

Chayat, Chaim (of blessed memory)

Born November 1915 in Otian, Lithuania and made Aliya in 1933

Joined the British Army in 1941, joined Ha'Chavura ("The Gang") in Italy

Died on his way to the Gaza Strip in 1970

Written by: Anat Zussman

This is the Way it Was

Otian was a regional center of about 20,000 souls. One third of its inhabitants were Jewish and most of them made their living by supplying services to the surrounding region. Chaim was born into a family that was both religious and Zionist, to a mother Henia (Becker) and a father David Chayat. The family made a living by selling flour and also had a large bakery. Chaim, who was the second of seven children, studied in a cheder and a Yeshiva, but at the same time, was a member of a Zionist Youth Organization.

In 1933, when he was 18 years old, he made aliya to Palestine legally within the framework of the Hapoel HaMizrachi, although he was closer to the Jabotinsky Revisionists in belief. On his arrival in Palestine, he was absorbed into Kibbutz Ruchama in the south and worked in agriculture. He bought a gun and a horse and began a career as a guard, and from then on his main interest was in security. Later, during the thirties, he spent a period of time with the Zaid family at Sheikh Abreik, joined the Shomer Organization and was one of its youngest members. Chaim served as a guard in Ben Shemen, Naan, Gan Shlomo and Ayanot. During this period he became acclimatized to the country, learned Arabic and became proficient in the use of weapons. He made numerous friends among the Bedouin and Arabs wherever he came in contact with them, and adopted many of their ways.

Despite his Revisionist ideals he was influenced by the general atmosphere in the country in the early 40's. In 1941, when contact with his family in Lithuania was severed, (three of his brothers had made Aliya in the interim years) and as his fear for their fate grew, as did the fear that the Germans would invade Palestine, he joined the British Army.

In 1942 he was assigned to the 544 Company "Electrical and Mechanical Royal Engineers", a company of electricians and mechanics that was a part of a unit that arranged for water supply and electricity for the fighting troops. Chaim worked as an electrician.

In 1942 his outfit was sent to Egypt and there he was active in smuggling weapons to Palestine. His outfit was sent to Libya; Tobruk and Bengazi where he took an active role in the activities of the local Jewish community. He educated them in Zionism and was able to smuggle some to Palestine in the guise of British soldiers. Chaim was in charge of a course in the use of weapons in which both soldiers and civilians participated.

In 1944 he returned to Palestine with his Company, the 544th, and in November of the same year he landed with them in Italy. Here too he played an active Zionist role. He first met survivors of the Holocaust in the city of Taranto. He helped organize their care and obtained equipment that they needed from the British army. This meeting with the Remnant was difficult for him as a part of his family had also been wiped out. He later moved to Bari where he was put in charge of the Dror Camp which was known to the refugees as Camp Forbidden because so many things were forbidden there. In this camp he also prepared the Ma'apilim for their illegal voyage to Palestine. Under the guise of running a summer camp he trained the young olim in the use of weapons. It was at this camp that he met his future wife, Miriam Reich, who survived the War in Europe by living as a Christian with false identity. She arrived in Italy as a member of the Zionist Youth Organization.

In April 1946 the members of his unit began to be discharged. Chaim Chayat gave his soldier's ID to a refugee who made aliya with it while he remained in Italy illegally and without an identity. He used various false names and false papers. He was one of five men from his unit who remained in Italy to work with Ha'Chavura ("The Gang") instead of being discharged from the Army and going home. He worked for another year in preparing survivors of the Holocaust for aliya to Palestine.

He returned to Palestine in February 1947 with false papers on the ship "Transylvania" as the fictitious husband of one of the refugees. When he got off the ship in Haifa his brother-in-law gave him new papers of an Israeli that he received from the Jewish Agency. In Palestine, he rejoined his friends Aryeh Chaikin, Avraham Gorochov and others, and was a partner in establishing the cooperative Moshav Bnei Dror in the Sharon Valley. This moshav was intended to be both industrial and agricultural, which suited the abilities of most of its members who had come from the 544th unit. That is why they chose to settle not far from the larger towns. By the end of that year he married Miriam Reich.

In 1955, he was the father of Boaz and Anat and took his whole family to live in Shdema, where he also took a hand in the establishment of this new moshav. In 1960 he moved to Bnei Brak and ran a shop that made window shutters. In 1967, when the Six Day War was over he worked for the Lands Administration as an officer in charge of properties in Northern Sinai. It was here that his knowledge of Arabic and Arab customs played a significant role.

He died on his way to the Gaza Strip in 1970 at the age of 55 years.