

אברהם הר (Herr) "Sonny" Har

גדעוני Gideoni

Radio Operator for the Clandestine Service During Israel's 1948 War of Independence



Biography: Avraham (also Avram, also Sonny) Herr was the son of Aaron Shalom Herr. Aaron was the second oldest of 10 Herr siblings from the Lithuanian shtetl called Vobolnik (Vabalninkas), closest to the town of Shavli, Lithuania. They lived on a farm.

The Russian Cossacks would periodically get drunk and maraud in primarily Jewish villages – setting fire to people's property and generally harassing them. Avram's grandfather, Joseph Herr, rebuilt the farm three times. On the fourth occasion, he decided that the family should leave for America.

Joseph had 10 children: Harry, Aaron (father of Avram), Sadie, George, Julius, Krendel, Rose, Rahel, Louis, Helen.

As Aaron Herr had emigrated from Lithuania to America with other family members, Avram was a New Jersey boy whose Zionist family subsequently moved to Palestine in the 1930's. In Palestine/Israel, Sonny used the last name Har, as in the Hebrew word for mountain. He moved back and forth between Israel and the USA several times. This is the story of his radio experiences, taken from his autobiography.

AVRAHAM HAR'S STORY

In the spring of 1941 I was invited to an interview at the offices of the Labor Federation (Histadrut), which also served as the headquarters of the Hagana, the clandestine defence force of the Jewish population in Palestine. Throughout my youth in Avichail (a moshav near Netanya) I had been a member of the Hagana, participating in village defence activities, and later on assisting in the illegal immigration operations in our area. At the interview I was offered a place in a wireless operators course which was about to open soon. The participants would later operate stations either in agricultural settlements or join the Palmach units which were being recruited to defend the Jews in the country in the case of an invasion by the Germans, or their allies in Palestine or elsewhere in the Middle East. I immediately agreed. This was the kind of challenge that I had been waiting for. I was given a date to report to a certain spot in the old fair grounds near the Tel Aviv port.

On the assigned date I walked through the rusting gate of the old fair grounds, to find a conglomeration of dilapidated pavilions, some of which still bore the names of the countries or industries that they had represented. After walking a few minutes, I found the designated meeting point. It was a large low lying building of wood and corrugated metal situated close to the stagnant Yarkon River, which bound the fairgrounds from the north. On entering into the building I found, in the heart of all the dilapidation and decay, an island of orderliness. Three rows of long tables, with wireless keys and earphones, were neatly arranged on both sides of the tables. This was the pavilion in which the course would take place.

There was a single man inside who was busy installing additional equipment. It turned out that he was Monia, who I had met once during the illegal immigration operations which had take place off the shore near Avichail. Later I found out that he had been the first radio technician that the Hagana had recruited to the organization, when wireless communications were introduced into its operations. We became good friends and our lives crossed many times in the coming years. Later I found out that he was among the people that recommended that I participate in the course. He directed me to one of the other pavilions, which was to serve as the dormitory for the men, where the registration was made and initial instructions about the

daily routine given. Very little time seemed to be wasted. Soon after lunch, the first phase of the course was to begin.

Before very long I became acquainted with the other participants. Almost without exception they were from agricultural settlements, mainly *moshavim* and *kibbutzim*. Many of them had already acted as radio operators in the clandestine network of the Hagana, but had only been given a rudimentary training. Others were complete rookies, who had been brought in to reinforce and expand the network. The purpose of this course was to raise the general competence of the operators and bring them all up to a common level. There was an interesting mixture of occupations represented in the group: teachers, nurses, *kibbutz* farm managers and just plain agricultural field workers. The participants were equally represented by both sexes. They were all hand-picked and could really be considered the cream of Jewish youth of the country. All had volunteered, though the operations were clandestine and illegal, but this was a period in which the British Authorities turned a blind eye to some of these acts because of the war.

From the start we were bombarded for long hours with Morse Code groups of five random letters, starting with slow speeds, which increased from day to day, always keeping the speed slightly above our ability to receive and write the groups down. The chief instructor, who was usually sending the Morse Code groups, was a young man called Peretz Rosenberg. He had an unusual memory. He could send random groups of five letters or figures for an hour while staring absent mindedly at the ceiling, at the end of the period as the trainees read back the groups that they had written down, he easily spotted any error that had been made.

I once asked him the secret of his phenomenal memory. He told me it was very easy. He would tap out the Morse Code according to different musical pieces that he played in his mind. 'Till today I don't know if he really meant it or it was said tongue in cheek. Dispersed among the hours of tedious receiving and sending Morse Code, were lectures on wireless theory and communication procedures. There was pleasant feeling of comradeship, with plenty of goodhearted fun in the little leisure time that we had. I still have photos that were taken then, showing a great deal of smiles.

In a pavilion adjacent to us there was a group of young men training for a secret nautical mission. The person in charge of this program was a British Army lieutenant, which certainly aroused our curiosity, but their secret was never leaked out to us. It was only a long time later that their mission was published, after its failure. Their task was to blow up fuel facilities in Lebanon, which were in the hands of the Vichy French. There was danger that these facilities would be turned over to the Germans, who were the Vichy overlords. One day while we were still at our course, they sailed away, without a word of goodbye. For many years their fate was a mystery, they never reached their target -- that became known from intelligence sources.

While the war continued there were hopes that they had been taken prisoners and held incognito. But at the end of the war it was evident that they had disappeared without a trace. They were honored with a monument that was put up in the National Military Cemetery on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem. They became known as the "Twenty Three Mariners," though in recent years it was felt that there was discrimination, because that number did not include the British Officer that commanded them. This has been corrected recently and they are now known as the "Twenty Four Mariners."

Only one of the navel course trainees was left behind, Arie Morris. He fell in love with one of the girls on our wireless operator's course, Miriam Lazerovitz, so they requested permission to marry, which was granted. They were unaware that the date fixed for the wedding, was on the highly guarded secret day on which the group was to sail. Those in charge decided against any changes in marriage plans, to preserve secrecy. So while Arie and Miriam were getting married, the group slipped away on its mission. Arie eventually became a senior officer in the Israeli Navy, in which he served from the day it was founded, until he retired. I had a close friendship with Arie and Miriam for many years.

In the middle of the wireless operators course, two of my colleagues and I were called to the office, where we were notified that we had been selected for a special assignment with the British Army, through an agreement with the Jewish Agency. The reason the three of us had been chosen wasn't so much for our radio operating proficiency, as for our knowledge of English. Personally, I was hardly a star trainee. With my reflexes, I was one of the stragglers. So with mixed feelings, I gathered my belongings, bid a farewell to my newly found friends from the course and headed to the offices of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem.

On arrival at the Jewish Agency building, I was ushered into the inner sanctum of Reuven Zeslani, the person in charge of Intelligence Services of the Agency and the Hagana. After a short friendly talk with Zeslani and his aide, Tuvia Arazi, in which they questioned me about my background and family. Then they explained to me the nature of my assignment. I was to work together with one of British Intelligence operators in maintaining contact with unspecified stations in special wireless network. My liaison person in the Jewish Agency was to be Tuvia Arazi, to whom I was to report periodically.

All this seemed very strange to me, after years of considering the British and the Mandatory Authorities hostile elements to the Jewish Community in Palestine, a queer turn of events made us allies. Even after the war started and among the first victims of the rise of Nazism in Germany were the Jews, the British rebuffed all attempts by Jews in Palestine to join in the war effort. On the contrary, they continued to implement a document issued by the British called the "White Paper," which restricted Jewish immigration and limited land purchases by Jews. At the time, Ben Gurion, the elected leader of the Jews in Palestine, made

the statement that “we should aid Britain as if there was no White Paper, and we should resist Britain as if there was no war.” This brought about the ironic situation in which our desire to openly support the allies, namely Britain, was rejected, while at the same time they were covertly accepting it. This was a slow beginning of a “Honeymoon” between the British and the Jewish Community in Palestine, which reached its crescendo toward the end of war, only to collapse with the Allies’ victory. Thus I became a player in this complex chess game.

The next day I was sent down to the Royal Air Force Headquarters for the Middle East, situated in a large school building opposite the Damascus Gate, which had been expropriated by the military for the duration of the war. There I was directed to an office with the enigmatic designation MLO. I later found out that it stood for Military Liaison Office, that it was really was a mystical name that disclosed nothing and had no relationship whatsoever with the RAF. Eventually I was called into one of the offices to be introduced to the person who I was to work with and would be my superior, Mr. Bell.

Mr. Bell was far from being an impressive person, with yellow nicotine stained fingers and moustache. He had a lit cigarette in the corner of his mouth, from which he lit a new one, whenever a burning one was about to reach his lips. He wore a crumpled dark suit, with a loosely knotted tie around his neck. He was about fifty years old, though he might have been a few years younger. It was obvious from his accent that he wasn’t a member of the upper class. My visions of working with a later-day Lawrence of Arabia were quickly dissipating. But there was much more that I would learn about Mr. Bell as we worked closely together for about a year.

Mr. Bell immediately took me in hand, ushered me into one of the offices, where I was presented with a form to sign called the Official Secrets Act, whereby I agreed to keep secret the contents of all the materials and information that I would come across in course of my duties. Next he took me down to an official photographer to get my picture taken for the Military Pass which allowed me to enter almost all the military installations in the country. I was to be awarded the acting rank of sergeant with the right to wear an army uniform or civilian clothing, according to the necessary existing conditions.

All these formalities and privileges impressed me greatly, until we took a taxi to the place where I was to work with Mr. Bell, at the entrance to the German Colony. The building we entered, I learned later, had been a girls school which had been built by the German Templars at the later part of the nineteenth century. It too had been expropriated by the military for their use at the beginning of the war. It was being used for the offices of Army Headquarters for the Jerusalem Area. There were also other offices of miscellaneous army units that, for the lack of space, were put up in this building. However the biggest surprise awaited

me when Mr. Bell led me up the winding stairway, floor after floor, to the roof level where he opened the door to single room. This was our “office.”

All romantic illusions about my assignment evaporated. In front of me was a narrow room with a window on the far side, which obviously had originally been a bathroom, with the bathtub taken out. The only vestige of what I had expected of a spy's den was that it was filled with the smoke of Mr. Bell's chain smoking. At the far end under the window was a tabletop on trestles which extended from wall to wall for the width of the room. On the tabletop were the transmitters and receivers with the cables leading to the antennas strung on the roof outside. Mr. Bell explained that the station would operate 12 hours daily, from 9 in the morning 'till 9 in the evening, with the two of us doing 6 hour shifts each. All in and out communication traffic was to be carried by an army messenger between our office and the MLO office near Damascus Gate for coding and decoding.

Seeing that we didn't fit into any specific army framework, we were to get a fixed allowance for accommodations and all other living expenses. On first sight it seemed like a deluxe assignment. But finding suitable accommodations in wartime Jerusalem to fit into our budget limitation was a difficult task. I succeeded in finding a solution to our problem. Through the recommendation of one of my friends I found a lovely place where homemade meals were served. This private restaurant was situated in an old Armenian house, where one of its walls formed part of perimeter wall of the Mamilla Cemetery, a Moslem cemetery situated in the heart of modern Jerusalem of that period, on the border between the Jewish and Arab sections of the city. The house was built in the typical style of the old time buildings from the past centuries, with a large courtyard surrounded by a series of small rooms, which opened directly into it. In summer, when we first became acquainted with the place, the entire courtyard was covered with vines which provided speckled shade for the diners. A middle aged couple, German Jewish immigrants, Mr. and Mrs. Teitlbaum, who had worked for a well known Jerusalem architect called Mendelson, she as a cook and housekeeper, he as a gardener and driver, found themselves without a job when their employer left the country. With their severance pay they decided to venture into running a small family restaurant. It turned to be an immediate success, situated close to some of the Mandatory Government Offices, they soon attracted many clients among the senior officials, who sought a quiet atmosphere and moderate prices. Their tasty, but unsophisticated, dishes apparently suited the English palate. Mr. Bell and I soon became regulars, with the additional advantage that our office was only about a ten minute walk away.

To my good luck, shortly after we started to eat there, a couple of rooms off the courtyard became available, which were offered to us at a reasonable rent. Thus for both of us our futile search for accommodations ended.

But things were working out too well. Immediately when we started operating the station, it became obvious that Mr. Bell was an alcoholic. Perhaps I had grown up in a very sheltered environment, where alcoholism was unknown; otherwise I would have discovered this fact much earlier. The glazed, bloodshot eyes meant little to me when we first met, nor did the involuntary twitch of the nicotine stained fingers. Soon I realized that I had a non-partner in sharing duties. Though at the beginning I attempted to make a shift schedule, it turned out to be meaningless for Mr. Bell. As he was usually a late riser, I would have myself down for the first shift, while he would take the late afternoon and evening shift. But what developed into a regular routine was that I would have my breakfast, walk down to our station in time to receive the first messages that were coming in. At about ten thirty, eleven, Mr. Bell would stroll in to keep me company for a while, look over the messages, then he would joyfully tell me that on the way down he had run into an "old buddy" of his, who he planned to meet for lunch. He asked me to take over part of his shift, if he was late in coming back. Then he would disappear for the rest of the day, returning back to his room in the evening in a drunken stupor. Consequently I found myself doing the two shifts, most days of the week. There seemed little that I could do about the situation. He was a nice likeable guy, and I was the "outsider," with him being part of the "establishment." I also had my obligation to my chief in the Jewish Agency, who fought to bring one of his people into the network.

Some evenings when I knew where he was, I would join him at one of the bars, so that he would come home safely. To his credit, I must say that he was a real "pro," with many years of intelligence service under his belt. No matter how inebriated he would be, never did I hear him hint or mention the nature of his work, or anything about his personal past.

Despite all these difficulties, I always look back at that period in Jerusalem with nostalgia. The city was more like a little town, where there little cliques, but almost everybody knew everybody else and where each one belonged. There were a few cinemas, but no concert halls or theatres, with the only "night life" on Ben Yehuda Street and Zion Square, which in winter months was deserted after nine in the evening. Social life was mainly in small closed circles, where the individuals knew each other from childhood. They had attended the same schools, belonged to the same youth movements, and in many cases the families were related. My attempts to break into these circles were futile, though I knew the family of Dr. Bernard Joseph, who had a summer house in Netanya. His son Ami was a friend of mine, but some of his friends in Jerusalem were less friendly. In short, they were snobs, sons and daughters of professors at the Hebrew University, or high officials in the Mandatory Government.

Consequently I felt lonely in Jerusalem in the first couple of months after I arrived there. I had neither friends nor co-workers with whom I could spend my limited free time. My social life improved when a couple of girls from Jerusalem, who had attended the wireless course

with me in Tel Aviv, returned home to operate the clandestine Hagana station. Through them I met many new people who belonged to the Hagana, an organization whose members were drawn from all strata of Jerusalem society. In addition, being a single man was a distinct advantage, because many of men were away from home either in the Palmach or in the British Army which had started to recruit Jewish youth into its ranks.

The meeting place of our friends was at the Atara Cafe on Ben Yehuda Street, where we managed to capture a small balcony which overlooked the lower floor and the entrance. From our vantage point in the café, we managed to organize our social life as to where to go and with whom. In those days, Atara was one of the hangouts of the Jerusalem bohemians. Alas, after about sixty years, Atara was recently sold to a fast food outlet. With its closure, downtown modern Jerusalem lost the last cultural and social landmark of the pre-state period.

I didn't care for the Jerusalem winter. The small room at the Teitlbaums' house where I lived had no heating, but I did have a cat that would sleep on my feet at night. A kerosene heater was the only heating that we had at the station, but it did little to keep the place warm, consequently my feet were always cold during my shifts. Once, out of desperation, I propped my feet up on the table and put the kerosene stove under my legs. Finally I found a way to thaw myself out, though it was only when I boarded a bus that someone pointed out that I had large holes in the rear of both of my trouser legs, which had been burnt out by the stove. It's easy to imagine how ridiculous I felt walking down the Jerusalem streets like that.

One December morning aboard a bus to go down to the station, I glanced at a newspaper over the shoulder of a fellow passenger, the banner headlines told about the Japanese attack on the United States Naval Base at Pearl Harbor. I was shocked. Though I had left America many years before, I had never lost the feeling of affinity to my country of birth. I was proud of being an American, which sometimes made me feel like an outsider in the Jewish environment in Palestine. It is something that has never worn off despite all years that have passed.

Things started to change in the operation of the station. Apparently in Army headquarters it was decided that our little station in Jerusalem was superfluous. As a result, all the messages would be diverted to the large station in Cairo and the Jerusalem station closed. In addition, because of deteriorating relations between the military and the Jewish Agency, the MLO became uncomfortable having a potential "mole" in its midst. Mr. Bell was exiled to some station where a drunkard could do no harm and I was unceremoniously discharged.

[For a while I was stationed in Cairo, then Luxor, as a meteorological communicator for the Air Force.]

But all good things must come to an end, though I probably could have stayed in Luxor for the duration of the war. One of the Air Force bulletins sent to us from headquarters in Cairo contained a notice that the Air Transport Command (ATC) was looking for radio operators for retraining as aircrew. This was an opportunity that I couldn't pass up, as it was a chance for me to fulfill my life ambition, to fly. The training as Flight Radio Operators and Navigators would take place at Paine Field, which was my home base. I applied and was accepted to start immediately. So it was with great sadness I bade farewell to the team at Luxor and to my missionary friends to board a plane back to Cairo.

The course at Paine Field was intensive, but short. As experienced Radio Operators, all the participants were familiar with Morse Code and Procedure, therefore the emphasis was on use of the aircraft communication equipment. In navigation, great strides had been made with the introduction of radio beams and radar, so that tedious calculations were no longer necessary. For our use we were given the basics, because most of the routes that we would be flying were already equipped with homing beams. In addition, we were given a number of hours of flying instruction in the Link Trainer – which is a flight simulator. The purpose of this was to familiarize us with what was going on in the cockpit, so that we could assist in case of emergency. Because of the shortage of operators on the transport planes, every effort was made to get us out of the course and on to the planes as soon as possible. The main route that we were to fly on, were sections from Casablanca in the west reaching Chungking, China, in the east.

AIRBORNE

Strange as it may seem, we were sent on our first flight with very little practical experience in the cockpit. We had been in a plane on the ground to learn how to operate the radio and navigation equipment that was installed in the cockpit, but never had the chance to operate them under real conditions. We were thrown into our duties, as one could say, “to sink or swim.” Naturally it was with great trepidation that I boarded my first flying assignment.

The planes that we were to fly in were mainly C-46s, two engine airplanes designed mainly for carrying cargo. It looked very much like the famed DC 3 (Dakota), but slightly pregnant with a big bulge in the lower part of the fuselage. These became the cargo workhorses towards the end of the exterior unit to give the engines the required boost to start them.

The route that I started to fly on was from Cairo eastward, to Abadan in Iran. From Cairo we would fly northward over the Sinai Peninsula, changing our course to the east when over Lydda (today Lod, the Ben Gurion Airport). From Lydda we would fly over Jerusalem, onward over Amman, then picking up the stations of the oil pipeline between Mosul in Iraq and Haifa in Palestine. We would then continue 'til Lake Habbania near Baghdad, at which point we headed southward, flying over the Shat el Arab where the Tigris and the Euphrates unite, over the city of Basra at the top of the Persian Gulf. The end of that leg of the flight was in Abadan on the Persian Gulf, where the Air Force had an airfield.

Abadan was an important station for the Americans and the Russians. It was through Abadan that urgently needed aircraft were brought by air and sea to supply the besieged Russian army.

Abadan was a small town that had been developed by the British Oil Company, to serve as a port and a refinery for exporting the Iranian oil. Huge amounts of money had been invested in building modern living facilities for the mainly foreign staff that operated the refineries. The housing was built in separate area outside the old part of town, and it was surrounded by a formidable fence and guarded gates. Regrettably, the Air Force base and airport were situated on the downwind side of the oil refineries. The time that I spent in Abadan was like being in one's idea of Hell. The day temperatures during the summer months averaged about 40 degrees centigrade. If one adds the eternal sulfuric smell blowing in from the refineries, the initial experience was like entering into Dante's Inferno.

The barracks on the base were austere, but had all the necessary living facilities. The living quarters were cooled by "desert coolers" which were large wooden frames filled with straw through which there was a continuous dripping of water. The rapid evaporation of these drops quickly lowered the temperature of the rooms. Because of the very low humidity the water evaporating through the straw lowered the temperature in the barracks making them livable. Fortunately our layover time in Abadan was rarely more than eight hours. If we stayed there for a longer period, the swimming pool in the Petroleum Company's enclave was at the disposal of the aircrews.

I enjoyed my new assignment. The only military discipline that I was subjected to was to show up in time for my flights. However it was all very exhausting because there was no daily routine. Our flight could be scheduled for any time of the day or night, with the only restriction was a mandatory eight hour rest period after any flight that last more than eight hours. In those days, the Cairo-Abadan flight took that much time. Today the routes are shorter and the planes faster, it can flown in less than half the time. Later on I was assigned to other routes, which eventually took me eastward to India and Burma.

Soon after I was transferred to Casablanca to participate in a special operation called the "Green Project." The purpose of this operation was to transfer as many troops as possible, with the capitulation of Germany, from Europe to the Far East. On the "Green Project," we flew from Casablanca southward to Dakar in Senegal, continuing after a layover, to fly to Natal in Brazil. For the first time in my life I was flying my dream, crossing the Atlantic. Though in the coming two months I made the round trip from Casablanca to Natal every week, despite being bone tired the thrill never left me. As the war was coming to an end, the Air Force started to discharge soldiers according to the length of service. Luckily the time I had spent in the British Army was also considered seniority, with the whole length of my service being overseas. On the basis of a point system, which considered seniority and overseas service, I was among those at the top of the list to be discharged. In the middle of September 1945, my orders came through to return to the United States to be released.

I was attached to a crew of five to fly a B-25 back to the United States. It was a wonderful jaunt. There was no deadline to reach the States, nor was there a prescribed route that we were to follow. We left Casablanca to fly to Senegal, over the route that the Green Project had followed. However, in those

days flying from Dakar to the eastern tip of Brazil was beyond the range of most twin engine planes, including our B-25. All these smaller aircraft had to land for refueling on an island in the South Atlantic, Ascension Island.

Ascension Island had been constructed before the Second World War, a barren uninhabited volcanic island in the middle of the southern part of the Atlantic. It came into importance with the necessity to refuel planes with limited range flying the Atlantic. To fulfill this purpose, a runway was bulldozed from one end of the island to the other. Living quarters were built for staff personnel and it was equipped with all the landing facilities. These included the most sophisticated navigational radar that existed at that time. The island boasted a single tree. Eventually, to supply the messes with fresh vegetables, a hydroponics farm was established.

Flying this leg of the trip, from Dakar to Ascension, was very tricky from the point of view of navigation. A small error in calculation could easily miss this little pinpoint of an island in the vast Atlantic. Though electronic navigation facilities already existed, they were not as sophisticated and accurate as they are today. So it was with a sigh of relief we landed safely. I felt proud of our achievement.

From Natal in Brazil we flew leisurely northward in short legs, stopping in Belem, Dutch Guyana, Puerto Rico and finally ending our trip in Miami. The moment we land in Miami we were hustled off of the plane, to have it flown out of Florida immediately, because a hurricane was expected within hours. We were put up at one of the hotels that had been taken over by the army. Two days later I was given a railroad ticket to Fort Dix in New Jersey, where I would go through the process of being discharged from the U.S. Army. In November 1945, I was given an Honorable Discharge from the Army Air Force at Mitchell Field on Long Island.

This marked the end of my services in the war. I had served in the Hagana, the British Army and the United States Army in those five years. It was time get back to be master of my own life again.

. . . When I came back that day I still hadn't decided what I intended to do. An alternative was to stay at home for a while, to help my father in the farm (on the Avichail *moshav*, near Netanya). Another was to find a job in the area. But it has happened many times in my life, decisions were forced on me by default.

The second evening after I had come home, the decision was made for me.

It was in the form of my friend Monia, who I had first met many years back when he established a temporary transmitting station in one of the houses in Avichail. We met again when he was an instructor at the wireless operators course that I attended in the early 40's. I had lost contact with him during the war years, but he had moved to Netanya and was a regular visitor in our house in Avichail. This was very convenient for him because it provided him with a base from which he could court one of the daughters of our neighbor, the Friedlanders. As result he knew everything that was going on in both households. As matters were coming to a

head politically, it became apparent that soon hostilities would break out between the Arabs and the Jews. He closed his little repair shop and returned to full time activities with the Hagana.

He wasn't alone going back into Hagana service, as there was an attempt to recruit all those who had served previously to return to full time service. That was the reason that he appeared so soon after I came home to Avichail. Orders had come through that the next morning I was to present myself in Even Yehuda. The instructions were quite explicit, at eight o'clock I was to be at the Worker's Restaurant, there I was to ask for mysterious person named Eliyahu.

The next morning, I left home very early tiptoeing out carefully, to make sure that I would be in Even Yehuda on time. In those days bus service was infrequent and I had to change buses at the crossroads near Beit Lid. I worried that the person that I was to meet would be eagerly awaiting my arrival. The Worker's Restaurant was in the middle of the village, so I had no difficulty in finding it. It was part of a chain of restaurants that had been put up by the Labor Organization (Histadrut) in different parts of the country. Because of close relationship between the Hagana and the Histadrut, these restaurants were a convenient point of contact. My expectation of being greeted by a reception committee was quickly dashed when I walked over to the counter and asked for Eliyahu. All I was met with was a shrug of the shoulder. Nobody else in the room knew or heard about Eliyahu. It all seemed very strange to me because Even Yehuda was a small place where everybody knew everybody else. Being the obedient member of the Hagana that I was, I sat down, had some breakfast and waited.

An hour passed, another one past, people went in and out, and nobody knew Eliyahu. I started to get annoyed, my zeal for volunteering was beginning to ebb. About two and a half hours after I arrived, a young man called Danny, who I knew from the late 1930s when we both were teenagers, entered. He immediately walked over to me, greeting me warmly with a handshake and a hug. I felt relieved, finally a familiar face. We chatted for a few minutes, then he excused himself and left. A few minutes later a stout man with rosy cheeks came through the door, walking directly to me. He was Eliyahu.

He sat down at the table with me, excusing himself for the delay, he explained what had happened. The village is a small place where everybody knows everybody else. My presence was common knowledge before I ever stepped into the restaurant. There was something about my clothes, which to me seemed quite usual, that must have had some kind of markings of a stranger. But the thing that set off the alarm was when I opened my mouth and asked for Eliyahu. Apparently my many years away from Palestine, speaking mainly English, gave my Hebrew a strong accent particular to English speakers. Pronouncing the name Eliyahu especially brought out this English flavored Hebrew. Immediately the word went throughout

the village; “there is a CID agent at the Workers Restaurant looking for Eliyahu.” He went on to explain that the CID (Civil Investigation Department) was the branch of the Mandatory Authorities to gather intelligence information about the underground organizations operating in the country. Among the Jewish Community these organizations were the Hagana, Etzel and Lehi. He, Eliyahu, was the Hagana commander of the Central Sharon Area.

That was the reason that nobody in the restaurant knew Eliyahu. All the people that came into the restaurant during the morning were sent in an attempt to identify who I was. It seems that my friend Monia had forgotten to notify headquarters about my impending arrival. It was only when my old friend Danny Ben Artzi came in and recognized me, was the alert called off.

Eliyahu told me that my duties were to help operating the central wireless station in the region. There were some remote settlements that had no telephones, others only had a single lines, which were strung on poles, that were cut frequently. This situation left these settlements, *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*, in constant danger of being cut off from the rest of the country. Many of them were close to the border, were vulnerable to Arab attacks, and without means to summon armed support and medical aid. The network was illegal under the Mandatory regulation, which meant that all our activities had to be kept secret. This was one of the reasons that my appearance in Even Yehuda caused such a scare.

Eliyahu himself walked me over to the only two-story building in the village, which had downstairs one of the local grocery shops. This shop belonged to Mr. Pograbski, who owned the entire building. We entered a hallway on the side and mounted a flight of stairs to the second floor. In the dim corridor there were a series of nondescript doors, apparently leading to apartments. Eliyahu knocked on one of the doors, where we greeted by a housewife, who without a word led us through the apartment to a room which appeared to be a storage room full of paint cans, brushes and ladders. Hidden behind a tattered curtain, which was pulled aside, was a plain unpainted door. After a knock at the door, Eliyahu identified himself. There was the sound of keys turning and bolts being drawn, and the door opened into a middle-sized room. We had reached the clandestine radio station.

It turned out that the station was situated in the flat of Mr. Tabakerka , who was a house painter, but also an active Hagana member. The room was chosen because its access was only through the apartment. On entering into the room there were no clues as to its true use, it contained three beds, a clothes closet and a large table with a radio.

Eliyahu introduced me to the three occupants who were looking me over with curiosity. He presented them to me individually, giving their name and function in the station. The first was a short stocky fellow, about my age, called Arontzick, who was in charge of the station. The second, called Zvi was a tall youngster in his late teens, with dark hair. He was a trainee

who just had finished the Hagana's wireless course, served as Arontzick's assistant and understudy. The third, Yoav Taani, about the age of Zvi, filled the duty of a message runner and lookout.

Once the introductions were made, Eliyahu rushed on his way, leaving further explanations about the setup and my duties in Aronchick's hands. First he introduced me to the most important article in the room, the radio. What seemed to be a regular home radio set had a medium powered transmitter built into its innocent looking cabinet. All of the necessary accessories for operation the station, the Morse code key, earphones and writing pads, had been quickly hidden in the drawers of the large table when Eliyahu unexpectedly knocked on the door. All wires leading to the antenna and ground connections were all concealed below the table, leading outside through a small hole in the abutting wall. Otherwise the room looked like a typical rundown chaotic bachelor's apartment.

The station had hourly contacts to a central station from 7 in the morning till midnight. From midnight till the morning the station was to be on standby, with a duty operator sleeping close to the set. All messages were to be encoded, except in cases of emergency when the messages could be sent in the clear. Both the encoding and the transmission were the done by the operator on duty. Of course when there was heavy traffic on the network, two operators worked alternating with encoding and transmitting. It was obvious that the two operators were relieved with my arrival to bear part of the load which was too much for them. As I understood it, they were paid a living allowance, which would cover food and travel expenses. Accommodations were in a small alcove adjacent to the station. The payments were adequate to cover food bills eaten at the Workers Restaurant.

After a day or two it became evident that I was out of practice, since I hadn't touched a Morse key for over two years. It was decided to send me for a two day refresher course at Kibbutz Shefaim, where the Hagana had a training school for wireless operators. In those days, Shefaim was far from any main road, which made it an ideal place for any type of clandestine operations.

On arrival at the training school I was immediately seated at a Morse key with a pair of earphones. For two days, ten hours a day, with short breaks for meals, I sent and received sets of five letters or figures in Morse code. When I lay down to sleep these dots and dashes were still buzzing in my ear. All this intensive practice soon brought me up to previous proficiency. Back to Even Yehuda.

I was still pondering if this was the peace and quiet that I expected for at least a few days when coming home.

It wasn't long before I was integrated into the work of the station. To my surprise much of the traffic which was going through the network was about the movements of the Jewish

dissident organizations, the Etzel [another name for the Irgun, a Zionist paramilitary organization that was an offshoot of the Haganah] and Lehi [often known pejoratively as the Stern Gang, later declared by the Israeli government to be a terrorist organization]. There was very little necessity at that time, the early part of November 1947, for security messages. The whole country was waiting with anticipation for the recommendations of the United Nations Committee on Palestine which were about to be presented at the UN Assembly. It was a lull before the expected storm, no matter whoever the recommendations would favor.

On the 29th of November we were put on alert. The recommendations favored the establishment of two separate independent entities, a Jewish one and an Arab one [which today we would call a “two-state solution”]. Throughout Jewish Palestine it was a night of rejoicing and dancing in the streets. Despite the truncated state that was offered, the Jewish Authorities were willing to accept the proposals. However the celebrations were without us, we remained throughout the night close to our transmitter and receiver, ready for any emergency. At about 9 in the morning the first news came through, a bus traveling from Netanya to Jerusalem was attacked, with casualties. The expected fighting broke out.

From that moment our hands were full of work. The outlying kibbutzim without dependable telephone connections depended entirely on our network. Kibbutz Hamapil was the most vulnerable, being close to the Arab town of Kakun. This town was one of the most hostile in the region. The Kibbutz had been continuously molested throughout the years in small ways; theft of farm equipment and animals, damage to the watering systems and cultivated fields in outlying areas. Immediately with the outbreak of the fighting, after the UN decision, the telephone lines were cut and part of the poles knocked down.

In other places the phones were more reliable, but secret and security information couldn't be sent over the lines which were open to snooping and tapping. As I mentioned before most of our messages were encoded, which was time consuming, but more secure. On the other hand we ceased to be a clandestine network. Once the British had a pullout date fixed, they no longer had an interest to intervene actively in the struggle between the Jews and the Arabs. All the secrecy of the underground organizations *vis-a-vis* the British Authorities was discarded. They could now operate in the open. This allowed a country-wide recruitment of young people to the newly formed legal army.

But within our network, in spite of the fact that we were already legal, we remained a closed society. Everyone knew everyone else. Through our frequent contacts over the air, if we didn't know what each person looked like, we recognized their style of sending and receiving the Morse Code. It was as characteristic as a voice, handwriting or a face. Many knew each other personally, through participation in courses or temporary assignment at other stations according to changing conditions. Thus we weren't only comrades in arms, we were one big family.

One of the *kibbutzim* was in a danger area, their only reliable connections through our network. The operator was a woman, who was a member of the kibbutz. She wasn't considered to be highly skilled and tended to break down under pressure. After two emergency situations when a message didn't get through, because of her incompetence, it was suggested that she be replaced by an outside operator. The suggestion was like a bomb burst. The Kibbutz was up in arms against the move, contending that replacing her would cause her mental anguish. It became such an important issue that a General Meeting was called to discuss the matter. A General Meeting is the supreme authority in the Kibbutz. By an overwhelming majority it was decided that she would remain at her post, despite the fact that the entire settlement was being placed in jeopardy.

Many parts of the country were already fighting the invasion of irregular Arab forces from the north and the east. The hardest hit were the settlements along the border. But in the center of the country this life went on as usual, although the newspapers carried all the news. A compulsory recruitment had started and young men were being directed to training camps. On the 1st of February the establishment of the Israel Defense Force was declared. All members of the Hagana were automatically inducted into the army. I was among those who entered the Israel Defense Force on the day of its founding. However, it took some time before I was awarded a serial number, to proclaim that I was one of the first members of the IDF. During the many years in reserves, after I was discharged from active service, I got a lot of respect when younger soldiers saw my four digit serial number.

[I was transferred to the station in the town of Hadera.]

The station in Hadera was situated in a flat in an apartment house. The station was staffed by two women from the town, one was married and the other was an American girl, named Alice. It was a nice set up, I lived in the station while the women usually slept at home, if they weren't on duty. Secrecy was still being maintained, so much so that a lady who lived in one of the flats complained to the police that a brothel was operating in the apartment house. Her proof was that two ladies and a man were living in an apartment, while different men were visiting at all hours of the day and night. What she didn't know that the men she was referring to, were our runners who brought and collected messages at all hours.

It was nice to have some female company of my age in the station. Alice's father had set up an English library in Hadera, so I also had plenty to read. But I was still getting restless, things were just too static. It was time to take some drastic step to change the situation.

...

Early the next morning I was already on my way to meet Jan, in our organization we were all still on a first name basis, no matter what rank. After a short wait I was shown into Jan's office, he greeted me warmly, inviting me to sit down. He opened our meeting with warm

words of praise and the importance of my work in the organization. Special emphasis was put on the fact that I had returned to Palestine in this crucial period for the Jewish People. It was all very pleasant for my ears, but I was waiting for him to say something with more substance, but when it came it was a letdown. Not a word was said about the letter that I had written to the Chief of Staff [requesting a new posting]. Instead he told me that there was a shortage of operators abroad, in a variety of duties; on ships which were bringing in immigrants from European camps or working in one of the land stations that had been set up in different towns in Europe. He explained that I had been chosen because of my excellent knowledge of English and that I had traveled extensively. All this was again very flattering, but my hopes of returning to the air again, quickly evaporated. My orders were to be in Haifa in two days to board a ship that had just brought a large group of immigrants from one of the camps in Europe, to return with it to Italy.

To see what was going on in the country, outside my little world of the radio stations, he suggested that I join one of the technicians who was going up to the Galilee to test some equipment. I accepted the offer immediately, a few hours later I was in a pickup truck on the way to Zfat (Safed). It was a thrilling experience. For the first time I was in the area where real fighting was taking place.

The regular road along the shore of the Kinneret [the Hebrew name for the Sea of Galilee] was cut off because a battle was going on between Israeli troops and Arab irregulars, so we were forced to take dirt roads along the cliffs which overlooked the lake. I had never been so close to a real battle in my life, rather ironic for someone who had spent five years in armies during the war. From our vantage point a couple of hundred meters above, the entire battle field was below us. Though there was no artillery involved, we could clearly hear the crackle of rifle and machine gun fire. Yet we had very little time to dally, we had to reach our destination by dark, without any assurance that we wouldn't have dangerous encounters on the way. We reached Safed as darkness fell, skirted the town where fighting was still going on, and made our way to Mount Canaan, which overlooked Safed. On Mount Canaan there were a number of popular hotels patronized by the Jewish population in summer months because of the cool climate of hills. On the peak of Mount Canaan was the largest hotel of them all, a seven story building. It was from the roof of this building we were to attempt to establish radio contact by voice with Tel Aviv. This contact was essential for military purposes, as most of the telephones lines between north and the rest of the country had been cut. The hotel itself had been commandeered by the army to house the troops that were fighting in the area. At midnight, the technician in charge of the experiment succeeded in contacting Tel Aviv. This was an important tool to coordinate the troops throughout the country from a central command in Tel Aviv.

Early the next morning we left to return to Tel Aviv. On the way back we heard that the night we were on Mount Canaan the town of Safed had been taken by the Palmach units.

The pickup truck dropped me off in Avichail. I had a big day ahead of me, to pack my things and then travel to Haifa to board the ship that was to take me to Italy. It was late afternoon when I entered the port. I don't know what I expected, but when someone pointed out the most ramshackle, neglected craft in the breakwater as my destination, my first reaction was to turn around and run. It was a shabby ship, with unshapely sheds on its deck. The original Italian name was painted over with a thin layer of whitewash, with the name awarded to her in Hebrew scribbled in black paint "Hamored" (the Rebel). An unspectacular, scruffy Rebel. It was with trepidation that I went aboard to introduce myself to the Captain.

Though I didn't expect a Captain with epaulets, he and his scruffy crew shocked me for a moment, but their hearty smiles put me at ease. They were all Italian, with one or two speaking a smattering of English. They had been hired in Italy when the ship was bought by the Jewish Agency. They had made a couple of round trips from European ports, all after the British blockade of the "illegal immigration" had ended. So they were saved the experience of running the gauntlet of the His Majesty's Navy. All the unsightly sheds on the deck were showers and toilets on side of the ship, while the cooking was done on the other side. Soon I met the other two passengers on the ship. The first was a fellow called Tanhum, who accompanied the immigrants on their voyage to Israel. He had the responsibility of taking care of all the logistical and disciplinary problems involving the welfare of the some three hundred immigrants on the return voyage. The other passenger was a girl of about twenty, who, like me, was destined to work without network in Europe. As it turned out later, she was little help in maintaining radio contact, because she lacked the experience necessary and showed no special desire to acquire any. On the way I found out that she was being sent to join her boy friend, who was the commander of the underwater demolition team, which was sent to Europe to thwart the shipping of military supplies to the Arab forces. Considering that every day could easily be his last, she was sent to spend some time with him.

Being the only radio operator had the advantage of having a real cabin for myself, while the other two passengers had to sleep on the wooden shelves that were built in the hold. These makeshift shelves, three levels high, enabled a little ramshackle ship like ours to transport three hundred people on the few days voyage from Italy or France, which were the main ports of embarkation. Because we were only twelve on board including the crew, our meals on this voyage were cooked in a small galley next to the radio operator's cabin. These and the crew's cabins were situated just below the ship's bridge. As a chronic sufferer from seasickness, having the galley next door to my cabin made my first two days at sea unbearable, though the sea was relatively calm. But as soon as I got my sea legs, the journey was pleasant. I

spent the time on deck, in between my radio contacts talking with my two fellow passengers and lending a hand to the crew members as they went about their duties.

The crew members were all Italians, including the Captain. Though they only spoke their language, I had no special difficulties communicating. Most of them had never been very far from Italian waters, though the Captain had traveled extensively in the Mediterranean. For all of them the conditions of their employment were far better than they could find in Italy, though before May 15th, 1948, they were running the risk of being caught in the blockade of the British Navy.

The voyage was uneventful, except for the last day. According to instruction that I received by radio, for some strange reason we weren't to enter the port of Naples before nightfall. I conveyed these orders to the Captain, who accepted them without questions. However, early the next morning we could already see Mount Vesuvius looming in the distance. We were arriving ahead of time.

I hurriedly contacted our agent on the shore to get permission to enter the port earlier. The answer was a definite refusal. It turned out that the engineer in his eagerness to reach home early revved up the engines at night, almost doubling our speed. Consequently we spent a good part of that day circling the Isle of Capri at half speed. For me it was an opportunity to photograph that beautiful island that had so enchanted me when years earlier I had read about it in Story of San Michele by Dr. Axel Munthe.

According to instructions, we entered the Port of Naples at night. As soon as the ship was tied up to the pier, I was whisked away by a representative of our radio network to a cheap hotel in a rundown area near the port. It was obvious that he had no idea why I had been sent. In the meantime he was waiting for clarifications from the man in charge of operations, whose headquarters was in Rome. I woke up the next morning to a scene taken from the opera Carmen.

My hotel was situated in a narrow alley. Right opposite the window of my room I could see a room full of young girls working on sewing machines, and suddenly I saw a stone being thrown from there. The stone fell on the floor of my room. I bent to pick it up and found a note was neatly tied to it. Hurriedly I untied the thread that held it. In the note, the sender asked why I was so sad. I went back to the window to see a pretty girl waving at me. It could have been a beginning of a wild romance, but it all came to nil when later that day I was sent by train to Rome. It is strange how little things in life remain engraved in a person's memory, while the details of major occurrences have been totally obliterated. I was sorry that my stay in Naples was so short, not even long enough to spend an evening in one of the hillside cafes overlooking

the lights ringing the bay. 'Till now I have never managed to return. Perhaps it is better that it remains an unrealized dream.

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About a week after my arrival in Rome, it was decided that I was to travel to Milan to reinforce a small station operating on the outskirts of the city. This station was being used to coordinate the movement of Jewish refugees, who were in camps in Northern Italy, on their way to ports of embarkation in the south.

...

Later in my life, the two people waiting for me [in Milan] were to become my close friends. They were Shushana Bentwich and Zeki Keni, who operated the Milan station from a modest villa in one of suburbs of the city. The original intention was for me to relieve them from the heavy work load that they had during that period. I joined them on their trip to the villa, which was to be reached by a short train ride from the center of the town. It was a pleasant two-story house with a small garden, with a dining room and a kitchen downstairs. This was the realm of the housekeeper, while the upper part of the house was out of bounds for her. Upstairs there were a number of rooms, one of which served as the wireless station, and the others were used as bedrooms. Apparently the villa had been built in the days of big families, because of the large number of bedrooms. It seemed to me that I had fallen into little piece of paradise.

However, this turned out to be a very short interlude. In about three days after I had been introduced the routine of the station, an urgent message came through that I was to travel to Venice for a special assignment. All that I gained by my short stay in the villa was to meet two wonderful people, Shoshana and Zeki. I also learned from the housekeeper how to rid the bottles of Chianti wine from the thin layer of olive oil that floated on the wine to prevent its oxidation. The process is simple. One takes the partially filled bottle of wine, pouring its contents slowly into the new bottle until it overflows taking the oil along with it.

Early one evening I parted from my good friends Shoshana and Zeki and joined a truck that had come to pick me up for the overnight trip to Venice. The next day after a long exhausting, uncomfortable ride cooped up in the cab of the truck with a couple of unsociable companions, I found myself dumped on St. Marks Square in Venice. It was the beginning of a new adventure.

GOING DOWN TO SEA IN SHIPS

Here I was on San Marco Square in the morning sun. All I had to do is pick up a phone to call the number that had been given to me in Milan. About ten minutes after the call, a contact man made his way directly to me. It was early and the square was still empty of the hundreds and thousands of tourists that would fill it later, so he had no trouble spotting me. It seems that Israelis spot each other a mile away, there is some giveaway sign, possibly our clothes, or our posture or maybe our smell. He introduced himself as Uri, we shook hands, exchanged a few words, then he led me to a hotel fronting on to the entrance to the Main Canal. Uri registered me at the hotel and left me to have a nap after last night's ordeal. He promised to pick me up for lunch, and about 1:30 PM he called to say that he was waiting in the lobby. He had along with him a few members of the organization who were working from Venice. Among them were a few that I had met before, either from courses that we had attended together or during my work in Israel after my return from America. I felt very comfortable in their company, so it was decided that we would have a night out on the town. They had already been in Venice long enough to know where to go, a place that had good food, wine and music – a place where we could enjoy ourselves without being too conspicuous.

Uri arrived a bit earlier in the evening and came up to my hotel room to brief me on my mission. Without going into too many details, I was to board a boat that had been acquired in Italy for use in Israel. The person who made the deal was none other than Zeev Hayam (Sea Wolf), who had been one of the Jewish seafaring pioneers in the pre-state years. He would come down to see us off the next day. We would be two Israelis aboard with an Italian crew. I was to operate the radio and my companion, Yigal, who would be in charge of coordinating matters with the Italian crew. He had been in Italy for quite a long time, so he spoke the language well. He had been accompanying ships with immigrants and was now on his way home after finishing his tour of duty abroad. As for additional particulars about the ship and its cargo, Uri remained rather vague.

Then he briefed me on timetables for regular radio contacts and emergency procedures. Finally he took out of his pocket a number of crystals encased in Bakeliteⁱ¹ which he gave to me. These crystals were used in the transmitter to fix the radio frequency on which it would be operating. Frequencies had to be changed according to the time of the day and also in cases of atmospheric or man-made interference. These crystals also allowed for easy shifting of frequencies in cases of suspected hostile eavesdropping.

When he finished the briefing we went down to the lobby to join our friends who were waiting for us. We wandered through a maze of alleys 'till we reached the restaurant where we had ordered our dinner. We had a wonderful evening together, which was further enhanced by the pleasant glow of wine that I guzzled during the evening. By the time we left the restaurant I was definitely tipsy. When we dispersed, I found myself to be the only one going in my direction. Unnerved by the stories that I had heard about attacks on strangers in the dark alleys of the town, I asked Uri to take the crystals that he had given me earlier in the evening. I knew that he would be on hand the next morning for our departure, when I would take the crystals back.

Early the next morning I met Uri for breakfast, then we set off to the wharf where the ship was tied up. When we arrived there, I was in for the second nautical shock since I had seen the Hamored in the Haifa Port. It was there with the hull barely above the water line. The superstructure hardly reached the height of the wharf. It was a World War II landing craft that had been built by the Germans for invasion purposes. Though there were many types that had been built both by the Axis and the Allies, this was one of the smaller varieties with a door that opened in the bow. If I could have honorably escaped from the scene I would have done so.

My fear increased when we jumped aboard, where I was introduced to a middle-aged slim gentleman dressed in overalls and a white cap with a visor. This was the famed Zeev Hayam. However his obvious nervousness didn't help to my already shaken self-confidence. He immediately ordered us to go below decks into the cramped crew quarters and to keep out



¹ Editor's note: Probably FT-243 crystals, which look like this:

of sight. There, Yigal, who would travel with me, joined Uri and me. Zeev Hayam began his briefing. Our cargo was two half-track-armored vehicles, each of which was loaded with ammunition and shells. These were sealed in the hold – inaccessible during the voyage. In addition, lashed to our side with hemp ropes and steel cables was an empty refueling barge. Barges like these were usually towed by tugboats to refuel ships standing out at sea. I hadn't noticed this hitchhiker when I boarded the ship. I had the uncomfortable feeling that Zeev had been to a garage sale and bought everything that he could lay his hands on.

After we were given as much information as possible, we went up to the wheelhouse, where we kept crouched down, to meet the captain and the crew. The Captain, who spoke only Italian, was a wizened middle-aged man, who when he later straightened out, turn out to be quite tall. The rest of the crew consisted of a mechanic and three deck hands. They looked like a motley crew. I knew that they were being paid good money for the risky job, otherwise I would have thought that they had been Shanghaied aboard.

Zeev Hayam's nervousness started to be contagious, though I doubt if there was a spy in Venice who wasn't completely aware of what we were doing. I later found out that the reason for the exaggerated secretiveness was that a temporary truce had been declared in the war between the Jews and the Arabs. Accordingly to the truce, both sides were forbidden to receive arms or war materials during that period. It was June 1948. So it was with a sigh of relief we shook hands with Zeev and Uri, as they disembarked. The hawsers that tied us to the wharf were freed. We were on our way.

Slowly we made our way along the canal leading into the main channel that led past the Lido out to the open sea. Our craft lumbered along, being hampered by the barge lashed to our side. The captain held the helm continuously, to compensate for the imbalance caused by the barge. Once we were in the main channel, we had a short distance to travel to leave the port. However we had one more obstacle to surmount, passing the harbormaster's tower. As we approached it, there were signals for us to stop. From one of the observation platforms, a uniformed man was madly gesticulating that we were to heave to, but our captain just ignored all these signs and continued full speed ahead. I looked back apprehensively to see if we were being pursued, but it seemed clear that the way to the Adriatic was open. As we left the protected area of the harbor, we immediately felt the sea swells. The first thing that had to be done was to carry out a maneuver that would free the barge lashed to our side and start towing it behind us. All this required a great deal of skill and was time consuming. When all this was accomplished, I went into my radio cabin to relay to our shore station that we were well on our way. I sat down and started tune the set, when suddenly the terrible reality hit me. The vital frequency crystals were still in Uri's pocket on the shore. Zeev's nervousness had caused such a

tension that I had entirely forgotten to retrieve the crystals that I had entrusted to Uri the evening before.

I was faced with a crucial decision, to continue the voyage without radio communication or to return to port to retrieve the crystals. The situation was very complicated, because our intention of evading the truce supervision forces depended heavily in coordinating our entrance to Haifa Port. On the other hand, reentering the Venice Port entailed lashing the barge to our side, running the gauntlet of the port authorities and finding Uri with the crystals in his pocket. I consulted with Yigal, who thought that we should return immediately to port, however the Captain was reluctant to carry out our decision, especially because of the maneuvering necessary to lash the barge to our side and the danger of passing the harbormaster's tower again. But Yigal was the superior authority and it was decided that we would go back. Luckily we were still away from the full power of the open seas, so lashing the barge was a lot easier than we expected. We then turned to enter the port again. As we passed the harbormaster's tower there was the same waving of arms and flashing of beacons, which we again ignored. We headed directly towards the wharf opposite the hotel where I had stayed. There, much to our surprise and relief, stood Uri with a few of our friends, waiting, as if they were naturally expecting our arrival. The Captain managed bring the ship close enough to the wharf for me to jump off, retrieve the crystals, jump back on the ship, and do it all within seconds. The minute I was aboard again, the ship turned sharply and we were on our way to the open sea. For the third time we went through the same ritual passing the harbormaster's tower, again ignoring their gestures. Apparently both sides knew how to play their parts.

About an hour later, we again left the shelter of the lagoon, out into the Adriatic. Again the barge had to be released for towing, and we were on our way again.

I rushed into the wireless cabin, inserted the crystals, tuned the transmitter and started to send a message to Zeki and Shoshana in the Milan station. All this had to be accomplished before I would be overcome by my congenital proneness to *mal de mer* or seasickness. As soon as the message was sent, I threw myself on my bunk, vomited my guts out, and fell into a deep sleep. I don't know how long I had been asleep, but when I woke up the ship was swinging in all directions. I opened the cabin door to the deck, to see what was happening. As I stepped on the deck, which is at the ship's stern, I could see the barge, which we were towing about forty meters behind us, bobbing up and down on the waves. Suddenly before my eyes, the four hemp towropes and the two steel cables tore like threads, leaving the barge to float freely on the high sea. Within a short time it disappeared out of sight.

I rushed back to the radio cabin to compose, encode and send a message to Milan that we had lost the barge. The last part of the message I sent holding the Morse key in one hand and a bucket in the other. According to what Zeki and Shoshana told me years later, it was only

with great difficulty that the message could be understood. My condition was so bad that afterwards I just lay in my bunk and hoped to die. It was just as well, because atmospheric interference was so bad that contact with the shore had been lost.

...

The Captain was an amiable man, but because of the language barrier I couldn't carry on any lengthy conversation with him. It was clear to me that he knew his way around the Adriatic. Through Yigal I understood that he had been an officer in the Italian Navy, but I don't think he was a grand navigator. I think that from the moment that we were out of sight of the Italian Coast he had a worried look on his face. After all we were in the Mediterranean, which meant that sooner or later if we kept going east we would run into an island or Asia. So we left the Adriatic and moved into the Mediterranean. We must have skirted south of Crete, to our luck the sea remained fairly calm, except for some choppy waters in the afternoons. I kept up my daily contacts with the shore in Israel, with all the messages encoded, which was a time consuming process. The Captain, with the aid of Yigal, estimated that we would be arriving at the Haifa Port on Saturday noon. This would be the perfect time because the Cease-Fire sea patrols of the United Nations wouldn't be especially vigilant because of the Sabbath, when the port is closed.

Of course at sea often the unpredictable happens. As we sailed to the south of Cyprus we ran into a bank of fog. If the ship had a foghorn, it didn't work, so the whole night there was a sailor on watch with an old fashioned horn with a rubber bulb that had to be blown every ten minutes.

When I awoke at sunrise, I went on deck to discover that the fog had lifted and ahead of us in the distance a shoreline with a range of hills was visible. I entered the wheelhouse to find the Captain and Yigal studying the charts, with a very animated discussion between them as to what our position was. The argument was which part of the Israeli Coast was ahead of us. But they both contended that we had to go northward to enter Haifa. I took a pair of binoculars and from the wheelhouse scanned the coastline to trying to find some kind of landmark that I could identify. I had grown up along the coast, but I couldn't find anything familiar. The hill that they assumed was Mount Carmel at its southern extreme was sloping in the wrong direction. Nor could I find the village of Benyamina at its foot. I returned to the Captain and Yigal, who were still arguing about our position, to express my opinion that we were much further north than they thought, which if it was true, we would be entering with all our glory into the Port of Beirut. As we were pursuing a heated discussion, one of the sailors on watch shouted that a navy destroyer had appeared on the horizon. A few minutes later as it came nearer to us they started to signal for us to stop. Apparently the Captain thought that he was still in Venice, where orders to stop weren't necessarily obeyed, so he continued on his way. It

was only after the destroyer shot a red flare across our bow that we stopped. Within a short time the navy ship pulled up alongside us. It was a United States Navy destroyer flying the American and the United Nations flags. For us in our landing craft the Navy ship looked like a ten-story building. As we stood side by side, the Navy sailors lined the deck, awaiting their Captain. Soon the Captain came with his megaphone, to ask us questions. As I was the only English speaker aboard our vessel I became the spokesman. The conversation went as follows:

Destroyer Captain: What is the ship's name?

Me: Dora

D.C.: What is the ship's registry?

Me: Italian

D.C.: Where are you coming from?

Me: Venice.

D.C.: Where are you heading?

Me: Haifa

D.C.: What is your cargo?

Me: We have none, only ballast.

D.C.: Are you sure?

Me: Yes, Sir!

D.C.: Good Luck and Godspeed to you! Get on your way.

Me: Thank you, Sir!

At that point the Captain turned and was about to walk away, when I remembered our real problem. Then I shouted: Captain, which way to Haifa?

A roar of laughter came from the row of sailors who lined the deck of the destroyer. A few minutes later we were given the course to follow, at that point we parted, each of us going his own way.

The course they gave us was to the south. As it turned out we were opposite Lebanon; the destroyer episode saved us from making a serious mistake.

About five hours later, on Saturday noon, we entered Haifa Port. Though we didn't expect a Welcoming Committee, there was no one at the port to meet us to take over the ship and its cargo. At that point it was no longer my baby, from there onward it was Yigal's. I took leave from the Captain and the crew, gathered my few belongings and hitch-hiked home.

...

[For my next trip,] I left the damp heat of the Sharon Plain and I was now shivering under a wing of a plane sheltering from a light drizzle and bone chilling cold. Finally after timidly asking one of my fellow travelers where we were, he looked at me incredibly, asking: "Don't you know? We're in Czechoslovakia."

My fear of abandonment subsided, feeling easier remaining with this herd of English speaking males. Soon the buses arrived and I boarded along with all the rest. Looking out of the windows one could see rows on rows of plants on trellises. Someone remarked that these were hops for the famous Czech beers. It all looked very quaint and peaceful. The ride into the town was short, ending at the entrance to a modest hotel called the Zlate Lev. I was very much surprised to find the signs were all in a strange language, instead of the German that I had expected. In retrospect I was ashamed of myself, that with all my extensive travels, I didn't know that Czech was a distinctive language of Slavic origin. I blame the excessive secrecy that surrounded my departure that nobody gave me a briefing about the country that I was going to. Even the illusive Dr. Felix could have done that in the Park Hotel, without having it leaked out to the enemy.

...

The new State of Israel had been given a building in downtown Prague to set up a diplomatic representation. It would be one of the first Israeli diplomatic missions in Europe, with the status of a Legation. My assignment was to help a technician to set up a wireless communication center in the Legation. Though it was standard procedure for diplomatic representations to have their independent communications facilities, there was tacit understanding that under the circumstances these would also serve for military purposes as long as the war in Israel continued.

Levi promised me that within a day or two a courier would come from Prague, who would take me back with him. Meanwhile I strolled around the town, enjoying the typical Central European building style. I soon realized that none of the languages that I had at my disposal, even a smattering of German, were useful in making myself understood in this small town. Also, the lack of consonants made my attempts to read signs frustrating.

Two days later the courier arrived. Soon after his arrival, Levi called me in and introduced me to the courier. Little did I know that on meeting Heini Chobocky, I was meeting another person who was to be permanently interwoven into my life. Because Heini was in a hurry, I thanked Levi for all his help, shook his hand warmly and left. It was only as we were approaching Prague that I realized that my passport remained snugly among those of the B-17 crews I came in with. Going back for it was out of the question, but checking into a hotel in Prague, now under a Communist regime, would pose a problem. However it turned out that the Palace Hotel was almost exclusively taken by Israeli Legation staff, so until I could legitimately register for a room of my own, I shared a room with Sam Pomerance. He was in charge of volunteer pilots who were operating in Czechoslovakia. A few days later I got my passport, which enabled me to become legitimate with a room and get a book of ration stamps, which was essential to anyone living in Czechoslovakia. The rations for tourists and temporary residents were larger than those given to Czech citizens.

In those days the Palace Hotel was luxurious, but modest. Today, after the demise of the Communist regime, it has been renovated and is considered the most exclusive hotel in Prague, with the front door manned by a top-hatted doorman.

A few days after I settled down in the Palace hotel, I had a chance to look around in this haunting, mysterious city. A few days later the technician who was to set up the wireless station arrived from Belgium. He had gone to buy some U.S. Army surplus radio equipment, which was on sale there. He brought with him two large crates containing powerful transmitters.

The person that I met was Sam Goldwater, another man that I learned to care for and respect. Sam was a short person, with curly hair, a prominent nose and a glorious sense of humor. His accent immediately disclosed his Scottish origin. We became close friends during his stay in Prague and I don't remember many periods in my life when I was continuously laughing as I did there. It was from the way he expressed his impressions of what he heard and saw in Prague. The Czech signs intrigued him with their scarcity of vowels. We would be walking along the street, when suddenly he would stop and point to a sign, exclaiming: "What a beauty!"

But we had a job to do. We were sent to the building recently assigned for the Legation, to set up our equipment. As I found out to our surprise, we were the first Israelis to enter the building. What we found was quite desolate, but with distinct indications of past grandeur. It had been one of the palaces belonging to the Schwarzenberg family, a leading family in the aristocracy in Prague. Their palaces of all sizes were spread throughout the city. With the rise of the Communists in Czechoslovakia, about six months earlier, these had been confiscated for public purposes.

Much to amazement when we entered through the door, we found a dignified elderly woman, who greeted us in perfect English. I turned out that her family had been the occupants of this palace, being part of the Schwarzenberg dynasty. She invited us into a small apartment near the entrance, which we found out later had been the residence of the palace's concierge. As she explained to us, she was allowed to live in it temporarily before leaving the country. Along with a very welcome cup of tea that she offered us, we had a very enlightening conversation about many world topics. Her tweed dress, knowledge of languages and familiarity with many cosmopolitan cities of the world, beamed nobility of an era gone by. One couldn't but pity her reduced circumstances, though she made no effort to make us feel sorry for her. However, I am sure that she was not being thrown out into the streets of a cold world. A few days after we entered the building, she moved out. We never saw her again.

The room assigned to us by the ambassador designate, Ehud Avrial, was a back room reached through two sets of doors, which assured us the privacy and security that the nature of our work required.

We had a terrifying experience bringing the two heavy transmitters in their original crates upstairs through a steep narrow staircase. At our disposal were only two porters who came with the truck to unload the transmitters and to bring them up to our room. The stairs were only wide enough for two people to stand. The porters with ropes stood on the upper part of the staircase and pulled the crates up, while Sam and I pushed them from down below. It was a difficult task, because there was only an inch or two of clearance on both sides. When we managed to maneuver the case halfway up the staircase, we found ourselves exhausted from the effort. When we paused for a moment, suddenly the crate started to teeter, threatening to roll down and bury us under it. It was some kind superhuman strength that Sam and I exerted that prevented a serious accident. 'Till today I feel a chill of panic when I remember the incident.

As the building was National Property, all renovations and changes had to be done by workers who were government employees. Here I learned my first Czech words and something about the communist work ethic. The job at hand was to put in a few additional electric outlets and to increase the capacity of the electricity, especially in our room. To achieve that, a number of ducts had to be chiseled in the walls. This is a tedious dusty job, but unavoidable. It was when the workers started to work that I learned my first Czech word: "*pomalo*," which means slowly. As it turned out, with lunch breaks, beer breaks and newspaper breaks, it took twice the time that we had estimated that the work would take. We soon realized that we must get used to a more leisurely pace of living.

This was most pronounced when we went for our lunch breaks. Because of our special status as foreigners, we were restricted by our ration books to specific restaurants for tourists.

In these restaurants which had probably seen better days and nobler clients, they still clinged to their tradition of long, leisurely meals. We were accustomed to the businesslike, no nonsense service of America and Israel, where restaurants were meant to provide food in minimum time and to get the client out as soon as possible. In the Prague restaurants, the intervals between ordering and the actual appearance of the food were long enough to indulge in a nap. Between courses one could forget what the previous course had been. All this took some getting used to. However, in recent visits to Czechoslovakia, I found that not very much has changed since then.

One of my more interesting culinary experiences happened when I rebelled against the meager Continental breakfast that was served in the Palace Hotel. So I decided to leave the hotel and find a cafe or restaurant that would serve more substantial repast. For me a breakfast without eggs wasn't considered a breakfast. As it happened I found such a jewel in one of the side streets, not too far from the hotel. In it I had a breakfast with two eggs, fresh rolls and excellent coffee. Elated with my find I rushed back to my friend Sam to tell him the good news. Early the next morning we set out full of anticipation of first real breakfast in Prague. With my usual picture memory I found the restaurant without any difficulty, only to be confronted with a locked door with neat sign in the taped to the glass saying: Because of the Summer Vacation, the Restaurant will be closed throughout the month of August. The date was the 1st of August.

But being in Prague wasn't all about having a good breakfast. It was urgent that the wireless station function as soon as possible. Mainly because a number of secret operations were about to take place, in which reliable communications were essential. One of the problems that we were faced with was to set up antennas. There was a small courtyard along the side of the building, where, if we put up a mast, we would have sufficient length of wire for transmitting and receiving. This was a job beyond our capabilities, so we had it done by some professionals, who did it quickly and efficiently. For security reasons the connections inside of the building had to be done by us. The only way that we could lay the necessary cables leading from the antennas to the wireless equipment was through an attic situated between the tiled roof and the plaster ceilings below.

Because there had been no direct transfer of the former palace to the Israeli authorities, there many things that we had to find out for ourselves, among them were to find the staircase leading into the attic. Finally after combing room after room, including the toilets and the bathrooms, we found a hidden, narrow, winding staircase which led up to a locked door. This was obviously the attic door. Next came the problem of finding the key to open it. In the concierge's apartment we found hundreds of keys, some old and rusty, others shiny and new. According to the lock, it was clear that the key would be among the old ones. Finally after a couple of hours of combining detective logic with trial and error we found the right key. Oiling the lock finally got the door open, and in front of us we found a massive low attic dimly lit by

dirty skylights. The entire interior was covered with dust and criss-crossed with cobwebs. It was an ideal backdrop for a mystery movie. Clearly we would have to dress and equip ourselves to penetrate this cavern.

The next day, dressed in our oldest clothes and with flashlights, we returned to venture into this intriguing space. Entering through the door, we moved in the direction where we assumed that the end of the antenna was fastened to the building. Even with our powerful flashlights, the beams could only light a short distance in front of us. Under the rafters were strewn an assortment of discarded sofas, chairs, chests, trunks and other articles. A frightening experience that I had was when suddenly beneath one of the skylights I was confronted with an erect figure of a knight fully arrayed in his armor. Though I'm not prone to beliefs in the supernatural, for a moment I was sure that I had seen a ghost. Maybe one of the Swarzenbergers was still inside? Had we not had an urgent task at hand we could have lingered there in that world of nobility of the past. Within a few days we managed to string the antenna cable through the attic and down a small hole in the ceiling and on to the transmitters.

Though we worked hard, we were able to enjoy life in Prague. It was just at the beginning of the Communist regime, so the Prague still retained the character of a cosmopolitan city. We had more than sufficient money at our disposal. Though we were only given an expense allowance in dollars, but converted into Czech Krona it was a handsome sum. Czech Jews who had left for Israel had entrusted large amounts of money with Jewish Organizations and the Israeli Legation. With the rise of the Communists, these monies could not be transferred abroad. So our expenses in Czechoslovakia were paid for with these funds, while their owners in Israel were given Israeli Lirat.

...

My blissful life in Prague didn't last long. One day, the man in charge of the military personnel called me into his office to tell me that we had been given permission by the Yugoslavs, directly from Tito himself, to use an airstrip in Montenegro to facilitate the airlift from Czechoslovakia to Israel. Because means of communications in that region were very poor and unreliable it was essential that we establish our own wireless station. I was the one that was chosen to do that. Though I wasn't the best operator in the world, it was known that I was a great improviser. A burnt fuse, loose wire or a low battery almost never kept me from transmitting my message. That was probably the main reason that I was sent. Besides I was already in the region and could be sent there without any time consuming preparations. All I really needed was a suitcase type of transmitter that had been used by agents behind enemy lines during the war. The capabilities of these small sets, with antennas looking like clotheslines, were unbelievable. Sam disappeared for a few days and when he came back he had a suitcase transmitter suitable for me.

I was ready to go, but reluctant to leave the good life in Prague. Heini drove me to Zatec where I boarded a plane that would stop for refueling at the field in Montenegro. This plane was a C-46 of the type that I had flown in during the war. The Israeli Air Force now used it as the main transport plane for carry urgently needed parts and equipment from Czechoslovakia to Israel. Until landing permission was given to refuel in Montenegro, the transport planes were forced to make a long detour westward to Ajaccio in Corsica for that purpose. All the airports had their code names, some designated, others just lovingly applied. Zatec was Zebra, Montenegro was Oklahoma and Ajaccio was Jock Strap. Where Alabama was, God only knows?

The pilot of the plane was Leo Gardner, along with us was Al Schwimmer who was one of people who helped organizing and implementing the acquisition of the aircraft for Israel during the War of Independence. Al Schwimmer continued to be active in Israel after the war. It was he who founded and later managed the Israel Aircraft Industry for many years.

Again, as usual, I was given a minimum of information about what to expect on arrival in Montenegro. However this time it wasn't because of secrecy, but because nobody really knew what was going on there. One of the reasons was the lack of any modern means of communication. So it was great anticipation I awaited our landing to see what the next chapter of my life would be like. As we started to descend I could see the rugged mountains below us. Suddenly a small valley with a small town could be seen in the midst of the mountain chain. We circled above it and came in for a landing on a dirt landing strip. As we taxied toward the head of the strip, it seemed that we had landed in the middle of nowhere. There were no buildings in sight, only stacks of oil barrels lined the side of the runway. Nor were there any visible signs of human activity.

As we pulled up to a stop, we could see a jeep speeding toward us leaving a cloud of dust behind it. It pulled up next to us just as we lowered our folding ladder. The driver of the jeep was a shirtless suntanned man, wearing a broad brimmed hat. As we came down the ladder he introduced himself, his name was G'eda Shochat. It was obvious that he hadn't had any notification on our pending arrival. As I found out later, the fastest means of communication were the few telephones in the town, which meant waiting for hours and sometimes days for a call to get through. I presented myself as the radio operator sent to set up a wireless station to improve communications. He invited us to climb aboard his jeep to go into the town for a meal and some coffee. As we were leaving the landing strip I was still looking for an encampment, though there was none in view except the large number of oil drums stacked along the side of the runway, and two piles of something covered by canvas.

The town called Niksic was situated about two kilometers down the road from the airstrip. We entered the town through its cobble stoned main street and stopped in front of an inn. It had some tables outside, but we entered into the dim cool restaurant inside. While we

sat down, G'eda examined the menu, though he seemed to be quite familiar with it. When the landlady came to take our order, we were surprised to see how easily he was understood. It was apparent that food was abundant, without all the bother that we experienced in Czechoslovakia with ration cards. The meal that we had was both tasty and filling. I had expected to find shortages after the debilitating war and ensuing unrest that they had gone through. Immediately after lunch we returned to the field, to find that a group of Yugoslav soldiers were in the final stages of refueling the plane from the barrels which I had seen stored along the runway. Within short time the refueling was finished, after a short farewell to the crew the plane took off, leaving G'eda and me sitting in the jeep.

Now that the plane had taken off, I had a chance to talk to G'eda about the setup on the field. When I asked him where the rest of the personnel of the airstrip were, he looked at me with a wide grin, saying: "They are all here in the jeep." I looked at him in disbelief, then it came to me that he wasn't joking. As it turned out, the living quarters that he led me to was one of the piles of canvas that I had seen along the side of the runway. It was an inner lining of what had been called in the British Army, "Indian Tents." This type of tent had an outer waterproof shell and an inner shell, for insulation against the heat and the cold. It appeared in this case that the outer lining had been lost somewhere in transit, while the inner lining covered a large square hole in the ground. Inside the "tent" were two army cots and an improvised table. I put my belongings on the unoccupied cot, then I joined G'eda outside on a couple of handmade easy chairs to get additional information about the airstrip and what my duties were to be.

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[After a while, the authorities in Belgrade granted us permission to move into an inn.] Living in the inn was quite an experience. All together there were four rooms on the upper floor above the restaurant and cafe. It was situated on the cobblestone main street of the town. Besides our jeep, there was very little traffic that rattled down it. Early in the morning there were already little tables set up on the sidewalk, where workers and farmers had their breakfasts, with an overflowing glass of Slivovits.² They were already singing.

The water supply to the upper floor was very erratic. Under the best conditions, the toilets could flush two to three times a day. Luckily, quite often we were the only occupants in the rooms. G'eda and I were given a double room which was big enough for our needs. I had two problems when I set my transmitter in the room. The first was to find enough length to string up my antenna. G'eda solved this when he tied a stone to the end of the wire and threw

Plum Brandy²

it with uncanny accuracy onto a tree on the other side of the garden. The other factor that was beyond our control was the unreliable electric current. Electricity to the town was generated by a pre-war diesel engine, which was connected to a generator from the same age. In addition, occasionally there was a shortage of fuel for the engine, which meant the supply of electricity was reduced to a few hours in the evening. But even then the strength of the current was weak and transmission fluctuated. Because of these conditions I cut down my radio contacts in the evening, whenever possible. My transmissions were made during the day, out in the field, where we had our dependable little put-put, which gave us sufficient power for our needs.

To make things more complicated, all messages, incoming or outgoing were in code. Consequently, handling all messages, even the shortest, was time consuming because of the necessity to encode or decode them. The code used wasn't the most sophisticated. All parties in the network had certain book, of the exact same edition, so that a marker that was made as to page, line and word was identical in all the copies. Without going into details as to how it was done, it was a tedious drawn out process. The book that we used was "Lust for Life" by Irving Stone, which is based on the life of Vincent Van Gogh. It was a Pocket Book edition, printed in 1945. The reason I go into all these details is to tell about what happened one day in the field.

I was sitting in our operations tent after a radio contact to Israel. My table was strewn with papers of all sorts and my copy of "Lust for Life, when our Yugoslav liaison officer, Mirko, asked permission to enter our tent. We were on excellent relations with him, but there was a tacit understanding that he would not enter our operations tent while we were working. Seeing that I had finished my transmission, I gladly invited him in for some coffee. We were really very lonely out in the field, so we enjoyed having some human company. I prepared the coffee and we sat talking in our strange way, I had already learned some words in Serbian and he had started to learn some English. Suddenly his eye landed on my book "Lust for Life." He picked it up and rifled through the pages. His face broke into a broad smile and he said that he would like to take the book to try and read it. G'eda told me on the day of my arrival that I was not to refuse any reasonable request that Mirko made, in order to maintain our good relationship. Yet letting the book out of my hands would be tantamount to closing down the station. I successfully explained to him that I was in the middle of reading the book and I would give it to him within a few days. I reported all that had happened to G'eda, so we decided to contact our main station in Israel telling them that the "Lust of Life" inadvertently had been destroyed and that different books had to replace it.

Within a week, all three stations, in Prague, Israel, and Yugoslavia, were equipped with identical copies of "Three Men in a Boat." The next day I gave my copy of "Lust of Life" to Mirko, which made him very happy. And life went merrily on.

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OPERATION VELVETA

Suddenly our tranquil, boring life changed. A big operation was afoot, "Operation Velveta." In addition to the disassembled Messerschmitts that the Czechs sold us, Israel also bought a number of Spitfires that Britain had given them at the end of the war. They became surplus after the Communist takeover, when the Czech Air Force started to arm themselves with Soviet equipment. At that point in the fighting, Israel was in a dire need for aircraft that could be put into action immediately. Therefore it was decided to strip the Spitfires down to bare essentials and to add wing tanks, so they would be able to fly the distance from Czechoslovakia to Israel, with a refueling stop in Niksic.

Overnight we became important, compared to how we had been ignored to a certain extent by the Air Force, except for the transport planes that landed for refueling. They had only a vague notion how many of us were stationed on the field. Evidence to that were the exaggerated amounts of food and cigarettes that were sent to us. This was partly due to the fact that we weren't Air Force personnel. G'eda came from the organization which was carrying out the transfer of Jews from Europe to Israel. I came from the Communication Branch. The two mechanics had been hired in the United States through Al Shwimmer, a volunteer that didn't belong directly to any organization. I'm not telling this in a derogatory way, it all happened because we didn't have the time to get properly organized.

The Air Force at this juncture realized that an operation of this size and extent couldn't be done without organization and meticulous planning. To begin with, they sent a special unit to establish a camp for the personnel required during Operation Velveeta. The equipment that came along with the unit consisted of decent tents, powerful radio transmitters and experienced radio operators in aviation communication. Until their arrival, our contacts were only with a station in Israel and another in Prague. With the equipment that we had until then, there was no possibility to maintain contacts with aircraft in the air. All this upgraded our landing strip in anticipation of the operation. Of course all this changed our life, with the new tents we moved back to the field again. Though G'eda still remained in command, the field was for all purposes in the hands of the Air Force personnel. Most of my duties were taken over by the newly arrived operators. We no longer had the intimate relations that existed when G'eda, the two mechanics, and I were alone with Mirko and his army detachment.

Seeing that the Spitfires had been stripped from all but minimal navigation and radio equipment, they would fly behind a mother ship. The plane chosen for this purpose was a four engine C54. It would do all the navigation and maintain radio contacts in flight. The whole

formation was to be like a V with the mother ship at the apex and the Spits flying behind her like little chicks.

As the days went by the tension increased. This was to be a trial operation, which if successful, would be followed by addition planes. We had already received a shipment of airplane fuel by rail from the coast. So we all waited for the message that the planes were ready to leave. Finally we got notification from the base in Czechoslovakia that they were taking off the next morning. Early in the morning we were all lined up along the runway to greet the incoming planes. About eleven o'clock the mother ship with three Spitfires on each side came into sight. There was a cheer from all of us on the ground. First to land and taxi into position was the C54, which would direct the landing sequence from the ground. One by one the fighters circled the valley and came in for a landing, five were on the ground with the last one coming in on its final approach. Then we suddenly noticed that its wheels hadn't been lowered. Incredibly we all realized that he was making a classical belly landing.

The plane glided low and slowly over the runway, then settling down on its belly, skidding till it miraculously stopped short at the end of the strip. Immediately we all rushed to rescue the pilot, however within seconds he had jumped out of the cockpit to the ground and ran clear of the plane. Luckily it didn't catch fire, but the auxiliary fuel tanks and the propeller were totally smashed. And then they were five.

...

[T]he mother ship lead the Spitfires to Ramat David, were they landed. The C54 continued southward and landed in Tel Nof.³ On landing I left my suitcase transmitter with the rest of equipment that that the plane had brought back from Niksic, I then slung my pack over my shoulder and hitch hiked home to Avichail.

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BACK TO PRAGUE

Another event involving the doors of our highly secure room happened when I was on duty alone. Suddenly the door opened and in came a beautiful young girl, carrying a large bouquet of flowers. I was totally flabbergasted. Never before had a completely unauthorized stranger entered our room. It was even out of bounds for most of the Legation staff. Now this lovely girl had unintentionally blundered into our inner sanctum. After I got over my initial shock I asked her what was the purpose of her unexpected visit. She was looking for her cousin Heini Chobocky, who she knew was working in the Legation. Someone in the corridor had

Formerly Aquir³

absentmindedly waved her to our door. In trying to explain the reason for the visit and the flowers, she told me that she had been to a wedding, where she was the lucky recipient of the bouquet that the bride had tossed in the air. To avoid the embarrassment of parading in the street with the large bouquet, she decided to leave it with Heini at the Legation, which was close to the wedding hall. I graciously took the flowers from her, promising to deliver them to my good friend. Then, still the state of confusion, I led her to the door. I mumbled a farewell and she left. Only then I realized that I didn't even ask her for her name.

I was sure that finding out information about the unexpected guest from Heini would be easy. Heini was always very open and talkative; telling him a secret was the surest way to publish it. So when I managed to find him, I asked him to come into our room to pick up the bouquet that had been left for him. However when he came in, he was reluctant to talk about his cousin, or volunteer any information about her. Finally after nagging and begging, he told me her name. Her name was Eva. It took additional cross-examining till he agreed to give me her phone number. Though we were bosom buddies, he clearly refused to get his family and relatives involved with the likes of me.

NOTES FROM THE EDITOR, FRED HOPENGARTEN, ESQ., K1VR

Avraham Herr subsequently married Eva. They lived out their lives in Avichail, a *moshav* next to the today's modern city of Netanya. Their land was formerly orange groves – but much of that land now has residences. Their daughter, Shula Herr, is the cousin of my wife, Betty Herr, MD, PhD. Sonny is listed in the official archives of the *Palmach* radio operators, known as the *Gideonim* – the Signal Service or Signal Corps. The list of *Gideonim* (available in the Hebrew version only) names 168 people, 51 of them women.

A digital version of the 'History of the *Gideonim*'⁴, in Hebrew, has been written by Danny Rosenne, 4X1SK. A short form of the history of the Haganah Signal Service may be found (in English) at <http://palyam.org/English/Gidonim/mainpage.php>.

See <https://forums.qrz.com/index.php?threads/gideonim-short-movie-hf-grp-inspiration-to-radio-amateurs.553909/> and be sure to visit <https://www.amutakesher.org.il/?CategoryID=273>

A dramatic video (~28 minutes) entitled "*Gideonim: A Legacy to Follow*," tells the story of the *Gideonim*, the *Haganah* Signal Service (Signal Corps). It is in Hebrew with English subtitles, and may be found at https://youtu.be/fPr2g_51icw. Danny Rosenne, 4X1SK, was the Executive Producer. It includes pictures of their suitcase portable equipment, interviews with real *Gideonim*, information on their cipher system, and stories. The video story is remarkably similar to the autobiography of Avram Herr that you've just read. – Fred Hopengarten, K1VR

⁴ The book is available on the Palyam & Aliya Bet website, at: <http://www.palyam.org/Gidhonim/Gideonim-Book-April-2018-Internet-Version.pdf>



And they grew old together . . .





Photo taken July 27, 1996.



ⁱ Probably FT-243 crystals, which look like this: