

Biger, Eliezer

Born in Haifa in 1922

Joined the British Army in 1942

Joined "Ha'khavura" ("The Gang") in 1944

This is the Way it Was

I was born and raised in Haifa-Bat Galim from 1922 until 1950, and am a fourth generation Israeli. I was the eighth son in a family of ten children. When I finished my schooling in Haifa I went to Beirut in 1936 to study at the American College there. In 1938 I returned to Palestine because of riots that had broken out. I joined the Hagana in Bat Galim when I was 16 and at first was in communications, and then did guard duty. After that I worked as a fireman in the central section of Haifa.

I volunteered for the British Army in July, 1942 and after I completed a driver's course, was sent to Sarafand and assigned to the 462 Transport Company. This company was on its way to Malta in April, 1943 in a convoy of 7 British ships. The ships were hit by German shellfire and four were sunk, among them the ship that carried the 462nd Company. 140 men were drowned and the rest were sent back to Palestine and assigned to other companies. In August 1943, my reorganized company boarded a landing craft and took part in the invasion of southern Italy, landing at Ponte Cagnano (south of Salerno).

Activity in Aliya Bet from Italy

After the invasion the company remained based in Salerno and we, the 462nd Transport Company, stayed there for about a year, supplying the fighting forces with fuel, food and ammunition. While at Salerno we came into contact for the first time with the remnants of the Holocaust. They had reached Salerno in their effort to get to Palestine. We picked them up and organized them into groups. Jewish soldiers took care of them and the Jewish companies supplied them with food and clothing. Toward the end of 1944 Eliyahu Cohen-BenHur came to our company and he had the rank of First Sergeant. He had been transferred from the 179th Company with the aim of reorganizing it. The British intended to disband this company because of the corruption it found there.

Eliyahu had authority and had been an officer in the Hagana even before he volunteered for the British army. Eliyahu Golomb had appointed Eliyahu Cohen as commander of the Hagana in Italy. He made order out of chaos by getting rid of some of the sergeants and bringing in others of the caliber of Meir Davidson, Yisrael Libertovsky, Shmuel Osia and others. He also called in Shalhevet Freier and, with this crew, the Mosad for Aliya Bet was ready to do its job until Yehuda Arazi would arrive. Eliyahu mobilized more men from our company and also from other companies. These were mostly Palmachniks, men of the Hagana, and moshavniks and kibbutzniks. The men were chosen carefully and warned of the dangers involved and of the necessity for secrecy. They all eagerly agreed, and that is how "The Gang" was formed. I also joined.

The company moved forward as the front line advanced and reached Milan. That was to be our base. It was our job to extract from other British bases false orders for food, fuel, radio equipment and whatever else Aliya Bet ships needed. Whatever we got would be stored at Magenta, which was not far from Milan. At Magenta we had a group of volunteers from among the immigrants, who stored and took care of whatever we brought in. Even the vehicles were moved about with false papers, and weapons were also stolen and stored at Magenta, then repacked carefully and shipped to Palestine.

When a ship was procured, we would send over a Palyamnik who would receive the fuel and the food supplies, and store them. Yehuda Arazi was the one who decided when a ship would depart and from which point. We would transport the refugees/ immigrants to the ships in military convoys with false traveling orders, and take them from our camps to the shore of departure. All this was done with military precision. In March 1946 a ship was prepared for departure in the port of La Spezia but there were two mishaps with this sailing. In both cases, as we were moving more than one thousand immigrants toward the port, Yehuda Arazi came riding towards us and told us to retreat. In the second instance, when he told us to retreat we found our way blocked by the Italian army which thought we were fascists trying to escape from Italy and go to Spain. After some negotiations we were allowed to move the immigrants to the port. We dropped them off there and then left in haste. There followed a confrontation with the British but we had the support of the Zionist institutions and of the Italian people. The immigrants went on a hunger strike and following a deadlock of a few weeks, and after the American Government also applied pressure, the ships were allowed to sail and take the immigrants to Palestine.

The olim were put aboard the "Fede" and the "Fenice," whose names were changed later to the "Dov Hoz" and the "Eliahu Golomb". They left harbor on 8th May 1946 and arrived at Haifa on the 13th May 1946. The Palyamniks who were on the ships were Eliezer Tal and Peter Hoffman. At about the same time the transport companies were disbanded and the soldiers returned to Palestine. We members of "The Gang" did not yet feel that we could stop our work, and decided to stay in Italy until others could come and change places with us. There were about ten of us veterans who were active in this kind of work. We gave some refugees our identities and papers so that they became British soldiers returning to Palestine legally, and we became refugees. I finally returned to Palestine on Passover eve, May 1947, having been gone from the country for four and a half years. In all, 36 ships left from Italy and they carried 22,000 Olim.

A summary of what followed after I returned to Palestine in May 1947:

After I returned I started working for the Electric Company in Haifa and in 1950 I entered the IDF. I served in the southern region, in Beersheva, as area transportation officer with the rank of captain and was discharged from the IDF in 1951. I joined a group of soldiers that created an agricultural community in Sheikh Munis and remained there until 1955. From 1955 to 1974 I worked for the Mekorot Water Company and spent two years working for this company in

Nigeria. After that, the company sent me to work in Iran where I remained until 1974. My job there was as director of a subsidiary company of Mekorot that did construction and pipe-laying work. I remained in Iran for another two years and worked for an Iranian contractor. When I returned to Israel I went to work for the Israel Shipyards as director of procurement. In 1977 I was offered another job in Iran as director of a large construction project for the army and returned from Iran in September 1978.

I joined a subsidiary company of Zim which repaired containers and served as director of their Ashdod branch until 1980. 1981-1982 I worked for "Ashtrom", a construction company in Jerusalem and in 1983-1984 worked for "Telcar" as building inspector. In 1985 -1988 I worked for Icarus at Lod as production manager.