

A Matter Of Survival: **The Early Stages Of The Arms Procurement Enterprise**

Written by: Yehuda Ben-tzur

On Friday, May 14 1948, David Ben-Gurion (B-G.), the first Prime Minister of Israel wrote in his diary: "At 4pm Jewish Independence has been declared and the state [of Israel] established. Its fate is in the hands of the Armed Forces". Two days earlier, at a meeting of the "People's Administration" [The provisional government, established following the UN resolution of Nov. 29, 1947], B-G. reported: "We already have lot's of arms... but it's not here. If all the arms we have out there had been here...we could have had a peace of mind".

B-G. could have made such a claim due to intensive hard-work starting three years before, at the end of WW-II in Europe. On July 1945, B-G. made a trip to the USA. There, he succeeded, secretly, to secure the financial and political support of a group of Jewish millionaires, known as the "Sonneborn Institute", to enable the Jewish community in Palestine (Hebrew name Eretz-Israel) – still under the British Mandate - to prepare itself for a full scale war against the Arabs, over the right for an independent state.

In Dec. 1946, B-G. assumed the defense portfolio of the Jewish Agency, and soon after, he conducted a "Security Seminar" in order to increase the awareness of Hagan's top ranks to the need to prepare for a full scale war - anticipated around the end of the British Mandate - against regular Arab armies. B-G.'s recollection from this seminar: "I said ... we are facing a war ... and we need heavy arms...there were Hagana's people who laughed at me and said I'm crazy".

During 1947, B-G. expanded the arms "acquisition" system of the Hagana by sending three prominent members abroad - Yehuda Arazi, Ehud Avriel and Munia Mardur – to find sources of arms and make all necessary arrangements to ship arms to Palestine towards the end of the British Mandate. Each one of them got his own budget and had to operate independently of his colleagues and report directly to B-G.

During Dec. 1947 to Mar. 1948, the "acquisition" organizers purchased six ships for transporting the arms - Santa-Chiara, Ressurectio, Maestralle, Monte-chiaro, Scio and Nora. For obvious reasons, the ships continued to carry foreign flags and were operated by their foreign crews. For "safety reasons", the "Mossad" placed on board every ship an escort – "Palyam" naval cadets and "Gideonee"s ["nom the guerre" for Hagana's radio operators].

The first two ships - Ressurectio and Santa-Chiara - had been purchased by Ada Sereni, upon Arazi's instructions, on dec. 47 , even before he signed any contracts. Arazi explained this instruction : "It is better that the ships would wait for the arms than vice versa".

When the armed struggle - forced upon the Jewish community by the Palestinians following the UN resolution of Nov. 29 1947 - begun, B-G. decided to take risks by giving orders to advance the shipments, in spite of the blockade imposed by the British Navy. The reason for this decision was simply because the Hagana hadn't enough rifles, let alone heavy arms. On the other hand, the Palestinians had nearly "open borders" to the Arab neighboring states.

The result of B-G. decision was that three arms ships – Nora, Ressurrectio (nickname Rex), and Borea-2 (Santa-Chiara) - broke through, before the end of the British mandate. Those three ships brought about 1,450 tons of arms to Palestine, enabling the just born state of Israel to defeat the Palestinians and check the invasion of the neighboring Arab regular armies.

From Independence Day to the end of the first cease fire agreement on Jul. 20 1948, eight more voyages – one each by Ressurrectio, Borea-2, Monte-Chiaro and Scio, two by Maestralla, and one each by two charter ships, Inako and Auopunia - brought additional 4,000 tons of arms and enabled the I.D.F (Israel Defense Forces) to move from defensive to offensive, and eventually win Israel's Independence. In 1968, on a special broadcast commemorating 20 years to the arrival of the Nora, B-G. raised his voice and summarized: "We wouldn't have been alive today without those arms!".

Written by Yehuda Ben-Tzur, Caeseria, Israel, 1977

Yehuda, a Palyam and Aliya Bet veteran, escort the arms ship Maestralla that arrived on June 27th, 1948. The story of the Nora is a shorter version of an article Yehuda wrote in 1995, dedicated to the memory of Ben Yerushalmi.



At the front, from left to right: Tzvi Tzur (IDF Chief of Staff), David Ben-Gurion (Prime Minister), Yochai Ben-nun (Commander in Chief, IDF Navy), Yehuda Ben-tzur (Commander, IDF Naval Academy)
Haifa, Israel, 1962