

Beltzen Chanoch

Born 1928 in Kishinev, Bessarabia
 Came to Palestine in 1939
 Joined the British Army in 1943
 Became active in the Bricha in 1945

This is the Way it Was**Disbanding of the Brigade**

I will start my story with the day we were told that the Brigade would be disbanded and we were to be returned home. I was at the time a soldier in the 2nd Battalion of the Jewish Brigade. One day I went to the city of Ghent in Belgium in order to visit the Diaspora Center and procure a uniform and papers for a British soldier so that I could travel to Eastern Europe in search of my cousin. I heard that he had succeeded in fleeing Russia and getting to Rumania and was stuck there someplace. At the same time we had already learned of the Shoah and I knew that my whole family had been wiped out. I could not return home without making some effort to save some remnants. I thought that if I could find my cousin I would dress him up in a British soldier's uniform and bring him to some unit of the Jewish Brigade. From there I would find some way of getting him to Palestine.

The soldier who tended me in the Diaspora Center told me that Eastern Europe was one big mess and there had been cases when some "British" soldiers went there and were not able to get back easily.

Also, because it had been announced that the Brigade was to be disbanded, there might be a problem in getting back to a Brigade camp in time. As I stood there debating what to do I heard someone call me by my name and I saw that it was a good friend of mine, Maccabi Mutzari – Manny.

No, not only one cousin!!

When Maccabi heard what my problem was he turned to me and said: "Why look for 'just' one cousin? If you are ready to look let's look for all the cousins we can find, and maybe your cousin will be among them. We are setting up a camp in Italy for Jewish youth who are remnants of the Holocaust so that we can train them to fight. They will then be able to help the Palmach in its work, and we could also bring them to Palestine. We are doing this in Italy and in southern France and we are gathering weapons and young people like you. Join us and maybe we will find your cousin as well and we will bring as many young Jews as we can along with us to the Mediterranean."

I join – Reporting to Nachum Shadmi – the commander for all of Europe.

What he had to say was so logical that there was no reason to object, so, on the spot, at a coffee house in the city of Ghent we shook hands on it and I told him I would stay and meet Nachum Shadmi along with a number of other soldiers of

the Brigade who also were to join in this project. These boys had volunteered with the knowledge that their ID would be given to Olim, remnants of the Holocaust, who would go to Palestine as British soldiers, and they would be given instead the ID's of refugees, remnants of the Holocaust. Nachum Shadmi, to whom I reported, was not a British soldier, and was dressed as a civilian. He had been appointed by Ben Gurion to be in charge of this operation for all of Europe. He asked me a few questions and then accepted me into the ranks.

I chose my 'double'

Matters started to move rapidly; my unit was due to return to Palestine very soon. One day a military vehicle came and took me to a camp in northern Holland. A First Sergeant from the Brigade told me to choose who would be my 'double'. There were several tens of young men in the camp from Germany, France, Belgium and some other countries. They had been dressed in British Army clothes and been kept busy by doing drill and other work that would help them to 'fit in' to the army. I walked along the row of fellows, all eyes beseeching me to choose them. Sometimes one young fellow would whisper as I passed close to him, "Take me". I was struck by one fellow who was slightly stouter than me but I somehow thought that he would be appropriate. He had said nothing. I pointed him out and his fate was sealed; he was a Jew from Holland and his name was Koppel. He was an expert painter. I took him to my unit and had to teach him my whole personal history. He had to know who my girl friend was and something about my parents, my sisters and my brothers. He also had to know who my close friends in my unit were. He had to learn how to behave as a British soldier and he would have to blend into the unit because he would have to live with the unit, with my identity, until his discharge.

I returned to the camp with Koppel who started learning "Chanoch Beltzen". The object of this training was to help him prove who he was in case he was questioned by anyone, any where. Finally, I handed him my rifle and all my personal equipment and lastly my soldier's ID card. I also placed him in the hands of my good friends in the outfit, Zerubavel Horowitz (who died in the War of Independence), Yankele Levitan and Hanan Kreps. Koppel reached Palestine and was discharged from the British Army (that is, I was discharged.)

Wait for me – I'll be back..

Now, what about my girl friend, Marnina? That was a complicated problem; what was I to tell her? I couldn't write and tell her because my letter was liable to fall into the wrong hands. Were I not to write at all what would she think had happened? That I didn't love her? On the last day, before the train was to leave for Paris and when I already had no bed in the camp and no table and no room; I stood in the midst of the trucks that were to take the unit to the harbor of Toulon and the car that was to take me to the train for Paris and debated with myself as to what to do. I had a romantic inspiration and took out a piece of paper and wrote in my own handwriting the complete, beautiful poem of Sholochov - "Wait for me – I'll be back", and I added the words: "If you will wait for me – I'll be

back.” I sealed the letter and off it went. Marnina waited for me for a whole year. We did not correspond, but I came back and we married and we have a wonderful family with three wonderful children. ..

Richard James Winter – Away he goes

I was given a new soldier’s ID. It had an accurate description of me and the name given to me was Richard James Winter, a Roman Catholic Englishman. That would allow me to be a bit strange if I were to be in the company of other Englishmen. In addition, I had a Dutch wife named Allie Winter, living in Amsterdam. All this was to help explain my need to travel in Europe. I had a picture of my girlfriend Marnina and on the back of the photo a woman wrote in a woman’s handwriting: “To my dear husband Richard with love from his wife Allie. Think of me always and come back quickly.”

From Ghent we traveled to Paris and in Paris we worked on the chief station agent to give us a berth to Nice. We were a group of seven soldiers and we had a printed order from the region commander (it seemed) ordering the seven named soldiers below to travel to Milan in order to bear witness in some trial that demanded secrecy. We had another ‘order’ forbidding us to divulge anything regarding the nature of the trial or of what we would bear witness to, except to the chief judge of the military tribunal. Only to the judge were we to give the sealed envelope that we had in our possession and which contained the Dollars that we carried with us in case they would be needed.

From Nice we transferred to a civilian train which took us to the border of Italy. We got off at the town of Ventemillia where we had to go through the French Border Customs. There were three tables in the small shack; one had a sign ‘customs’ and the second said ‘Health’ and the third said ‘Police’. We walked along in single file and placed a Virginia cigarette for each soldier sitting at the tables and then we passed on to the shack where the Italian soldiers sat. we did the same thing there without saying a word, and several minutes later we were in Italy and traveling on a civilian train to Milan...

We left the train in a hurry and went out to the street. We were now free, but we were in uniform. We entered the offices of the Jewish Community of Milan as soldiers and after a short while we left them dressed as typical ‘refugees’ in civilian clothes and papers supplied us by the JDC. Richard James Winter was stored away in a closet (I did not know then that I would have to resuscitate him one day) and I was now David Goldberg, born in Rovno, Poland. I chose this name which was the name of my cousin on my mother’s side which would make it easier for me to remember, and he had no doubt been killed in the Holocaust.

My time in Italy

I spent this first period in Italy In Rome, where I was put in charge of a house in which we had six apartments in which lived three different groups. The people

were very crowded there and we had no doctor and no medicines, not even a thermometer.

We shall never understand...

I remember the first Friday evening get-together that we had in Austria. We entered the room and everything was dark and no one saw us. A 'poet' mounts the speakers platform, turns towards us and starts speaking in Yiddish, and says: "You will never understand us, you were never in Treblinka..." he was correct, I am not sure that we already knew of the 6 million. Of course we didn't know of the stores of teeth and the mountains of shoes. He was absolutely correct and we could not argue with him. We could never understand!

Piazza-Toure

After the large convoy that came with Maccabi Mutzari-Manni we moved north in the direction of Milan. We traveled in trucks covered with canvas that were painted in army-like brown and had fictitious numbers painted on them. They also had AJDC printed on them in large letters, which stood for: the "American Joint Distribution Committee". This was a well known and very highly respected Organization. I once heard Yehuda Arazi explain to an Italian that it meant the "American Joint Diplomatic Corps." When we were fairly close to Milan we saw that the trucks turned towards Turin. Our road did not however end at Turin either; it continued for about one hundred km further into the heart of the Italian Alps until we arrived at a god-forsaken little village called Piazza Toure.

Here, in what was the wreck of a former schoolhouse, we arranged classes for studying Hebrew, math and nature study, and in what had been the gymnasium we were able to teach the use of light weapons, especially rifles (when they were not in use we hid them from sight). When all was ready we received our students. These were young people who had to stop their studies because of the War and because they had been in the camps. They and their sisters or brothers came in groups organized by the youth movements. We set up a school that no one knew about and that was under no one's supervision. We were completely on our own and had no guests and no visitors.

A new mission in France

These days came to an end fairly soon. I was called to see Mondek, our local commander, he told me that I had to go to France in order to set up a school there to teach Morse to young men and women, who had been in the camps, and who would later work as radio operators on the Hagana ships bringing the immigrants to Palestine. It was very difficult to bring enough of these men from Palestine to the Diaspora to do that work, and more were needed. Mondek told me that these were direct orders from Nachum and did not let me discuss the matter with him but immediately started arranging my transfer. Shortly afterwards I was on my way to Turin because in an old abandoned castle there was the laboratory where the papers I needed to authorize my movements were made up. From there it was once again only a short distance to the train for France.

When the conductor came round to collect all the papers and passports I gave him the papers of Sergeant Richard Jointer who had been given compassionate leave to travel to Holland at his own expense. My heart was somewhere up around my mouth as I waited anxiously for the papers to come back, and when they did they were stamped: "Permit to leave Italy". Once the first stamp had been added I did not worry about the others and I soon had official stamps from Switzerland and from France also decorating my fictitious papers. Not long after that I arrived in Paris.

I went to an address that had been given to me when I first started on my journey and came to the door of an office that had a sign on it in French saying: "Ehud Avriel, journalist, and representative of the newspaper, "The Ga'aton Daily". I recognized that I had come to the correct address. I knocked, and it was Shula Arlosoroff who answered and opened the door. After she heard my story she told me to get settled in a hotel because it would take a week or two to arrange new documents for me. Here I must sadly admit to one of the biggest mistakes I made in my life...I forgot that I was in Paris, the cultural capitol of the world; a city that everyone dreams of seeing some time in his life.

I phoned Nachum and he immediately invited me to his hotel because there was someone there that he wanted me to meet. When I arrived I saw someone who did not make any particular impression upon me, but Nachum said: "This is Monsieur Paul, the commander of the Jewish branch of the Maquis (the French underground movement); let him know what you need in Marseilles." I was completely surprised and did not have anything that I had prepared to ask for; I managed to mumble that I would need some documents and the name of whom to approach when I am in Marseilles. Monsieur Paul said that that could be easily arranged and when I would get to Marseilles I should go to the address he gave me and tell a Monsieur Tau that he sent me. He wrote an address on a piece of paper and was gone. At that time I did not realize what a great help that piece of paper was. I received permission from Nachum to travel as a British soldier and not to wait for new documents.

Shortly after that meeting I was on the train and on my way. I arrived at Marseilles and left the train station by a side door and walked along the street. I hopped into a cab and gave him the address of the St Jerome camp, the biggest camp of refugees of the Holocaust that there was in southern France, and where our offices also were located.

Marseilles

The first thing I did was to get rid of the uniform of Richard James and to put on the clothes of an ordinary Jewish refugee. The second thing was to find the aforesaid M. Tau. When I told him that I had been sent by M Paul he rose from his chair and received me with the utmost respect. The next day I had in my hands a document announcing that all the papers of M David Goldberg were

being cleared by the police station of Bouche de Rhone and the ID with a photo of me was valid anywhere in the French Empire.

The Naval School “Zevulun”

I then searched Marseilles for suitable housing and that was not an easy job. I needed a classroom that could hold about 20 students that was distant enough from nosey neighbors. This took me about ten days but then I came across a deserted castle on the door of which was written that “His Highness, Emperor Napoleon 1st slept here for two nights when he attended the wedding of his brother..” There was no problem in finding suitable material for the courses. Young fellows who knew Hebrew were transferred from various camps to the immediate locale, and some even delayed their going on Aliya in order to participate in the course. Among the candidates for the course was group of Americans and also a group of English who had arrived in England as refugees (from Germany) before the war. The rest were young men who had grown up in the camps during the war years. They were all of excellent standard and it was a pleasure to work with them.

The course started with a Sabbath evening meal with a pleasant relaxed atmosphere that was completely in contrast to the effort that the pupils were to expend during the course. Their daily schedule was very tough and started with an early awakening followed by exercise and ending with lights out at a scheduled hour with many work hours in between. They needed a great deal of practice in order to acquire the necessary skills in a short period of time. There were the usual moments of crisis and breakdown but they were all able to overcome them and the course reached a successful conclusion. I invited Nachum to come to the graduation ceremony in which they would all be sworn in to the Hagana on a bible and a loaded gun. While the course was still ongoing anyone and everyone who was in the vicinity came to visit, Moshe Dayan, Shimon Avidan, Moka Limon and many more. They were all very impressed by the sight of the Olim studying but for me this was probably the most difficult task I had had to perform. I thought that the students deserved some sort of reward so I asked Nachum to take them to Monte Carlo for 3 days.

Now, in early 1947 it was about time to think a bit about my own needs. I took the train back to Paris and once again appeared before Nachum and reminded him of our first meeting in Ghent. I told him to send me back home because I wanted to continue my studies at the Technion. Nachum said that I had fulfilled my tasks well and he had no complaints and had two choices before him: the first would be to go as an immigrant Oleh on a Hagana ship, in which case he did not know exactly when there would be one and if I would be detoured to Cyprus on the way there. The other choice was via Aliya Daled (Aliya Daled was legal Aliya with false papers). I chose Aliya Daled of course.

When I asked Nachum how I get a false passport he said that I was better at knowing something like that than he was. I left Nachum and stood in the street

scratching my head and trying to figure out how I get a passport when along comes a friend of mine and his suggestion is that I go into the lion's den and get one; that is – that I go to the police station and tell them that I am a refugee and have a chance to leave France but need a passport to do so but do not have one. "Give them the paper you received from the Bouche de Rhone police and see what happens," was his advice.

That sounded like good advice to me so I went to the police station and wandered from official to official for a few hours until I came to the office of a nice woman who took my papers and one thousand francs and told me to come back in two days. I came back as scheduled and when I walked out of the police station I had a bona fide French passport in my possession in the name of David Goldberg and which was good for leaving the country for one time. I had to wait a few more days before I received a bogus visa via Nachum. I then traveled to Marseilles to say farewell to some friends and as I was walking along towards the main pier I feel a friendly slap on my shoulder and turn around to see a Jewish captain from my former unit in the Brigade standing there. I didn't know how to get rid of him, he knows me as Beltzen and I am now David Goldberg. Maybe he even works for the British intelligence? I mumbled something about having to make an urgent phone call and beat a hasty retreat.

I went to the nearest Hagana office and phoned Haggai Avriel and asked him what I should do. His opinion was that the officer did not have to know what passport I was carrying in my pocket, and if he gets too nose-y I should throw him overboard. I went back to the ship and took another good look at Simcha and saw that he was broad-shouldered and taller than I; it looked to me that I would have had a hard time trying to throw him overboard. It even occurred to me that maybe he was just a plain ordinary good Jew and perhaps worth befriending! It turned out that he was "A great guy" and I spent most of the journey in his company – 12 days. We spent two days on shore in Palermo, Sicily.

When we arrived at Haifa I kept my distance from Simcha when we went through customs. I had no trouble at all and walked out the port gate. No sooner was I out when a fellow approached me and asked me for my passport and promised to bring me a mandatory ID in the name of Chanoch Beltzen. On the following day I started on a new adventure in the Haifa Technion which had no resemblance whatsoever to the greatest adventure in my life that had just come to an end.