

The Czechoslovak Arms Deals during the War Of Independence

By: Tzvi Ben-tzur

Even before the UN partition resolution on Nov. 29, 1947, allowing for the formation of the Jewish state of Israel, Ben-Gurion gave order to identify sources of arms to the Hagana, in preparations for a war with the Arabs once a decision about an independent Jewish state is accepted. Following the UN partition resolution, frantic efforts began in Europe to procure arms, involving the very high-ranking members of the Haganah, Monia Mardor, Saul Avigur and Ehud Avriel.

Legal sources of arms in the U.S. and most European countries were blocked to the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Eretz Israel during the British mandate) due to arms embargo declared by the USA and Britain (and the UN as well once Israel became a state). The alternative was to engage in illegal arms procurement and to appeal to the Soviet bloc. Unlike the USA and Britain, the USSR, which enthusiastically supported the UN partition resolution, continued to stand behind the resolution, even after it led to the beginning of the armed conflict. One of the manifestations of the USSR's support was a "green light" to broad scale arms deals between Czechoslovakia and the Yishuv/Israel. The USSR hoped that in light of the USA arms embargo imposed on the Middle East, military assistance to Israel, which was yet to be born, would promote her to be pro-Soviet. The main motivation of Czechoslovakia for the deals was clearly the money.

During World War II, when Czechoslovakia was under Nazi occupation, Hermann Goering, Hitler's deputy, took over the Skoda Works plants in Czechoslovakia and turned them into weapons production plants - part of the Hermann Göring Werke complex which served the German war effort. Towards the end of the war, when Czechoslovakia was occupied by the Soviet Union, large quantities of weapons and arms producing factories were abundant. Contacts with the Czechs about arms procurement began in July 1947 when Moshe Sneh, head of the political department of the Jewish Agency in Europe, raised the issue with the Czech Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Clementis, and received his agreement in principle. In early November Ben-Gurion sent to Prague Dr. Otto Felix, who was a lawyer born in the city and a friend of many Czechoslovak government officials, to check out the purchasing options there.

Towards the end of December 1947, the efforts in Czechoslovakia bore fruit when Ehud Avriel and Otto Felix struck a deal, helped by a Romanian Jewish arms dealer named Robert Adam-Abramovich¹, to buy large quantities of small arms from the arms producing company Zbrojovka Brno, in Brno, Czechoslovakia. The contract was signed towards mid January 1949, with noticeable help from Jan Masaryk, the Czechoslovak foreign minister, and a "green light" from the Soviet Union. The contract, in the sum of \$750,000, was signed on "official" papers of Ethiopia, as Czechoslovakia required its parties to be sovereign states.

The transportation of the arms encountered many difficulties, but in the end, it arrived in Israel just in time to serve the fighters of Operation Nahshon to end the siege on Jerusalem. The enormous impact of these arms in the battlefields is unquestionable, and the turning point in the War of Independence during April 1948 is directly linked to them. Most of the arms came on April 1, on board the arms ship Nora which loaded them in the port of Sibenik, Yugoslavia – 4,500 Mauser K-98 Model P18 7.92mm rifles (the famous "Czech rifle" which remained in use by the IDF to the 1970's), 200 MG-34 machine guns (called MAGLAD in the IDF, they were in service until the end of 1950's, when replaced by the Belgian FN MAG), about five million bullets and spare parts. Nora was the first arms ship of Israel's arms procurement organization to arrive during the War of Independence, managing to run the British blockade and bringing her cargo to the port of Tel Aviv. Much smaller quantities of arms – 200 K-98 rifles, 40 MAGLAD's and 150,000 bullets – were transported from Prague by a chartered C-54 Skymaster airplane. The airplane landed on the night of March 31, 1948 at the Beit Daras airstrip – a deserted British airstrip adjacent to Be'er Tuvia. This flight is counted as the first flight in Operation 'Balak' – the airlift of arms from Czechoslovakia to Israel (accordingly, it is marked Balak-1; the activities in Israel around the landing of the airplane and its special cargo were named Operation 'Khasida', khasida means stork in Hebrew).

The massive and intensive activities around the arms shipments from Czechoslovakia to Israel, by air and sea (via Yugoslavia), required a reliable communication infrastructure. Prague authorities approved the establishment of a wireless station at the Israeli mission in Prague headed by Ehud Avriel. Surplus U.S. Army equipment was purchased in Belgium, packaged and sent to Prague by air. It was the most sophisticated equipment the Haganah radio operators ('Gideons') encountered so far (after Israel was born, this station became the first in the communication network that later connected all Israeli diplomatic missions and embassies worldwide, known as Sherut Takhal – the "stations abroad service" communication network servicing Israel's foreign and defense ministries).

¹ In March 1942, 11 Jews escaped Romania on board a private yacht – the owner of the yacht Robert Adam-Abramovich with his wife and friends. Five years later it was Robert who linked Avriel with the Czechoslovak arms factory Zbrojovka Brno. He didn't ask for any commission for the deal.

In late February 1948, Ben-Gurion also asked to explore the possibility of purchasing fighter aircrafts in Czechoslovakia, after it finally became clear that the U.S. embargo on arms shipments couldn't be circumvented and therefore American airplanes, relatively cheap and technically superior, would not be available. The exploration identified the Avia S-199 fighter airplane – a Czechoslovak version of the German aircraft, the Messerschmitt Bf 109. Despite being technically inferior and carrying an exorbitant price tag (a base exorbitant price of \$44,000 per aircraft, which soared to \$190,000 including ammunition, spare parts, assembly and training), it was decided in late March to purchase 10 units. The purchase contract was signed in late April by Ehud Avriel, Otto Felix and the Czechoslovak Chief of Staff General Bocek. In early May it was approved by the Prime Minister Klement Gottwald and the Defense Minister General Ludvik Svoboda. In a subsequent deal, 15 additional Messerschmitts were purchased (at the end, only 23 aircrafts arrived in Israel). The nickname of the aircraft was "Sakin" (pl. "Sakinim"), sakin means knife in Hebrew.

The local government made available the airport at Jatech to the Israeli delegation. This airport, nicknamed Etzion, became a busy center for Israeli activity on Czechoslovak soil. Training of pilots and ground crews took place there. Etzion became the base in Czechoslovakia for Operation 'Balak' and it was also a major junction for smuggling aircrafts to Israel from all around the world.

Most of the first pilots of the Israeli Air Force were WW-II pilots from the air forces of Britain, the United States, Canada, South Africa and Australia. The acquisition of German fighter airplanes forced them to do "professional conversion". On 9 May 1948 the first 5 pilots were sent for training in Czechoslovakia on the new airplanes – the Israelis Modi Alon and Ezer Weizman who purchased their pilot skills in the British army, Lou Lenart and Milton Rubinfeld, Machal volunteers from the U.S., and Eddie Cohen, a Machal volunteer from South Africa.

Operation Balak – the airlift to transport arms from Czechoslovakia to Israel – began on March 31, 1948 (flight Balak-1 mentioned above) and continued until August 12, 1948, when Israeli activity at the Etzion base came to a sudden halt due to U.S. threats against Czechoslovakia. During the operation about 100 round trips were conducted, by transport airplanes of models C-54 Skymaster (one chartered and one acquired, which joined later), C-69 Constellation (a single plane which performed a single flight before it was badly damaged in an emergency landing) and C-46 Commando (about 10 aircraft which were smuggled out of the United States and operated under the guise of LAPSA - the national airline of Panama²; at any

² LAPSA (Lineas Aereas de Panama Sociedad Anonima) provided excellent cover to the illegal operations of the transport airplanes and they remained on its books as late as Sep. 1948, even after they moved to operate inside Israel. According to its charter, LAPSA could "rent and lease vessels, airplanes... maintain, operate and repair workshops, ports, buildings, hotels, hangers, runways, airfield... manufacture, make, buy, sell, rent, lease, repair..." – in short, endless possibilities of which the procurement organization took full advantage.

given time only a few of them were operational). The airlift was carried out by the 'Air Transport Squadron' (then still 'Air Transport Flight') – an autonomous unit within the Israeli Air Force, based primarily on air crews and mechanics from Machal (volunteers from abroad). The Commando airplanes needed a stopover for refueling. Initially they used the Ajaccio airfield in Corsica; after French permission was revoked, an airfield in Yugoslavia was used instead.

The highlight of Balak Operation was the transfer of the "Sakinim" to Israel. The aircrafts, flown in from 'Etzion' disassembled to the Akron airfield (Tel Nof) in Israel, were re-assembled there by the Czechoslovak technicians. The first airplane arrived on May 20, 1948 ("Balak-5") and the last on July 28, 1948. Ezer Weizman, who returned to Israel with the chartered Skymaster that carried the first airplane, described the flight as "eleven and a half hours from Jatech to Tel Nof, without stopover and without refueling, lasted the flight of the first transport airplane that brought to Israel the 1st real fighter airplane of the IAF in its infancy".



A "Skin" in the IAF service

The Messerschmitt aircrafts played an important role in the War of Independence and helped to tip the scale in favor of Israel during the critical battles against the invading Arab armies between May and October 1948. In particular, the first operational mission carried out by the aircrafts – the attack on May 29 by four "Sakinim" on the Egyptian army column near Ashdod³ (at the Ad Halom bridge, "ad halom" in Hebrew means "up to here") – is considered by many to be the reason why the Egyptians stopped their advance on Tel Aviv. Also thanks to the "knives", aerial bombing by the Egyptian air force on Jewish population centers came to a halt. However, the aircrafts were a nightmare as far as maneuverability and maintenance,

³ [Click here](#) for a video of the pilot Lou Lenart telling the story of the attack

causing loss of pilot lives, including that of the first fighter squadron commander, Modi Alon, who was killed during a landing.

As part of further deals with Czechoslovakia, large quantities of arms were shipped to Israel, primarily by the arms ships of Israel's procurement organization. The arms ships loaded their cargo at the port of Shibenik, Yugoslavia. The first shipment by sea arrived on June 27, 1948, on board "Ha'zaken" ("the old man"). The main items of these deals included 1,100 ZB37 ("BESA") heavy machine guns, about 5,000 MG-34 ("MAGLAD") machine guns, 24,760 "Czech rifles" and 52,440,000 7.92 mm bullets. As a result, within a few weeks each soldier in the IDF was equipped with a personal weapon and each squad and platoon was equipped with arms to the standard.

In September 1948 another deal was signed with Czechoslovakia to purchase 'Spitfire' fighter aircrafts. The aircrafts originally belonged to the No. 310 Squadron – a Czechoslovak-manned fighter squadron of the RAF during WW-II – and were given to Czechoslovak Air Force after the war. The tag price was \$23,000 per aircraft (\$30,000 due to additional costs). The Spitfire's nickname was "Yorek" (pl. "Yorkim"), yorek means "one who spits" in Hebrew.

During the War of Independence, 50 Yorkim were purchased from Czechoslovakia (few more were purchased after the war). Between late September 1948 and the end of 1948, in two special operations named Velvetta-1 and Velvetta-2, the first 14 Yorkim arrived in Israel by self-flight (with a refueling stopover in Yugoslavia). To allow the aircrafts to fly the long distance to Israel, all non-essential equipment, like guns and radios, had to be removed and extra fuel tanks were added. 5 planes did not reach their destination – 3 crashed on the way and 2 made an emergency landing in Rhodes and were confiscated by the Greek authorities.

The two operations were organized by the overseas volunteers flight engineer and pilot Sam Pomerantz – a prominent Machal volunteer from America, who was killed at the beginning of Velvetta-2 when his aircraft crashed in Yugoslavia (it was Sam who orchestrated the amazing technical feat of refitting the aircrafts for their long distance flight) – and the pilot Boris Senior – one of the first Machal, a volunteer from South Africa and one of the founders IAF (his most senior role was Deputy Commander of the IAF). The "Yorkim" were immediately assigned to war activities, some of them even managed to participate in Operation Horev to the eradication of the invading Egyptian army, and also be involved at its end (January 7) in the serious incident in which 5 British airplanes were shot down near the Israeli-Egyptian border. During February and March 1949, the remaining 31 "Yorkim" arrived from the port of Shibenik on board the arms ships of Israel's procurement organization.

Czechoslovakia was paid around \$12,200,00 for the arms. The amount was then about a third of her income per year in foreign currency.



Loading of "Yorkim" in the port of Shibenik, Yugoslavia, on one of the arms ships

In 1968, a meeting that was broadcasted on Israel Radio took place. It was named "Salute to The Nora" and marked 20 years to the arms ship's historic voyage. Ben-Gurion raised his voice at the end and concluded: ***"The Czechoslovak arms saved the State of Israel, really, absolutely, and without these weapons we wouldn't have survived"***.