

## **The Story Of Nora – The First Arms Ship**

**Written by: Yehuda Ben-tzur**

The most famous arms ship is Nora - the first ship to arrive and break the British blockade, just in time to provide the much needed arms to "Operation Nachshon" which marked a turning point in the war against the Palestinians and the battle for Jerusalem. Nora (Hebrew nickname Yoram), with capacity of 840 ton and flying an Italian flag, reached the small anchorage of Tel-Aviv on Apr. 1 1948, forty five days before the end of the British Mandate. The arrival of the "first swallow", marked the end of an epic, starting four months earlier, when, on Dec. 2 1947, B-G. instructed Avriel to "jeopardize \$300,000 and send [a ship] to Tel-Aviv".

The next day, Avriel went to Europe and started to "sniff" for arms on the "Black Market". In less than a month of extensive despairingly search, he managed - with the help of Adam-Robert Avramovitch, a Jew with the right connections, offering his services for free - to reach directly to the arm manufacturing company "Zboroyovka" in Czechoslovakia and have a deal. It turned out, that the Czechs - with the blessing of the "Big Brother", USSR - were eager to sell not less than the buyer, who offered hard currency and didn't haggle too much over the prices. During the negotiations, it was discovered that the international-law prohibits states from selling arms to organizations (not to mention illegal ones, like the Hagana). The problem was solved by the "laboratory" of the "Mossad", which provided forms, according to which the arms were sold to... Ethiopia.

The deal, expanded to \$750,000, included 4,500 rifles, 200 machine-guns and ammunition. Right after, in early Jan. 1948, Avriel examined the best ways to ship the consignment of arms - which included hundreds of cases weighing over 500 tons - to a port of embarkation. Out of the three alternatives ( all Soviet Block countries ) - Yugoslavia, Poland and Romania - Avriel preferred the route through Yugoslavia, which was the shortest one and familiar to him, from his involvement in the illegal emigration activities, back in 1946. Avriel reported to B-G. on Jan. 18 1948 that: "In principle there is an approval [by the Yugoslavs] for the passage of the shipment, but a final answer will be given only tomorrow". A positive final answer was indeed given, but only after a month! The delay has nothing to do with the negotiations over the passage terms - all "shipping & handling" costs were agreed upon and paid in advance - but rather the result of Yugoslavia having to get the blessing of USSR (The rift between the parties happened half a year latter).

The initial estimation was that the shipment would reach Tel-Aviv within four weeks - from Czechoslovakia by rafts over the Danube river to Yugoslavia and then by train to the embarkation port. Accordingly, B-G. got the message that the shipment would reach Tel-Aviv "by Feb. 10 and possibly earlier". This time-table was revised twice, mainly due to delays on the question of the passage through Yugoslavia to the port of Shibenik. When the shipment finally arrived at Shibenik, at the beginning of Mar. 1948, no ship was waiting for it, and the "acquisition" had to wait there over two weeks!!!. Why did it

happened? How come, that in times of "heavy starvation" for arms, such a delay could occur ? Unfortunately, one has to find the answer in "the politics" of internal-personal relations among high ranking members of the "acquisition system" and the Mossad alike. B-G. was aware of the inter-personal issues from a complaint E. Kaplan made (Jan. 1 1948): "Eliezer complains bitterly about our agents... that one ignores, sometimes even slanders, the others. Fredi is against the procurements of Yehuda [Arazi]. Yehuda ignores Ehud [Avriel]. There is no cooperation...". Soon enough it became clear that even B-G. was unable to restrain the ego of his high ranking people.

Nora's purchase demonstrates how poor coordination resulted in the arms waiting for the ship rather than the other way. Avriel, as described above, handled the arms acquisition and its shipment to Yugoslavia. As for the ship, he had all the reasons to believe that the Mossad branch in Italy - specialized in dealing with ships - would take care of it. B-G. wrote in his diary about it on the 4th of Jan. 48 : "Ada [Sereni] was told to buy a ship". Many years latter, in 1995, Ada claimed, that she can't remember being told to buy a ship for Avriel's shipment and more then that, she knows nothing about B-G.'s diary entry. To the question of why one of the ships already available - the Santa-Chiara or the Ressurrectio were not engaged in arms shipment at that time, beginning of Mar. 48 - hadn't been directed to Shibnek? Ada RESPONDED that she doesn't recall being instructed to do so and that in such an important matter, Avriel had to address directly to Arazi.

No wonder B-G. started pressing hard on Avriel. Finally, late in Feb. 48, Avriel understood that the Mossad is not going to help him with a ship, so he decided to deal with it himself. He asked the people of the "acquisition unit" in Italy to help him, but these people were actually reluctant to get help from the Mossad, fearing leakage of information to the British Intelligence. "For security reasons", their agents, Sahar & Yariv approached Efraeim Eileen, a Jewish private businessman dealing with shipments from Egypt to Italy, asking him to purchase for them a ship and prepare her to the mission. At the beginning of March the Nora was purchased in Venice. Before departure to Shibenik, she was loaded with 300 tons of onion and potato sacks and wooden-plates, to be used as a "cover" ( double meaning ) for the real cargo.

As an escort, Avriel assigned "his best men", Benjamin (Ben) Yerushalmi, an experienced field-person of the Mossad (unlike most of the escort, Ben was not a Palyam member, but the decision to have him aboard turned out to be a very good one), and Avraham Lichovsky, an experienced "Gideonee" (with a radio-transmitter).

The Italian crew suspected that an illegal mission might be involved. At the beginning they weren't told that the final destination is Palestine, Yet it was difficult enough to convince them to sail to Yugoslavia, because the hatred towards Italians in the Dalmatic coastal areas, occupied by Italy in WW-II, was still quite big. Around Mar. 19 1948 the Nora entered into Shibenik port. During the loading, the Italian crew understood that they are going to be involved in a large scale smuggling of arms into an area of active fighting. Some of them wanted to sign off, but they were "convinced" by the Yugoslavs that such a move would "not be to their benefit". Ben, a charismatic person, managed to

convince them to take out to sea, and in addition gave them a raise and even a promise, to get an... "air umbrella" protection, once they reach the port of destination - Tel-Aviv.

East of Crete the Nora ran into a severe storm that forced her to take shelter in Larnaca Bay, Cyprus. She stayed there in company with two British destroyers, belonging to the "Palestine force" blockading the coast. When the storm was over, the destroyers sailed to the east, and the Nora followed crawling in the same direction towards Tel-Aviv.

Late by four days, due to the storm, the Nora arrived at Tel-Aviv Anchorage on Apr. 1 1948. While maneuvering to anchor, a British destroyer - one of the two Nora had met in Larnaca - approached the ship and started to circle her. The Italian captain, afraid the British discovered the nature of the cargo, got panicked uttering a sigh: "Adeso, tuto finito" (now, it's all over), before collapsing. Ben, "assuming command", impersonated as the captain, ordered to salute the British destroyer according to the maritime tradition. The destroyer returned a salute and sailed away.

Nobody in the Hagana's H.Q. knew the exact day of Nora's arrival, because Ben and Avriel agreed to maintain "Radio silence". On Mar. 28 - the day Nora was expected, if not delayed by the storm – B-G. was on the verge of losing his nerves. On that day – one of the worst for the Jewish side since the struggle begun – B-G. threatened to return Avriel back home, if he fails to expedite arm shipments by... air. On the same day he had taken a risky decision to divert arms from other fronts in favor of "Nachshon forces", preparing themselves to reopen the main road to Jerusalem. Four days latter, Nora unloaded the brand new rifles & machine-guns, Still with grease on, they were rushed directly to "Nachshon" fighters! Just before beginning the operation.

Summarizing the affair few days latter, B-G. wrote in his diary on the 5th of Apr. 1948: "The delay of the first shipment caused by a lack of a ship... everybody buys his own ships. We need somebody to coordinate... better If it would be assigned to Shaul" [Avigur, the head of the Mossad]. Unfortunately, even this new assignment as a coordinator of the arms acquisition in addition to his role in the Mossad, had not resulted in the desired improvement. Two months latter, Lova Eliav reported to B-G. from Italy: "As far as acquisition goes... I see here a complete chaos. Everyone hinders the others."

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