the Warsaw ghetto. At first they were both reported to have died in the ghetto battles. Zivia Lubetkin, however, survived the Nazi occupation. She is now in liberated Poland.

looks as though the faucet painted next to the little room must have been open and a lot of water wasted. I closed it. Thank Nira for the little quiet painting that she sent me. The picture of the flowers in a vase is pasted on the wall. Your picture is there, too, with the cypress that you sent my friend the painter, but he saw how much I wanted it and made me a present of it.

You ask me where I am. It's forbidden to me to tell you. If I write you where, the "man with the scissors" who is as anxious as we are for a speedy victory (and he knows how badly fathers and children miss each other, for he reads all the letters that they write) will cut it out of the letter. It's forbidden for soldiers to write details that might fall into enemy hands. It is true that my daughter is an ally, and he knows this. But it's a long way until my letter reaches her, very long indeed, and our "comrade with the scissors" is afraid that the letter may not reach you. So I can't tell you a word.

My dear little Dvora, you ask me impatiently when I'm coming home, after all? Is this the time to think of such things? Surely you have heard about the revolt in the Warsaw ghetto. Our brothers were surrounded there and doomed to a certain death and they rebelled and died fighting. Among them were young girls who had stolen across frontiers and who returned to the ghetto to encourage the rebels. In days like these, my daughter, how can we spend time in longing for each other? All we want now is to reach there as quickly as possible; perhaps it will be possible to save some of the remnants of our people. And if—may God forbid—we are too late it will be the end of millions of our people . . .

So it is, my own daughter. I believe that you realize all this as much as I do. In the poem that you sent me you said that you "hear their desperate cries" . . .

July 14, 1943

First of all I want to pass on to you the thanks of our whole unit for the gift of books that we received from the secretariat of the *Kibutz.* We received the package of books in good condition. During the days of our advance in Libya, Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, and the months of sand-storms and winter-rains, our library was emptied of books. These books came just at the right time.

The news of our victory came at the right time, too. Now you see that we are putting our foot into their boot, so that we may advance farther up to the north. . . . That boot! Even before the war, when I used to climb up on the roof of our main building and look about me at the surrounding countryside, seeing our socialist settlement surrounded by other ones, strange to our way of thinking, I would feel a kind of dread in my heart and the painful question would present itself: What will happen to our communal settlements, surrounded as they are by a capitalist society? How will our children be brought up here? How will we be able to cope with the economic competition against us? And when you would nurse the dream in your heart that Palestine, this Land of Israel, into which you and your generation are pouring their strength and their sweat, will be an oasis in the desert, with the desert all around it, that damned boot would appear in your imagination, like a threatening shadow—and it was no morbid or deceptive imagination that bred these fears. We went through the riots of 1936 to 1939 when many of our brothers were blown up by mines on the roads, mines exactly like the mines that we found at Tobruk. In Tobruk we discovered not only those mines, but also the devices used to transport them. "Sugar-Export" was marked on the cases packed with mines. When I told the officer in charge he smiled and said, "Do you think that is something we don't know? There are more interesting proofs than that in our archives."

So our hearts pounded with a double joy when we thrust Graziani back on the road to victory. We lived in a state of exultation in those days. The steel scales of her colonial empire are falling off the coat-of-mail that the beast has worn so arrogantly. Now we are on the threshold of their homeland. In a little while we shall invade it. . . .

Is there any truth in the rumor that Zivia and Tosia are still alive?

August 9, 1943

You know, my little girl, that there are always two feelings that exist side by side in our hearts. One is sympathy for the suffering of our people and the glad acceptance of the obligations that it imposes upon us; the second is the craving for happiness. When I remember what the Germans and Italians did to us and how they were at the very gates of our country—so that if they had invaded it, the country would have been devastated and the Jewish community annihilated—then the feeling of homesickness and fatigue vanishes. In fact that feeling grows red with embarrassment and sinks deep into the heart, and the queen-feeling seats herself on the throne of the heart and the mind. This is the feeling that must win.

And now we are winning foothold after foothold. Soon we shall conquer all of Sicily and after that we shall besiege Rome. Do you know what day it will be tomorrow? *The Ninth of Ab.** The day on which the temple was destroyed. In Rome the arch of victory through which the captives of Jerusalem were led before Titus is still standing. We hope to reach that same arch of Titus, not as defeated captives, but as victors. As we penetrate into the enemy's country we shall meet with the remnants of our unhappy brethren. And we shall free them and bind up their wounds and feed them and perhaps we shall also be able to bring many of them to Palestine. When we

* *Tisha B'av:* Fast day in commemoration of the destruction of the Temple.

attacked across the Egyptian border into the Libyan desert we met some of our brethren who had survived. We shared our bread with them and confiscated the enemy's stores of flour so that we could divide it among them. We opened a Hebrew school for children in Benghazi and we left some of our soldier-comrades there as teachers. We hope that we will be able to do the same things when we get to our brothers in Europe.

And you, my little girl, try to enthrone in your heart the feeling of duty. The day will come when I will return, and it's not so very distant. Then, as I already wrote, you will have to find a clean white shirt for me in our wardrobe and we shall go out together for a long, long walk. . . .

And until then, my daughter, write me letters. For your father has two feelings in his heart, too. One of them misses his daughter and longs for her, and wants to meet her soon, and the second feeling knows that we must be ready to give everything to our people. When he gets letters from his daughter his tiredness lessens and it is easier for him to bear the pain of longing. You want your father to be strong, so that he can give all his strength for victory. That is why you must write to him. . . .

August 10, 1943

Tonight is the *Ninth of Ab.* This is the night of mourning for our people. Those who survive are mourning in Poland, and who knows what tomorrow will bring for them. They are mourning in the ghettos and the concentration-camps and prisons. Wherever they are, they are mourning. Two thousand years ago our fate was decided. The end of the Warsaw ghetto came as it did because the battle of Judea was decided in this way between our people and those who wished to destroy it. If we had not been defeated in that battle, we would have been a nation of fifty to sixty million, leading among the nations of the East. The whole of western civilization might have developed

differently. But the thing was decided in this way and not otherwise. For two thousand years now we have wandered and been slaughtered, been burned and exiled. A horrible fate. But it was our fate and we bore it with pride. And because of this there is something fine and sacred in our spirit that is not in the spirit of those who have not passed through so much suffering. But today—we should have only a single desire: *NOT TO DIE!* We must be ready to do anything so that our people will live. If, after two thousand years of suffering and waiting for the Messiah to come and to redeem us by his divine power, we have finally realized that there can be no Messiah for our people except for ourselves—and that Palestine is our *only* and *last* place of refuge, we must become aware of this with more than our conscious selves alone. We must live this belief with our flesh and bone, we must be ready to give our lives for it and bring up our children so that they will be ready to give gladly of their bodies and souls so that our people may be saved. Sitting alone on the *Ninth of Ab,* overseas, this duty that we have taken upon ourselves to perform is seen in a new light. On ordinary days when you are gnawed by homesickness, your tiredness makes you petty and vile. But on this night, the night of the *Ninth of Ab,* it is impossible not to hear the weeping of our people. I hear it inside me and I would like all of you to listen to this weeping so that you will hear it inside you, all of you, Ron, Giura and Dvora.

I am enclosing a German prayer-book that was used by their soldiers. Keep it. Today they need prayers, those beasts, but no prayer will help them. The curses of the millions of Jews whom they have murdered will pursue them to their bitter end.

I am also sending you a small Nazi flag. Keep it in our room. Tell Ron that this is the symbol that robbed him of his father for three long years—and who can tell how much longer? But if his father sends this flag home, it is a sign that he has defeated it and that the day is near when it will disappear completely and then father will come back and will never go overseas again.

August 11, 1943

This year, too, we had a ceremony of mourning on the *Ninth of Ab.* We presented a "program" that included passages from the days of the destruction of the temple to our voluntary mobilization for the army in the present. It took place out-of-doors. Around the benches our cars were arranged in a kind of "N" shape and our lamps shone in the surrounding darkness. Facing the audience was a large map of Palestine, drawn by one of our comrades and on it several points were illuminated, the points at which the last stand against the Romans was made: Masada, Jerusalem, Beitar and Yodefet. On one side of the map were the words in large letters: YOU ARE NOT ALONE! All this was lit by lamps and torches. A prayer was recited by a rabbi, an army chaplain, who had come as a guest. After the prayer and before the "presentation" began, we held a short memorial for a comrade who was killed that week. He was an illegal immigrant, without a home in Palestine, and his only home, like that of many, was the company. After the memorial our performance began. It was something very fine. The rabbi was, as he said, deeply moved. After it was over a large group of us, officers, men and comrades, sat together and sang until it was very late. . . .

August 12, 1943

I am sorry that I am not permitted to write you about the way in which we finally left the continent of Africa behind us and embarked northward, towards Europe. Even if I don't describe it to you, you can imagine what an experience this was for us, the natives among us. We had never stepped on European soil in our lives. The ship brought us to a British island, not far from that coast. . . .

For the time being we are having a quiet respite and something of a vacation. We are living in an enormous building that was formerly a convent. The hall in which fifty of us sleep could hold the whole of Naan inside it.

The island is very beautiful. It has wonderful bays encircling its coast. The cities are built on rocky coasts and there are stairs and narrow paths that go down to the ports.

All of the population here is living in caves. It is easy to dig in these limestone cliffs. It is strange to see the network streets and pathways in the depths of the earth. In the days of the "Blitz over Malta" the island was bombed very heavily. Every second house was destroyed. But the enemy failed to accomplish what he had set out to do. On the contrary, the island is now serving as a fortress and a bridge for the next attack to be launched. The Italian coast is very close from here. At night we can see the flashes of the exploding bombs that we are dropping over there.

Today the Germans and Italians ceased fighting in Tunisia. Hundreds of thousands of enemy soldiers laid down their arms and gave themselves up as prisoners. It is a great victory. But the rejoicings of victory do not silence the painful questions that pound through one's brain continually: *What will become of us, the Jews?* All the signs seem to point to the fact that the world of dog-eat-dog will remain as such for us.

When the convoy anchored in the port of this beautiful island, the coast was swarming with crowds who had come out to welcome us. Women and children shouted from all the cliffs and ruined houses, waving their handkerchiefs and uttering cries of joy. The English soldiers, too, welcomed us with respect: the boys of the Eighth Army, Montgomery's boys. During all the time that we were pursuing the retreating Germans, these islanders were undergoing a continual siege and bombardment. Ships weren't able to approach the island. Food supplies were meager and there was actual hunger. Nevertheless, it is we who go about here as heroes.

We arrived here during the blossom period. The scent of the blossoming trees here in the evenings reminds me of the scent of the orange-groves and makes me homesick. But opposite me is the coastline, a distance of only ten minutes by air, and that coastline beckons to me and calls me. . . .

When I recall our sea-trip, my stomach turns over. When I got out on deck I said to myself, "Listen, you native Palestinian, you had plenty of bombs at Tobruk, but you've never been in danger of sea-sickness before. Don't be excited and do the first think that comes into your head. Let the others vomit. But you—do without it. Or, at least, be the last one to reach that stage." I put on my life-belt, a kind of jacket that you wear over your back and chest that keeps you afloat for some hours in the water. I lay down on the deck and waited for some sea-sickness to come along. I deserve a prize — many of the boys vomited, but I refused to. I can't say that I felt like an old sailor. But I didn't do any vomiting.

August 13, 1943

I am sending a number of poems by a fine boy who volunteered from one of our younger groups in Palestine. From time to time I fight with him until he lets me see the poems at the bottom of his knapsack. Read some of them and you will see how fine they are.

I should tell you that our soldiers don't read poems much. But whenever we see any of his poems, it evokes a warm response from all. The value of these poems lies in the fact that they express the inner experience of each one of us, a deeply intimate thing. Every soldier hides this corner in his heart and watches over it lest anyone discover it. But just because he is so fearful that it will be discovered, he covers it up with rags of cynicism so that no one will notice it. Often, however you find that this superficial cynicism that is only a covering, becomes a part of the man's inner self and penetrates into his innermost depths. These poems, in their warm simplicity, in the candid

honesty that they reveal, tear the veils of cynicism away from the hearts of many of these soldiers. They meet their own intimate and secret feelings face to face for the first time and something in them is shaken by it.

September 9, 1943

During the last few days a number of Russian prinsoners-of-war have reached us here. They were freed by the Eighth Army and for the time being they have settled down in our unit until they can be sent back to their country. They are simple, hearty village boys. We have heard some interesting stories from them. You realize then that what you read in books or the newspapers is not everything. There are many things, both great and small, that you can only hear from the lips of the people themselves. And they talk. They're very simple and trustful, and they're happy to find themselves in a unit where many of the boys know Russian.

One evening we sat on the porch with them and sang. It appears that all the Russian songs that we know at home are unfamiliar to them. They are the children of the revolution and they sing other songs.

Something amusing happened. In another Jewish unit that is stationed nearby is a boy from Yagur whom you know. His name is P. The boys from that unit are very envious of our luck in having these Russians come to us and they sometimes come to "smell out" some news from Russia. One morning P. appeared on this kind of mission, eager to meet one of "our" Russians and to talk with them.

In our unit is an old-timer who came from Russia a long time ago. He was a foreman in the *Solel-Boneh.** He speaks Russian very well and has a long moustache. I suggested that he take the "Palestine" off his epaulettes, so that he wouldn't be recognized as a Palestinian (the Russian prisoners are wearing

* *Solel Boneh:* Cooperative society of the Jewish Federation of Labor for building and public works.

our uniforms because they came to us in rags). He could then appear before P. as a Russian soldier. Before the appointment he made sure, by looking through a crack in the shutters, that he had never met P. in Palestine at any time. When he was sure of this P. was brought to the editorial room in which the "Russian" was sitting, together with one of our boys who knows Russian, who presented P. to him as a member of a *"Kolchoz"* in Palestine and the "interview" began. P. asked questions and the "Russian" replied in fluent Russian. Afterwards the Russian asked questions and P. answered. Then the "Russian" delivered a long lecture to P. on Russia, the *Kolchozi* and the attitude of the Red Army soldiers to Zionism. He revealed that the Red Army soldiers were versed in the affairs of the *Kibutz*—and *our Kibutz* in particular. The conversation went on, getting brighter and brighter, and a real friendship seemed to be springing up between the interviewer and his subject. Among other things the "Russian" told P. that there was a soldier in his company who had been in the *Chalutz* movement in Poland who had told him about a large commune in Palestine, near Haifa. He thought that the name of the com-commune was "Ya-Ya-Yagur." P. jumped out of his seat with a cry of joy, embraced the "Russian" and cried: "Yagur! But I come from there!" He got so excited that he nearly wept, and he was so completely beside himself that he did not notice the way in which I poured some cold water on the head of the boy acting as the Russian, so as to keep him from rolling under the table with laughter.

At the end of the conversation we suggested to P. that he tell the members of his unit all about the things that he had heard from "Ivan" at their next Saturday meeting. We got ourselves ready to visit them at this meeting and to die laughing. But, unfortunately, the story got around and even reached the ears of P. himself. If you hear one day that an attempt has been made to murder me you will understand that it was P., trying to shoot me in revenge for pulling his leg in this way. It's a long time since we laughed so heartily. . . .

September 29, 1943

Let me tell you a funny story that began with a bet and may end with an operation. One day I got into an argument with one of the boys, a fat, good-natured fellow called S. My view was that we were due to embark for Italy from here, while his was that we were to be brought back home. You have to understand the psychological basis for an argument of this kind: —the tormenting desire to get out of this damned place. In the midst of the argument we made a bet between us and, owing to the fact that my friend is supporting his old mother and I am always wasting my money on pictures, it was agreed between us that we wouldn't bet any money that we didn't have. What could we bet on, then? Now listen to what we thought up: after we leave this place and reach whatever is to be our destination the boy who loses the bet will have to come to the editorial room daily at noon and the boy who wins the bet will climb up on his back with his tin plate and knife and fork and ride to the dining-room in this way. This will be repeated for thirty days. Since I may not be permitted to write to you whether we arrive in Italy or are taken back, you will be able to gather the truth of the matter from what happens. If I write you one day that I rode to lunch on S.'s back, you'll know from this that I am in Italy. And if I write you from somewhere, for example a hospital, you'll understand that we are back in Tripoli and that I took S., my friend, on my back once or twice—he weighs nearly 300 pounds. These are the things that occupy us now, while the opposite coast goes up in flames. . . .

October 2, 1943

A year ago today the attack began and El Alamein became an historic term. Certain experiences of a year ago were etched deeply into the heart, as if with a white-hot iron. Here they are:

In Cairo, on the eve of our departure for El Alamein.—The streets are full of troops marching to the front. On the pavements stands a curious crowd with astonished expressions on their faces. In their wily eyes you seem to see the signs of scorn and malicious pleasure. Suddenly, among the crowd of civilians I see a woman, crowned with white hair, wringing her hands with grief. Her eyes are full of sorrow and her lips move, as if uttering a prayer. She looks so isolated and solitary in the midst of the hostile crowd that I push my way over to her and say to her, *"Shalom."* She was a Jewess, as I thought.

I visited in Jewish houses there. Suitcases were standing at the door and there was panic in the air. People were rushing about trying to get visas for other countries. I asked for the leaders of the community, those active in Zionist work—all of them had fled. Anyone who had the means ran away. Only T. remained. T., who could have gone home so easily, remained at his post.

On the steps of the synagogue I met two Jewish soldiers from South Africa. In the synagogue they were reading the Psalms for the day of calamity. A Jewish boy, a native of Egypt, told me that people were taking turns. Psalms were being read for twenty-four hours of the day. And the South Africans asked in astonishment: "Psalms?—You should get ready to fight!" But the Jewish boy, a native of Egypt, lowers his eyes in confusion.

The Jewish Soldiers' Club was closed. The signs had been taken down and hidden away. The Egyptian superintendent laughed at us to our faces, "Finished, the Jews are finished. The Germans are coming." In another second I would have raised my hand to strike him in the face, but I stopped when I saw the frightened expression on the face of my Jewish guide.

In the street car in Cairo I met a New Zealand soldier. He saw "Palestine" on my epaulettes and asked me where I was from. He was returning to his company after having been sick and sent to convalesce in Palestine. He showed me some photographs and said: "Kfar Vitkin." He said that he was going to learn Hebrew, he had an English-Hebrew grammar with him.

He wanted to answer the letters that the children would write him from Palestine. "Do you know—I was raised in an orphanage and I have no relatives in New Zealand. There are a few families that I am friendly with in Kfar Vitkin." And he kissed a photograph that had two children in it. "If I'm lucky enough to come out of this safely, I want to go back to them and open a shoemaker's shop in Kfar Vitkin."

A strange encounter.

On our way to El Alamein we passed through Cairo. We stopped for a hasty meal in the desert behind the city. Suddenly a car appeared, filled with lots of Jewish girls in the services and driven by one of them. They had come to say goodbye to us. On their faces we could see that they envied us and they resented the fact that they were only in the auxiliary services behind the front. As we began to leave they stood up on the back of the automobile and sang, *"Shalom, shalom, shalom aleichem!"* They seemed very lovable at that moment. Even the whirring of engines and the chugging of planes could not drown out their farewell song.

On the battle fields of El Alamein. "The soil on which a German foot has trod will never be given up." Yes, they won't give it up. There are graves everywhere. Crosses on grave mounds—how forlorn these graves of those arrogant "supermen" look. And the thought burns within you that you are fortunate to be looking at these graves. May they be cursed for having brought us to the point where we feel like this!

The days passed and weeks followed and good news seemed to tread on the heels of good news. On to North Africa! Hurrah for the Yankees! Now the Germans will have to cope with a two-front war in the desert!

Column after column rushes forward. We exchange a glance of deep understanding with the tank drivers. "On to Benghazi!" Suddenly one of the tank gunners jumps off the turret, looks at our Star of David signs curiously and shouts to us, *"Shalom, aleichem, Jews!"*

October 7, 1943

The winter has really settled in. Dark clouds hang over the world and the rain comes down. The air is damp and wet and you feel as though the dampness has penetrated into your very soul. The English seem to feel very much at home on a day like this—the weather reminds them of their home country. But I, who was brought up in a warm climate, feel sad. The clouds crawl slowly and heavily through the sky and seem to weigh down on the roofs.

Besides all this we have just received some newspapers from home. The whole business of the trial and everything related to it seem to bring cold winter upon us.* Now, after three and a quarter years of serving in the army, we are cut to the heart. It was at me and my comrades that the speech of the prosecutor for the Crown was directed when he attacked the *Histadrut*† and the Jewish community at home. But then—is there anything new in all this? Did we go to war for the sake of someone other than ourselves? We went to war because Hitler declared war against us. Because Hitlerism made *our* annihilation its aim. We went to war because the fight of the Jews for survival is our fight. But when a pile of filth is dumped over your head by one of your fighting allies this doesn't make your feeling of participation in the war any easier. And I know that this is only a beginning. There is someone in England who thinks that the way to solve the political muddle in Palestine is to hand us over to the Arabs as a permanent minority. But this shall not be! It will never happen because we know, only too well, what it means to remain a minority. If our fate is to be a

* In Summer 1943 the Palestine government brought to trial two young Jews accused of smuggling arms from British arsenals in the Near East. The prosecutor for the government tried to implicate the Jewish Agency in the smuggling of arms. This caused great resentment among Jews in Palestine and other countries.

† See footnote on p. 83.

minority, there would be no reason for us to flee from Poland and from Germany and to devote decades of pioneering and thousands of lives to the creation of our community in Palestine. The time has finally come for us to say: Enough! We will not be slaughtered any more. In Poland and in Germany we were faced with this horrible fate. In Palestine it shall not be. What I and my generation will not be able to finish, our children shall finish in their time. For this we are ready to give our lives.

Autumn winds are blowing, cold and chilling. Our warm army clothes don't protect us against this cold. It's cold in the heart. A kind of helpless anger surges inside you, and together with this there is the feeling of being on a ship that is caught on a sand-reef. . . .

I don't know whether you've read the little book that I rereceived from Palestine today. It's called, "From a Prison Camp in Germany." A fine little book. It's a collection of letters from S. Hacohen who was taken prisoner-of-war in Greece. He was taken prisoner at the same time as B. A.; they were both officers. While he was in captivity he suddenly discovered that he wanted to paint. He had never done this before. In his letters to his wife and daughter he used to enclose pencil-sketches—drawn from his life as a prisoner, with portraits of the comrades he was living with. The military censor was rather easy with regard to these pictures and they reached Palestine safely. They were published together with his letters. The letters are very simple and short, for prisoners-of-war are greatly restricted.

October 21, 1943

I have have no good news today—I'm still in the same place, eaten up with envy of the boys who have already had the luck to leave.

Many of my comrades have fallen into a state of apathy and laziness that arouses all kinds of fears when I consider them.

We're really hungry for action and this long wait is very depressing and seems to weaken our sense of life. This situation has produced a number of curious repercussions. Many of the boys have adopted dogs. If you could see the tenderness with which they take care of them. A human being has to find something on which to project his love and affection, and if he has neither women nor children for this, he finds dumb creatures instead. I, too, made a search for some young puppies, but I found some children instead. There are a lot of hungry children wandering around here; they come to us mealtimes to ask for the remains of our food. I have become their patron and protector. They come to ask for my help when one of the boys objects to them. But, after all, everything is very sad and boring here. I read a little, but my mind feels as if it had dried up. I'm afraid that if I go on I'll drag you into this state of melancholy too.

October 22, 1943

Yesterday I received the news of the death of the poet Saul Tchernichovsky. The generation at whose knees we were brought up is disappearing. I remembered a little "affair" that I had with him. Some years ago, before the war, I took part in a meeting at Naan that was discussing the program for the *Seder* night. The suggestion was made that some well-known person be invited. I was reminded of a curious correspondence that I had had with Tchernichovsky and suggested that we invite him to our *Seder.* The suggestion was accepted.

This is the story of that "affair." One evening when I was putting Ron to bed when he was very small he said, "Father—sing me the song that you like so much." I was surprised at this and asked, "What song do you mean?" "The song that you sing to yourself quietly, when you're feeling sad." I was still surprised and said: "Which one?" And the child began to sing,

"Smile, smile—" but could go no further with it. Then I realized what song he meant and I sang it to him to the very end. Then I told him that in my childhood my grandmother used to sing that same song to me (my mother died when I was a baby). My grandmother used to tell me that my mother had loved this song very much and that she used to rock me to sleep with it. I told my son all these things, and as I sat in my room I thought about how this song had been the possession of four generations and had become a kind of heritage. I wrote to Tchernichovsky, telling him that it would undoubtedly be pleasant for a Hebrew poet, in his unrewarding career, to hear that four generations had loved one of his poems. . . . I wrote him this and sent the letter to him offhandedly. In a few days I received a reply from him. He wrote with great joy that the day on which he had heard this had been the happiest of his life and that he was eager to meet Ron and his parents. And so the poet allowed himself to be persuaded and came to us for our *Seder* night.

Here is the story of the poet's meeting with Ron. Ron was very happy to meet a "grandfather" with a "moustache that was like none he had ever seen before." But when the poet told him that he was also a children's doctor, Ron slipped out of his arms and announced that he hated him, because he hates children's doctors. . . . With great effort I managed to soothe him and to win him round. On the next day he was still keeping away from the poet because of the stigma of his profession, but finally the two of them made up and became great friends.

This is the story of my "affair" with Tchernichovsky. I wrote him again from here and asked him to write a "Song of the Soldiers." He replied in a sad letter referring to his tiredness and age. And now he is gone.

November 4, 1943

My dear little girl,

In your letter you have good news for me when you tell me that you and your comrades have joined the *Noar Haoved.** This is a holiday for me, my daughter. If you could only know how happy it made me to think that both you and your father were in the same movement.†

Do you know that when your grandfather and grandmother dreamed of returning to Zion, while they were still in the *Galut* and wished to come to Palestine and to join the ranks of its builders, they had to rebel against their parents? Parents did not wish their children to leave them and to go to Palestine in those days. There was a battle of the generations, between fathers and sons. The fathers did not understand the desires and aspirations of their sons and the sons had to be ruthless and to hurt their parents. In this way a great deal of pain and suffering and humiliation were inflicted both on the parents and their sons. And afterwards, too, when these pioneers built settlements and had children, there were some among them who did not wish to continue with the work that their parents had begun. They felt estranged from work and from the agricultural life, and many farms were abandoned for lack of heirs in the new generations. We have been fortunate enough to see one generation holding out its hands to the generation before it.

My father and mother built the first *Moshav*‡ in Palestine, and I continued with their ideal in building the first *Kvutza* of the *Noar Haoved,* and my daughter, as she grows up, will continue with the same ideal. . . . So we see parents and their children holding each other's hands in a single circle; link is fastened to link and the chain is unbroken . . . and the heart is full as on a holiday.

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* See footnote on p. 48.

† The author is himself one of the founders of the *Noar Haoved.*

‡ See footnote on p. 55.

And another thing, my daughter. We have always been afraid because our children who are born and brought up in our settlements know nothing of the *Galut,* have never seen the misery of our people with their own eyes, and did not experience in their own lives what workers and the children of workers have to bear in the outside world, where little children have to subject their weak young bodies to hard work at an early age. We were fearful lest our children would be alien and estranged from the children of workers and the poor. But now you are all in the same movement as the poor children of Jerusalem, Tiberias, Haifa and the poor suburbs of Tel Aviv. These children are poor and they earn their living with great difficulty. Many of them don't go to school, because they have to make a living for themselves. And now that you are in the *Noar Haoved* you will learn to know the children that suffer and are hungry. When you will grow a little older you will go to the cities and you will meet the children of the cities and the poorer neighborhoods face to face. Then you will tell them about the *Kibutz* and about the country so that they will learn that there is another kind of life, more just and beautiful and that they, too, can live that way. You shall bring with you a sense of brotherhood and the sharing of a common fate. That is why I wish to celebrate this day.

"For work, for defense, and for peace"—this is the slogan of the *Noar Haoved.* You will wear this on your blouse proudly, but this must be more than a mere slogan, you must inscribe it on your heart.

You must know that there has been bad news from Palestine lately. You, too, and the other children, must realize what is required of you. All of us want to save our people and to build up our country that has been laid waste for so many generations. For our country can be a home for our unhappy and persecuted people, and what my father and his generation were not able to accomplish in their day, I in my generation have continued, and that which we shall leave unfinished, you and

your generation will continue. And so, too, the generation after you will build and continue and in this way our aim will be achieved.

*For work, for defense and for peace!*

November 23, 1943

We received a newspaper that had been delayed which had an account of what took place at Ramat Hakovesh.* Heavens! I have been walking about here in pain and fury. I shut my eyes and let my mind carry me away. I remember everything that has been inflicted on my people—in the Warsaw ghetto, in Treblinka and the cellars of Bendin,† and then I return to the scene at Ramat Hakovesh. My blood seems to rush to my head when I consider that you too might be beaten by one of the police with Ron looking on.

Suddenly memories of the past rise up in my mind. It was during the first World War. I was a child then and I seemed to absorb all the fears that were rife in those days when Palestine was under Turkish rule. In the distance we could hear the cannon of the conquering British army, and our hearts pounded as we heard it, for it sounded like a symphony of liberation. I shall never forget the shouts of rejoicing when we first saw the British soldiers coming toward us, and especially when we saw the fiery Australian cavalry. They came with good news for us, for the Jews in Palestine and for our people in the Diaspora. We were like prisoners let out of a dark cell, who gulp down the happiness of the sunshine and the light. . . .

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* The communal settlement *Ramat Hakovesh* was raided by British troops supposedly in search of deserters from the Polish army. Finding some arms hidden in the settlement, they attempted to round up the settlers. In the course of this clash between the unarmed settlers and the armed troops, one member of the community was killed and many others, including women, were severely beaten.

† Nazi extermination centers in Poland in which many hundreds of thousands of Jews found their death.

For us, the children, those days were ten times more wonderful than the grown-ups could imagine. We clung to the soldiers, we followed them as they walked through the streets and exulted at the privilege of taking them where they wanted to go; our hearts were full of gratitude to them—the liberators.

But along with these joyous memories, another, bitter experience was etched into my soul, an experience that I shall never forget. In those same days I became friendly with an Indian who used to come to our colony riding on his mare. He often lifted me up on the horse to sit beside him, and sometimes let me take the reins into my hands. I would be radiant with joy at the opportunity. It was this same Indian cavalryman that I visited at the nearby camp of Indian soldiers.

One day I went to visit them, in order to say goodbye to them before they set out for the front. As I came through the entrance gate I was met by a kind of strange, sorrowful silence and I wondered at it. I approached the large tent in the center of the camp, feeling very embarrassed, and when I reached it I became rooted to the ground. The large tent with its many folds was packed with angry, sorrowful Indians. Many of them were standing, and all of them were listening intently to one of the soldiers who stood leaning on the center pole, reading from the pages of a newspaper, his voice quivering with a kind of helpless bitterness. After a few moments I discerned the figure of my Indian friend in the semi-darkness and my heart grieved for him.

From what I was told afterwards this was the picture that was in their minds: a village in India, an excited crowd in the streets, and an alien police force trampling the crowd, their clubs rising and falling.

I'm in another bad mood. Not because of the dreary days or the dark nights, nor because of the bad news from our home. This week it was a full half year since we shipped out from one continent to another. It's a full half-year now that we

have been living in a kind of empty interval of waiting, a waiting that is a kind of slow torture: *how much longer?* We are in the grip of a continual anxiety concerning the coast that faces us to the north. In our imagination we try to face the enemy, so that we may tear down the beast once and for all and save the last remnants of our people from his savage grip. But we are weary with waiting. . . .

I still remember the emotion I felt when the ship weighed anchor and set out from the African coast. The deck was dense with our comrades. All of them were wearing white life-belts and there was a feeling of joy in our hearts: *at last!* The dawn rose on the opposite shore and there was a feeling of a new beginning in our hearts. This was a solemn moment: our mission is really *beginning.* And we seemed to see our brothers in the valley of sudden death.

We left the desert behind us, and the ship cut a path through the sea and still our eyes were chained to the sight of receding shores, vanishing on the horizon. "Goodbye, desert!" we seemed to be whispering. We made our peace with the desert in that hour and were reconciled to its filthy dust-storms and its parched sand dunes. Now we were embarking for populated places where the desert was made by human hands—for Europe, that had become a land of desolation for our people.

The coastline disappeared—and we were not yet in sight of a new one. We were in the midst of the sea. A blue and tranquil sea stretched from one horizon to the other, peaceful and soothing, and the sound of the waves seemed to mix with the quiet happiness in our hearts.

Do you remember the little sketch by G. Shofman that we read one night of heavy rain? It was called "On the Same Globe." We used to fear that we, in Palestine, would become callous to the sufferings of our people in the *Galut,* but the earth was shaken in our generation and we felt that we were all "On the Same Globe." The cry of our slaughtered brothers

seemed to penetrate into our very being. That is why our hearts were so full as our convoy set out on its way. Now at last we were drawing near to that very soil.

But we have been suffering the pangs of waiting between one desert and another—a full half year now!

The coast opposite us is so near—the human desert that the Nazis have made. When will we invade it at least and deliver a message of hope to the remnant of Israel? When will we bring back her sons and her orphaned little ones—to their *home?*