

**Gefen, Sioma (Siomka)**

Born in 1924 and made Aliya in 1935

Joined the Palmach in 1941

Enlisted in the British Army in 1943

Joined Ha'Chavura ("The Gang") in Italy in 1945

**This Is The Way It Was****The Shadow Unit**

Who in Israel has not heard of the enormous operations connected with Aliya during the last years of the British mandatory rule? What people do not know is that very often the food and fuel for the Hagana ships was supplied by none other than His Majesty's armed forces. This was made possible because of a very unique unit which operated within the British Army. This was a 'shadow unit' which received its commands directly from the Jewish institutions in Palestine. However, all the expenses of this unit were covered by the British Army which did not even know of the existence of this 'invisible unit'.

At the end of WW II the Hagana created a fictitious transport unit within the ranks of the British Army in Italy. The drivers in this unit were disguised as British soldiers, or South Africans, Australians or others. It is doubtful whether deceit in such huge proportions ever took place in any other army. The whole setup was brilliant! The paperwork for the soldiers, the truck identifications, the receipts and the equipment, the transport orders and the orders for soldiers' leaves, were all a forgery. Even medals were given for the good work done to various members who participated in this huge masquerade.

During this period whole transport companies or units of varying sizes would appear and disappear during a night's work. Fuel would be supplied for this entire company, and other supplies as well; this long line of trucks would move hundreds of survivors of the Holocaust to secret gathering places where they would board ships sailing to Palestine. They carried the passengers and the food and fuel for the ships.

The operations in which supplies were taken from the storehouses of the British Army (and from the American Army as well) was a 'work of art'. Everything was planned to the smallest detail, and this was not a simple matter. These convoys had to pass numerous check-points where papers were checked by soldiers and by Military Police. At the very beginning, operations were on a small scale, but they grew bigger and bigger and more audacious. The headquarters of the 'shadow unit' was in a small office in Milan. One wall was covered by a large map of Italy, on which every base of the British and American armies that had any connection to the work of this unit, was indicated. It rarely happened that the same person would deal with the same base twice. I myself started by working with a base in the north of Italy, and by the time I had finished, was working with bases in the vicinity of Bari and Foggia in the south. Each driver in the unit was occasionally required to drive 2000 km (in order to get from Milan to the south of the country and back). Sometimes this was required for just for one mission, and had to be accomplished within 48 hours. To give one some

idea of the scale of the campaign, suffice it to say that each person had to carry out hundreds of operations, yes, hundreds,- and always with the aid of forged papers. The danger of being caught and court-martialed was always a real possibility. The work went on day and night and energizing drugs were frequently used. All this activity was invested not 'in order to win some prize'; we worked without counting the hours and traversed the roads of Italy from North to South with a minimum of sleep in the driver's cabin.

Very often the drivers were seemingly 'soldiers-on-leave'. but when they went into action they suddenly became non-coms or officers. At first they even slept in the 'office' of the 'unit'. Later they took over a Jewish school in which there was also a secret radio transmitter, which had contact with the Hagana ships and Hagana headquarters in Tel Aviv. A garage was purchased in Milan and overnight became an 'official' British base. At this 'base' the trucks were painted, licenses 'treated', and proper insignia applied to the trucks. All of this was the base of the 'official' transport company of the British Army, of which the British Army knew nothing at all, and which was no more than a figment of the imagination of Hagana headquarters. Armed soldiers guarded the base 24 hours a day, and none of the neighbors ever guessed at anything unusual.

All the equipment and supplies 'procured' by this outfit was stored in a warehouse at Magenta, a town located about 20 km from Milan and not far from a large refugee camp. There were huge quantities of fuel, food and cigarettes which were necessary for the ships of the Olim. In addition, this base was also used to store stolen weapons and ammunition, which had been 'appropriated' from British bases. and which would be brought to Palestine as the opportunity arose.

At the head of this whole operation stood Yehuda Arazi. Together with him was a bunch of devoted and tough young men. They were a closely-knit gang that gave all they could to achieve their aim. There were perhaps no more than 15 of them, but they had been carefully chosen from among the thousands of Israelis who were fighting in the British army. Among them were Yisrael Libertovsky (of blessed memory) who was later manager of Israel Shipyards, Moti Hod (a later chief of the Israel Air Force), Shalhevet Freier (of blessed memory) who became head of the Israeli Committee for Atomic Energy, Zorik Dayan (of blessed memory) brother of Moshe Dayan, the former Defense Minister, and others who were the cream of Israeli youth. What was common to all of them, was that they had all been in the Palmach at an earlier stage in their careers. They had left the Palmach because they sought more 'action'. They got action and they responded to it in a most positive way. They were also of high moral fiber, lived frugally, worked hard, and were very disciplined. Each one had to carry out an unusual 'special' mission in order to qualify for acceptance into this remarkable outfit. In order for me to qualify, I had to go to a British army base near Udine and withdraw a truckload of food supplies for a fictitious outfit of 500 soldiers. All this was accomplished with the aid of false documents which were made to order by Shalhevet, a master forger of the highest rank.

I left Milan in the morning dressed as a South African officer, and with my friend Yochanan Zaid (Alexander Zaid's son) as my driver. It took us 8 hours to get to our objective, and the closer we got the more jittery I became. I knew that if I wanted to work in this outfit, I must succeed in this mission at all costs. The sentry asked for my papers as we reached the entrance to the camp. I handed him my papers and the documents for the supplies. The sentry waved his hand and pointed me in the direction of the camp office. As I walked to the office a young Israeli soldier recognized me. He looked at me in astonishment and asked me when I achieved the rank of an officer. My heart sank but outwardly I did not react and turned my head away. To this soldier's credit, I will add that he dropped the matter and disappeared from the scene.

Loading all the supplies took more than an hour and was done by Italian laborers under the watchful eye of an English sergeant. They finally completed loading and Yochanan and I breathed a sigh of relief. However, I noticed that a soldier left the camp on a motorcycle and stopped at a nearby junction. He was wearing a white summer helmet with a green stripe on it which identified him as a member of the British field security service. At first we hoped that his interest in us was just standard procedure, but when we passed by him he continued to follow us and did so for many miles. We had no doubt that he was suspicious of us when we had gone 25 kilometers and he was still on our tail. We tried to figure out how we could lose him and decided that the best way would be to collide with him.

We looked for a side road that was not used by many vehicles, and although we did not want to hurt him we knew that we could not hesitate and endanger the cause of Aliya Bet. We slowed down and the next time he passed us by (he did this every so often and would then wait for us at the next junction), Yochanan speeded up and swerved in toward him. There was a slight bump which we felt, and saw him fly from the motorcycle and land in a ditch. We saw no more of him and to this day do not know what happened to him, but sincerely hope that it was nothing serious. We continued by a devious route to the town of Mestre where an Israeli engineers unit, attached to the British army, was based. There, we ran into our contact man and he notified the office of our doings. We remained at the base for three days. During this time our truck was doctored again. It was repainted and marked with the insignia of an Australian unit. When we finally reached headquarters in Milan, we were welcomed by "The Gang" with cheers and pats on the back. I had passed my initiation test and was immediately made an official member of "The Gang".

Sioma Gefen spoke Italian very well and was asked to remain in Italy after the entire Aliya Bet operation came to an end. He was needed for procuring arms and cooperated with the "Mosad" for this purpose, and with the Palyam sabotage unit, with the government munitions manufacturing company, and more. He returned to Israel in 1950 on a forged South African passport, which was the only identification which he carried at the time. He was the last British Israeli soldier to return home after 7 years in the Diaspora. Sioma worked for

the Israel Military Industries (IMI) for 42 years and retired after serving as head of its mission to Great Britain.