

On Both Sides of the Crypto

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By

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משני צדי הקריפטו

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Chapter 3: Procurement

Importing Weapons for the State-to-be

In May 1945, soon after WW II had ended, the Jewish population in Eretz Israel started preparing for the struggle for the establishment of the State. The Hagana, the main clandestine military organization of the Jewish community living in Palestine, started to amass weapons, ammunition and other equipment. The potential enemy, in the eyes of the Hagana commanders, was the local Arab population in Palestine. The type of armament they thought fit for use was light weapons (rifles, pistols, etc.). The sole leader who foresaw and predicted the future, who saw the neighboring Arab states as the potential enemy, was David Ben Gurion. He held the post of Chairman of the Jewish Agency, which acted as the de-facto government of the State-to-be. In the beginning of 1947, Ben-Gurion called in the Hagana's top commanders and those who handled armament procurement and told them: "Do not concentrate on light weapons; we need tanks, warships, fighter planes, artillery." One of those present at the

meeting wrote a quick note which was circulated among the participants: "The old man has gone crazy". Only those who lived in Eretz Israel at the time could appreciate the amazement with which those participating reacted. Only a few could understand the foresight of Ben-Gurion. Thus, the search for advanced weapons started; preparing for the expected war for independence.

All the Western countries, including the United States, imposed a strict embargo on the sale of weapons to the local Jewish population. The only country who was willing to supply us with heavy armament was Czechoslovakia. Ehud Avriel, a member of kibbutz Naot Mordechai, had developed a relationship with the Czech government. In 1947, when the end of the British mandate, as well as the end of the struggle for the foundation of a State were approaching, military hardware deliveries from Czechoslovakia started to arrive. The Mosad for Aliya Bet which handled immigration from Europe to Eretz Israel was put in charge of the procurement. The Czech government gave us access to the Zatec airport, some 50 kilometers from the capitol, Prague. The air service of the Hagana, which was the nucleus on whose base the IDF Air Force was later built, grew and developed. Jewish pilots as well as air line owners from around the globe volunteered to participate, and soon an air train from Zatec airport to the Tel-Nof airport (as well as other airports in Eretz Israel) had begun. Tens of planes carrying weapon, dismantled air fighters as well as varied equipment created an air train from Czechoslovakia to Eretz Israel.

The activity enjoyed the blessing of both the USSR and the Czech governments.



Uri on the Montechiaro

Ehud Avriel headed the operation, and became the first Israeli Ambassador to Czechoslovakia when the State of Israel was founded. Meanwhile, young men from Eretz Israel were sent to train as fighter pilots. Most of the instructors were Czech. These trainees would become the skeleton of the young IDF Air Force, including Motti Hod, who later became the Air Force Commander.

Transmission Station in Prague

During the years the Mosad for Aliya Bet was active in Europe, following WW II, several transmission stations were operated by the “Gid’onim” in major European cities. There was no such station in Prague when the weapon deliveries started, rendering the communication between the activists in Europe and their commanders in Eretz Israel almost impossible, and highly unsafe. All coordination from Zatec had to be done through Paris, by phone, and then coded and transmitted through the Gid’on Network – to Israel. Ehud Avriel managed to get the Prague authorities to allow the establishment of a formal communications office on Czech territory. We purchased a powerful transmitter and the necessary equipment, and the engineer Sam Hillel and I left for Prague, to install it.

Following so many years of secretive, underground activity, equipped with home-made faint transmitters (for fear of being discovered), we arrived in Prague, with the designated equipment, where we passed customs with the courteous assistance of the airport police. Setting up the station was an unforgettable experience: climbing up to roofs, setting antennas in broad daylight, was a novelty... in a day or two, communication was operational and we were able to transmit and receive messages to and from our counterparts in Eretz Israel. For me, having been used to operating underground transmission stations, (maybe this is where my hearing problems started), it was a remarkable sensation

to operate the first official communications station of the state-to-be. It set the grounds for the more sophisticated network of foreign stations, which operates today with technologies and scope that are beyond my grasp.

It is important to remember the names of those who managed the incredible Gid'on Network: Jan (Yaakov) Yanai, who managed the Hagana stations worldwide; Moshe (Zick) Yerushalmi, who managed the Gid'on network and operated as the Gid'oni aboard several refugee vessels on their way to Palestine. Moshe headed the foreign network for many years, a network born in obscure rooms in European cities, in Arab countries and in the communication cabins on vessels of ma'apilim.

Closing Shop

The air train described here was a necessary source of weapons, without which it is hard to imagine the victory of the IDF in the War of Independence. At the beginning of 1948, the British government applied pressure to halt those shipments, and managed to get the UN to force Czechoslovakia to stop them, and have the operators leave its territory. We were instructed to board the last plane that took off from Zatec to Palestine. I landed in Tel-Nof in the middle of the war. Going north, our vehicles were shelled near the Arab village Mrar, close to Tel-Nof, but I managed to get home safely, to the surprise of my relieved parents.

The First (?) Smuggler of the State of Israel

With the founding of the State, the gates were open for immigration. Some of the Aliya Bet vessels were converted to carry weapons and war supplies and equipment for the IDF, in the midst of the War of Independence. I sailed on board the Italian vessel Montechiaro (renamed Ha'Har), commanded by Yona Yavin, where I was in charge of communications as Gid'oni. We sailed to Marseille, where we met Yehuda Arazi and his assistant Dani Agronski (Agron), who loaded some 20 'Hispano-Swiss' anti-aircraft guns, accompanied with travel documents, stating their destination. Arazi and Agronski gave me a present, a small Beretta pistol. We also loaded several tons of onions, "to scare the evil eye"... , to hide the precious cargo from the UN ships, who were enforcing the weapons embargo on the State of Israel. We had two sets of documents for the cargo: one stating the ship was carrying anti-aircraft guns from Marseille to South America, which we used with the French authorities in Marseille; the other stated that the ship was carrying several tons of onions, designated to Haifa...

I remember a conversation I had with Yehuda Arazi, on board the Ha'Har: before leaving Marseille; we were discussing philosophy and arms trade... Arazi came with a Polish arms dealer who, to me, seemed the archetype of an arms dealer, who thrived on war and blood. I asked Arazi, how we, as people with high moral standards could possibly negotiate with that person. He replied:

“Theories are always good, but once your life is at risk, you should re-evaluate your conceptions...”

We sailed at the end of May 1948, on calm seas. Following voyages in immigrants’ vessels, sailing with cargo that did not require tending to, nor food, water or fresh air was refreshing. We arrived in Haifa after seven days. Once we passed the inspection of the UN officials, (expedited, no doubt, thanks to the onion and its poignant odor), the inspectors were treated to a glass of wine and let us go. I was met by a representative of the Mosad who escorted me out. As we were leaving the harbor, he asked if I had anything to declare. This was my first entry to the State of Israel. I was surprised by his question and replied I had nothing to declare, but immediately thought of the pistol hidden in my toiletry case and told him about it. Following his advice, I left it under the seat. When we left the harbor, I thought I should have told the customs officials: “I brought 20 guns and one small pistol”. Thus, I became the first (maybe) smuggler to the young Israeli state. I had the gun legally licensed and kept it for many years. I guess after 60 years, I am not getting myself in trouble...

The Gid'on Network

The communications network of the Mosad for Aliya Bet, named Gid'on network, held stations in major cities in Europe: Prague and Bucharest in the East, Rome, Milan, Paris and Marseille in the

West. The equipment was built, for the most part, by our own engineers and technicians, members of the Hagana and Palmach: Ra'anana (Rani) Rubinstein, Tzvika Beit-Din, Naftali (Nafta) Raz, Yeshayahu (Ishi) Lavi, Sam Hillel who came from Scotland, and many other good guys. The network efficiently served the immigration and procurement operations, thanks to the devotion and zeal of its members, the *Gid'onim*. Its operation was confidential and only few people knew of it. It transmitted messages, instructions and reports in cipher, which we held to be unbreakable.



Operators of the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Rome.

Right to left: Max Bennet (known as Meir Bint, who was arrested in the '50s in Egypt in "the affair"), a local employee, Uri, Yoch, Mike Harari and Rachel Betzer. Top left: Azriel Einav

In the 60's, I served as an officer in the technology unit of the IDF Intelligence. Based on the excellent working relationship we had with the Italian Intelligence, we hosted a delegation of their officers, and were invited to reciprocate. While we were in Rome, we arrived at Monte-Mario, where we had operated a clandestine transmission station in 1947, for the Aliya Bet. As so many years had elapsed, I allowed myself to mention my service in the area in those years. They did not react, but the following day, I was presented with a folder of our decoded secret letters. My escort explained that they knew of our operations, intercepted our transmissions and deciphered them, only to make sure we were not any part of the communist underground or any other risky element, jeopardizing the Italian government.

It is important to mention both the Italian and the French governments, who were very tolerant and positive in regard to immigration operations, as this anecdote demonstrated. It is hard to imagine the success of the Aliya Bet operations in Europe without this active (and passive) help.

Back to Marseille

With the founding of the State, the title for many of the vessels that serviced the immigration and procurement effort was awarded to ZIM, which became the national marine carrier. To show its respect for those who took part in the immigration endeavor, ZIM

offered them free tickets to Europe on board its ships. The ticket covered the trip only, and other expenses were the responsibility of the traveler. Our financial situation was dire. Nevertheless, I took a short vacation from the military and boarded the Kedma, en route to Marseille. Marga was entitled to such a free ticket as well, having served as Gid'onit aboard an immigrants' vessel, but waived the offer, as she did not care for this Mediterranean city as much as I did.

The journey was marvelous. I was the Captain's guest, and was treated to a nice cabin, a pleasant dinner, etc. During a stop-over in Napoli, Italy, the Captain invited me to join him for a tour of the city, which I enjoyed. I could not understand the expression "to see Napoli and die". I admired the beautiful scenery and thought the expression should go – "to see Napoli and live!"

In Marseille I met an old friend – Joe Baharliya. He was Jewish, the owner of a local company that provided all kinds of services to the docking ships. He was of great help to the Mosad for Aliya Bet, and his command of the Hebrew language was limited to two words, which he often used: "yihye beseder", namely – it will be all right. And indeed, things were all right, if "kosher" or less kosher. Joe took me to a modest hotel, and I toured the neighborhoods I used to like. I rented a small car (Citroen Deux-Chevaux), and drove to the locations of the camps where we worked. I had to survive on limited means, but I refused Joe's offer

to take care of the hotel bill for me. I gladly accepted his invitation to a traditional Friday night dinner at his house, and enjoyed meeting his family. We also met in town for lunch, one day, but all in all – I was too proud to take his money, and survived on the little I had, eating cheap sandwiches for lunch. On the last day of my visit, I treated myself to dinner at a small restaurant that my buddies and I used to like when we worked in Marseille. We used to order steak and fries and drink the local cheap but good wine. I did just that, but was skimpy on the wine, for fear I wouldn't have enough cash to pay for it. Only when the bill came, did I realize that the mineral water I ordered cost more than the wine. The taste of that wine I did **not** have stayed with me for a while after returning from this beautiful journey.