

Acknowledgment to Mrs. Ora Argov for allowing us to present
a chapter of Levi Argov's book on the Palyam site.

"The beginnings of the Bricha* from Romania"



**At the end of World War II in 1945, a mass exodus of Jews from Europe began. they moved across borders in their endeavor to reach the port cities of the Mediterranean or the Black Sea, so that they could board a vessel that would take them to Palestine. This mass movement was aided and in fact led, by emissaries sent from Israel, 'Haganah' members of the Jewish Brigade - 'Ha'Chavura' and at the end of the line – in provisional camps around those ports – Palyam members who had to prepare the people for life on board the ships. This mass flight organization became later part of the 'Mosad Le'Aliya Bet' known as the Bricha, the Hebrew word for flight. (Translated by Aryeh Malkin).*

"I accepted the task and prepared a list, together with Palgi, of all our friends in the youth movements who might be able to help us in moving the survivors from Romania. As Palgi was leaving the country on the following day he suggested to me to ask for people from the youth movements who would help in this work; not movement work but work for the good of all. We gave the code name "Hike" to this operation, as during the World War itself we had used this name in the youth movements for operations involving crossing borders (illegally, of course).

The people on this list were very experienced in this sort of work. My friend Mimish, or Peretz Raabs of "The Young Maccabees" had participated in their first "Hike" in the spring of 1942. They had first crossed the boundary to Hungary at the start of the deportation of the Jews of Slovakia to Poland. Tzvi Goldfarb, a leader of the Dror movement in Budapest, had already fled from Poland to Slovakia in 1941 and from there he made his way to Hungary some time later. The youth movements experienced most of their "hikes" after the Germans entered Budapest on the 19th April 1944 until the city was liberated on 18th January 1945.

By means of various avenues of escape which were paved through Transylvania, more than 1000 members of the youth movements were smuggled to Romania as well as thousands of other Jews. At the same time, the people of the Hungarian youth movements became experts at forging passports and other documents. Some of these were necessary for the

smuggling operation but they were also necessary for staying alive in Budapest. At the height of their activity the Hungarian underground forged 120 000 Swiss documents that helped save thousands of Jews in Budapest.

All this experience in smuggling across borders and falsifying documents, together with the experience of working underground now stood under our control so that we could move survivors from Romania to Austria and we were able to organize from the group that we had that represented all the youth movements a committee to organize this "Hike". Those active on this committee whose names I recall were Peretz Raabs of "Maccabi Hatzair", Tibor Rosenbaum of "Bnei Akiva", Rafi Rosenberg of "Hanoar Hatzioni", Tzvi Goldfarb of "Dror", Moshe Pil and Efra Teichman of "Hashomer Hatzair" and later on Mimish too. This committee met soon after and work was under way soon after. This committee was actually a continuation of earlier activity and what was new about it, that it was an inter-movement committee that was to work for all the refugees of Romania. At one of the first meetings it was decided that the term "Hike" was already too well-known to the Hungarian authorities and therefore it was decided to change the term and use the term 'Bricha'.

Don't Move! There is a Russian Here!

Our first task was to move 2,500 young 'Halutzim' (*pioneers i.e. youth who went to Palestine to settle on the land. A.M.*) from Romania to Graetz, Austria. From there, with the aid of the men of the Jewish Brigade we were to bring them to Italy. We did not then realize that this Bricha was only the start of a long and continuing operation. We thought that this was a one-shot incident the aim of which was that these youngsters would not be caught by the Russians and sent to Siberia. Graetz was still under Russian control but it was supposed to be transferred to British control in the near future. We thought that we would be making it easier for ourselves if we moved all the youngsters to Graetz and then they would come automatically under British control. We thought that it would be easier than trying to smuggle them across a Russian controlled border. This plan altered the general direction of the flow of the Jews by 180°. Until then, the Jews had been moving from Poland to Romania, now we wanted to take them from Eastern Europe to central Europe and from there, with the aid of the Jewish Brigade to get them to Italy.

In the spring of 1945 when they were going in the opposite direction on their way to Romania, the travelers were aided in Slovakia and Hungary by local Jews in various places along their route. Some of these locales were close to the border and these same people were able to be of assistance again. We started working and made contact with the leaders of the Polish youth movements who were in Romania at that time. Among these were Abba

Kovner and Tzivia Lubetkin who praised pro-cooperation between all the youth movements under a combined frame called the 'Brigade'.

When we had decided to concentrate the refugees in Graetz, Budapest became a central transfer point. Mordechai Rosman was sent there from Romania. He was a member of Hashomer Hatzair and also for a 'united youth movement' (*which was given the name "Chativa" -Brigade in Hebrew- A.M.*). He had been among the leaders of the underground in Russia and later on he was the spokesman for the Ma'apilim on the "Exodus 47" and a member of Kibbutz Ha'Ogen. He joined us in Budapest and soon became the central figure in our group there.

The first thing we did was to set up a halfway-house in Budapest. This was a place where refugees in transit would be able to rest and receive something to eat. Mimish took care of this, although he had to get out of his sickbed to do so. He was able to procure a large hotel through the auspices of the JDC. The building was not in very good condition but we were able to put people up there. There were times when we had 1000 refugees in that house at one go. The JDC also helped us establish a kitchen in this hotel. We procured guides from the various movements. Some of these guides traveled to Bucharest and helped bring the refugees to Budapest. Others went to the border points between Hungary and Austria; Sumbathei and Saint Gotthart. We told these guides that they should pick out some of the refugees who they believed would be able to assist them; even to choose some children because the Russians did not harm children, on the whole. There was one little boy who was helping refugees to cross the border and whenever he spied one he yelled: "Halt! Don't move! A Russian is coming!" After they had crossed the border and then spied a British soldier the refugees would lie down and the boy would call out: "Idiot! Why do you hide from a British soldier? The British will not harm you!"

Within 10 days we filled every room there was in Graetz. Through the emissaries of the movements we told the youth movements in Poland that from then on they should send the refugees directly to us, and not to Romania. We sent one of the boys to the city of Czop, on the border between Hungary and Carpathorus. This part of Europe had been added to Ukraine a bit earlier. This fellow was told to send refugees who had a Red Cross refugee certificate directly to Budapest. Other emissaries contacted men of the Jewish Brigade in Austria and told them to be prepared to receive the refugees from Graetz. Sometime later we received the first group of emissaries of Brigade men in Budapest and the contact with them became much stronger. The Brigade people were able to be of assistance only in the sector that was under their control so they were especially efficient in Austria.

Once contact and communication were well organized, the first groups of young pioneers started arriving. Most came in groups of 20 and each group had its leader. On the first day four such groups arrived, after that there were ten groups. Soon there was an ever-growing flow of refugees. Some days we even had thirty groups arrive. In Budapest they were received at the appointed locations which were determined by Mordechai Rosman. There, they would be given their falsified documents which allowed them to travel by train, and some pocket money and a bit of food. In addition, every group leader was given a package of one kg of pork. This pork was handed over in Austria, where food was very scarce and the pork was worth a great deal of money. This pork, once it arrived in Graetz, was able to pay the expenses for the whole Bricha setup".