

Efrati, Gershon

Nickname: Eshed

Born in Treuburg, East Prussia, Germany in November, 1921

Joined the Radio Course in Bitan Aharon in 1943

Joined the Gideon Network in 1946

This is the Way it Was

I was born in the town of Treuburg in East Prussia, Germany in November, 1921. My grandfather was the cantor of the Jewish community there. I did not know my grandparents but was named after my grandfather. My parents moved to the capital of East Prussia, Koenigsburg, and that is where I grew up until I left Germany in March, 1938. My father, Ephraim Yaakov Chakninsky had been born in E Prussia, in the region of the Mazovian Lakes. He earned his living by selling material for men's suits. He would travel all over the country during the week and return on Thursday night. He was one of seven brothers and sisters. My mother, Erna Gerson, was the second of six children. She was a marvelous housekeeper and the house always hummed with guests and friends. The Gersons were a musical family which was something they probably inherited from their father. They all played musical instruments and sang and played chamber music in my uncle's house. My mother had a great deal of work to do because besides raising her own two children, a sister and brother of hers also lived with us.

I went to a gymnasium and then to a high school until 1936, and was in the Habonim Youth movement. I even studied Hebrew. In 1936 I had a row with my teacher because of my being Jewish and quit school. I would like to point out that all the kids in my class supported me and when I hit the teacher, they were all on my side. In 1937 I went to a youth farm training program, studied Hebrew at the same time, and in March, 1938 we made Aliya.

I arrived in Haifa the day that Hanita went onto the land. On the following day we continued on to Ayelet Hashachar. We spent two years there in the Youth Aliya group. After completion of our learning and training, we went to Shefayim and on the Hebrew New Year of 1940, joined our new kibbutz, Sdot Yam. I had learned the Morse code when I was at Ayelet Hashachar, because we used to signal by searchlight to Kfar Gileadi, and I loved signaling. In 1943 I went to a course at Bitan Aharon and when it was completed I joined Benny Porat, who was a year my senior, in signaling. The two of us worked the transmitter and held contact with Hadera and the Tel Aviv center. There was as yet no telephone in Caesarea. When the Palyam was created, we also worked for them, within the Palmach network. It may therefore be said that I was the first of the Gideonim, until the fellows who had completed the course of the Naval School at Haifa, joined the Palmach. These were: Shlomo Rosen (RIP), Hansi, Yoash Tzidon, Gad Lifshitz, Reuven Oren (Pupchen), and Benny Maimon (RIP). When they began working and operated the network, I was relieved of the job, discharged and mobilized again. At first I worked in Hadera and then in Tel Aviv. At the same time Moshe Nevel (RIP) became ill. He had been working

from Merhavia and I was called to take his place. I was in charge of all contact in the north. When "Black Saturday" came, the transmitter at Mizra crashed, so I took it upon myself to operate the Tamar network as well, and Yigal Alon and Yitzchak Sadeh joined us. Merhavia was not far from Mizra and there was danger that the British would also reach Merhavia.

That night we put all the equipment onto a jeep and drove through the fields to the Emek Hospital in Afuleh. We received a room in the building occupied by the nurses. This building was very close to the road, and on the other side of the road was a British camp of Legionnaires. Contact via the Tamar and Avinoam networks continued without interruption. There was a search in Caesarea and all the men there were taken to an internment camp. I did not get a break to visit home until the course at Juara was over.

I was then given a break and went home to visit, but did not return to Merhavia because a search, with dogs, took place that night, and I ended up in Rafiah. When I was finally released I returned to Tel Aviv and was put in charge of TACHAL (the stations located outside Israel), and Shoshana, the transmitting station that had contact with ships. This was from 1946 to 1948. There were many vessels and I had two stations and a great deal of work, so was given Noa (from the Mosad for Aliya Bet) to help me.

Arnon worked with: Yissar – Paris, Leonardo – Rome, Ofri – Prague, Berman – Baghdad, Rais – Cyprus. Cyprus was a station to which we sent messages without receiving a reply. When the camps were closed Noa and I went to Prague together and a whole new set of adventures began. Noa spent only one week in Prague and then went to Paris. I stayed with Shlomo-Hansi for about six months and then I too went to Paris. In conclusion, as a seaman from Sdot Yam I wanted to go to sea, but the opportunity was never granted me and I remained a land-anchored seaman.

Some additional stories...

The story of the induction camp.

One day Avraham Tanchelson was with me while I was working and someone rang the doorbell. I don't know how they obtained the address but two MPs stood there and asked for me. They gave him a note which was an order to appear at the induction camp at Kiryat Aryeh the following morning. I told Avraham not to worry, everything would be okay. I had a grey card with my name and serial number on it, but as we were not in uniform, there was suspicion that we were draft dodgers. In order to allow us to wander about Tel Aviv, we had a bunch of passes from the Communications Department of the Army that were all signed beforehand and which we filled in with details as needed. In order to return from the induction camp to Tel Aviv I wrote on one of the passes Gershon Efrati, # 31581, free until 10:00. I signed Eshed and had the stamp of Communications on the pass. When I arrived at the camp there was a line of several thousands waiting, and order kept by a guard with a Mauser on his hip.

I showed the guard my pass and showed him that I had to be back in camp at 10:00. He took me out of line and put me in a hut. I spoke to the clerk there and told her there must be some mistake. She got up, went to speak to someone, and came back and said that I was correct and that I could leave. All those standing in line who saw me arrive, be received by the guard and then some clerk and out of the camp in five minutes, thought to themselves, "Who is that son-of-a-bitch? In and out in 5 minutes and we're standing in line for days." I came back to the transmitter and told Avremele, "You see, everything was OK."

The passport and the flight

This really started when I received an order to report to the Communications Section of the Army. I was sitting on my duffle bag and waited for the first Cease Fire. When that took effect a few days later, I received an order to report to the transport office of the Air Force. I appeared and a good looking young clerk asked me who I was. I said that I did not know and that she should check the passports. She checked, found my photo in one of them and announced: "You are Yaakov Solomon Dorfman". I took the passport with my photo and someone else's name, to which I had to become accustomed. I met Noa and we rode at ten at night to the airport by bus. A gigantic four-engine DC-10 sat on the runway waiting for the two of us. There were no seats but a member of the crew gave us a mattress on which to sit or lie down. We took off at 1:00 a.m. and when we were somewhere over Greece the plane started to wobble a bit and roll from side to side, but nothing more happened and we landed at an airfield near Prague. The field was run by our people and the fellow at the desk stamped the passports without even a glance at us. We took a bus to Prague and found a hotel for the night.

The DC 10 and my mandolin

We all resided in the Pas Hotel and could get to the consulate after a ten-minute walk. The building was a sort of old castle with many rooms, and the entrance was grand with a flagpole in front. Our communication station was somewhat to the rear of the building and had a separate entrance. On the door of our spacious room was a sign "No Entry". Czechoslovakia itself had gone through a Communist overthrow several months earlier and was eager to obtain currency from the West (\$). This is what made our task of obtaining weapons easier. The Arabs were also very busy there. We also ran several courses there, including one for pilots and another for paratroopers. Yankale Salomon, the Palmach emissary, was organizing a Czech Brigade. There were a good number of young Czech Jews who had been in various army groups and wanted to make Aliya and help in our fight against the Arabs. At the same time there was a mini-war between Mapai, Achdut Haavoda and Hashomer Hatzair. On top of that, the Palmach had been disbanded. A military mission arrived in Prague, at the head of which was David Reshef. The Czech Brigade was disbanded and Yaakov Salomon received a note ordering him to return to Israel. Incidentally, Yaakov always organized the drinking of a toast on the 13th of every month, in accordance with Palyam tradition. This usually took place in a little Bulgarian Café, with a little Gypsy orchestra, and where he was able to speak Bulgarian.

When we entered and played the Palmach anthem, they thought it was the national anthem and would greet us with song and put a little Israeli flag on our table.

The Czechs repaired old Spitfire planes and these are what the pilots in training learned to fly. There was a serious lack of any kind of planes in Israel so ten of these were prepared for direct flight to Israel via Yugoslavia. Unnecessary equipment was removed, and fuel tanks were added. Two flights of five planes each left Czechoslovakia, one shortly after the other. Unfortunately, only eight of them made it to Israel. Sam Pomerantz, who planned the route, failed to make it over the Carpathian Mountains and was killed but another pilot managed to come out alive. Our task (the Gideonim) in this operation was a passive one. Afterwards a DC-10 arrived which was to pick up all the equipment that had been left behind. The crew was mostly American and a girl waited for each of them. They had probably been sent by the Czech Government because they knew more than we did. The pilot announced that the plane was not in condition to make the flight back, and upon examination, one engine was found not to be working and had to be changed. A new engine had to be delivered from Israel, as there were none in Czechoslovakia. The engine arrived and was mounted onto the wing. The plane was to leave on 1st January and is where I entered the scene.

I told the representative of the Air Force that he would not find a pilot able to fly the night after the New Year, but he said that he would find one. I was correct, however, and when he came to the hotel, no pilot was there and it wasn't before noon that several showed up. They went out to the airfield and first did a test flight, so by the time they took off for Israel it was about 17:30. I was on duty and was to contact Israel at 23:00. When I came on duty there was no information that the plane had left and when I called the hotel where the pilots stayed, I was told that no one was there. I closed the office and went back to my hotel to sleep. At about 1:30 or 2:00 the phone rang and the Air Force rep asked if I had sent the telegram. I told him there was no telegram to send. I asked him when the plane left and he said that it left at 05:30 (not at 17:30). I said okay if he left at 05:30, then we will contact Israel at 09:00. I must have been in a sleepy fog because I did not realize that it was already afternoon when we were talking.

The next day Hansi phoned me and said that a note was found behind the "No Entry" sign on the front door. That was why no telegram was sent and here is where a mixup began. The plane arrived in the morning in Israel as scheduled and asked permission to land. Since this was wartime and the airfield did not know of the plane's arrival beforehand, it was not given permission. It tried at another field, but here also it was not welcomed. They were running out of fuel and things were looking grim! When the plane flew above Tel Aviv it was shot at. Finally the plane sent out an S.O.S. so they lit the airstrip but the plane had no fuel to reach it and landed in the sea. The pilots had a rubber lifeboat which they threw into the water, jumped in after it, and made it to shore. Among the passengers on the plane was a radio operator scheduled to work in Yugoslavia,

but as this did not turn out, he was being returned to Israel. I had given him my mandolin to take back. (I had been told that I would not be able to take it with me from Czechoslovakia.) It was a very good mandolin which I liked very much and often played in my free time. I thought that it would be lost at sea but the fellow also threw it into the rubber lifeboat, and brought it safely ashore.

When I came back to Israel about a year later and went to the Mosad for Aliya Bet office, I was told that a fellow at such and such an address had something for me. I went to see him and he handed me my mandolin which was in perfect condition. The Air Force sent an investigating committee to Prague and I was also questioned. They reached the conclusion that I had acted in an orderly manner and was not guilty of anything. The Air Force representative was found criminally negligent but granted a pardon. I went to Paris after that. I remained there until December 1949 and had to return because my passport had expired and could not be extended. I came back and was discharged. Of course there are plenty of stories to tell about Paris but I think I have said enough, and will call it a day.