

Hason, Yosef (Sternlicht)

Born 1922 in Vienna, made Aliya in 1939

Joined the Jewish Settlement Police in 1941

Joined the British Army in 1942

Joined Ha'Chavura ("The Gang") in 1944/ 45

This is the Way it Was

My parents lived in Vienna. My mother gave birth to twins, my brother and I, at her mother's home in Kharkov. When we were two months old we returned to Vienna and that is where we grew up. I made aliya in 1939 with the Aliyat HaNoar and went to the Tian Begur trade school. In 1941 I left the school as youth were then called "To Work and To Arms". I joined the Jewish Settlement Police at Ein Gev and in January, 1942 joined the British Army. In March 1946 I was married to Naomi in the Great Synagogue of Rome. She had been born in Lucca, Tuscany. Naomi was the only daughter of the only Jewish family in the city. When I returned to Israel we lived in Tivon and I worked as a machinist and lathe operator.. I was also a teacher of mechanics at Kiryat Chaim. I was secretary of the local council of Tivon and served in the IDF. In 1954 I began working for the Mekorot water company.

My Personal Memoirs of the Ha'apala (bringing people to Palestine)

I worked at the "Diaspora Center" where my job was to act as the contact between those who were bringing survivors of the Holocaust to Italy, and those who were taking care of them there. The survivors of the Holocaust had to be brought to Italy, and then taken to various camps, training centers, etc., where they prepared for the journey to Palestine. At the same time we worked at reviving the Jewish community in Italy. We built up a local Halutz (pioneering) movement. We also removed Jewish children who had been hidden in monasteries and created schools and other Jewish institutions. When Rome was liberated in April, 1944, the work of Jewish soldiers in fighting units of the British army expanded, and included saving survivors of the Holocaust. I started learning Italian when I was in Naples.

I had studied Latin for 6 years when I went to secondary school. In 1944 Yechiel Duvdevani drafted me to work full time at the "Diaspora Center". In Rome I continued to study Italian with a teacher. I told the teacher about Judaism and Zionism, and our desire to save the Remnant of the Holocaust, and she was sympathetic to those ideas. I could not convince her, however. that Jews also served as soldiers in the British Army and that in Israel there were those that worked in farming.

When Yehuda Alon (Alon was Arazi) came to Italy he passed through Rome and we met there. After a few opening sentences he came straight to the point. He needed 400 lifebelts. He saw my surprise and told me that they were needed to save Jews from sinking vessels. In the "Diaspora Center" we had connections with various civil authorities, but not with the Italian Army. I left immediately for the naval base at Civitavecchia and was able to meet a very

senior quartermaster officer, but failed completely. I told that to Yehuda and he was understanding, as if he never did expect to get the lifelbelts through me.

When the city of Livorno was freed by the American Army we were able to begin rehabilitating the Jewish community. I filled the pick-up van of the army chaplain Rabbi Ohrbach with supplies of food and clothing and newspaper articles of the Jewish community in Rome. When I arrived in the center of the city a Jew noticed the Star of David on the truck and approached me. I asked him to show me how to get to the house of the Rabbi of the community. The Rabbi asked all of the Jewish community to assemble in the synagogue. There were also a number of refugees there who were survivors of the Holocaust. It was a very emotional moment. The Rabbi spoke and I also spoke, and the Rabbi invited me, the Jew from the Holy Land, to lead the service. This was somewhat embarrassing and I had to admit my ignorance and beg to be excused.

Yitzchak ben David, who was a journalist for the newspaper "Davar" before he enlisted, was working on an Italian – Hebrew dictionary, the first one in 2,000 years. A refugee from Hungary helped him in this task. Every letter or section that they completed was forwarded to Chief Rabbi Chuli who had formerly been a Polish Jew name Tzoller. He was known as a man of science, and fluent in both languages. One evening while we were all sitting in our clubroom, we received calls from several news agencies which were interested in knowing if the Chief Rabbi had really converted to Christianity We were quite surprised but knew that he could not be counted on to cooperate with us. He did not even want to help us take Jewish children out of monasteries. However, the fact that the Chief Rabbi had changed his name to Leugenio Maria Chuli, and did leave the Jewish faith, came as a blow to the community. Yitzchak ben David felt betrayed. He threw away some papers for the dictionary that he had received from Chuli that morning, and would not add them to the dictionary. We leased a house for Jewish children in Selvino, not far from Milan. In the past, this building had been used by fascist youth as their clubhouse.

Several years ago Naomi and I went to visit Italy and decided to see what remained of that house. The whole town had undergone a radical change. There were many new houses and wide streets and avenues. I stopped and asked a man if he remembered that house and he said: "How could I not recall that house? I was the boy who brought you bread every morning!"

What didn't we do to collect large sums of money? UNRRA gave 3,000 liras to each person for a day and usually each refugee had to come and personally collect the money. I told the official that many of the refugees had become ill with some contagious illness and were not able to appear at his office. I asked him to come to the camp and distribute the money there. He did not like the idea of traveling with a large sum of money but he agreed on the condition that soldiers accompany him. We put uniforms on some of our people so that they looked like British soldiers and they accompanied him to our camp. I was surprised that he was not afraid of catching the contagious disease.

When aliyah activity moved further north, Duvdevani decided to send me to Milan. Until then, there had been no repercussions to our work because of politics. Our soldiers represented the entire political spectrum, but all agreed on the need for rehabilitating the survivors of the Holocaust and sending them on their way to Israel. There were several people in leadership among the survivors of the Holocaust. I recall a meeting between Duvdevani and Antek in which I also participated. Duvdevani tried to convince Antek to set up one united Halutz movement in Italy. Antek did not agree. This attempt failed because not only was the Diaspora Center working with the refugees, but there also was Ha'Chavura ("The Gang"), Yehuda Arazi's people.

Duvdevani had to give up his idea for one movement, and "The Gang" gave up on its plan of having people chosen to sail to Palestine according to their countries of origin. Yehuda would also have preferred to work without the interference of the representatives of the movements. After a conference between the parties they all gave in, and decided that I be the contact man for all sides. I was just a young soldier without any authority from anyone, but then again, that is perhaps why I had relative success. They all stood on their rights and they all had to compromise; in short – Mapainiks. (a center-left political party in those days).

Yisrael respected Duvdevani and spoke of him as an "honest" Mapainik. Meir rather scorned Arazi, the "good" Mapainik who was ready to compromise. Regarding Surkis, they said he was a typical functionary. When it came to young me, Yisrael said that I was the only Mapainik who was worth talking to. There were numerous problems: soldiers wanted preferential treatment for their relatives, problems of uniting families of the refugees, some balance between the various parties and movements had to be maintained, and there was even the threat of personal violence. On the way to my wedding in Rome I passed through a training camp of the Beitar movement. They were always complaining that they were being discriminated against. No explanation was good enough, there were hints that they would not let me leave, and it was evening. I had to travel 600 km to the south to get to my wedding on time. I told myself that my wedding was more important than my job, and I promised what I knew could not be granted.

One day a leader of one of the movements came to me and said that he had knowledge of a Kapo. Even prior to this instance, there had been cases where soldiers set up a "field court", sometimes with the participation of Holocaust survivors. There was no possible way to check if the information was true or not. Sometimes one could hear the phrase "Kapo" or "Nazi" railed against our soldiers when the refugees thought they were too strict, or if there was bad blood among several of the refugees. Sometimes there was an act of brutal violence. I would have preferred not to deal with such problems; there were higher-ups who should have taken care of such things. I talked to Duvdevani about this and he thought that the matter should rest with authorities in Palestine. That was the easy way out of making a decision. I also discussed this with Meir Davidson as the refugees respected him very highly despite his use of

authority in preparing a voyage. We both thought that as soldiers we did not have the authority to intervene in such matters, and that it would be best if soldiers did not take part in such decision-making.

In Milan we lived in a hostel for soldiers and there was also an Army Rabbi's office there. One day the Rabbi introduced me to an Italian visitor. He told me that he had a relative who was in the crew of a vessel that carried Ma'apilim and contact with him had been lost. This fellow looked suspicious to me, and was unable to give any details about his relative. He also had no explanation as to why he addressed his question to soldiers. I expressed my thoughts to Yehuda and that put an end to the matter. Several days later Yehuda invited me to his room, and to my surprise, there was the suspicious person. Yehuda explained that the fellow had been followed and it was discovered that he was captain and partner in the ownership of the vessel in question. He also wanted to take part in bringing Ma'apilim to Palestine. His name was Mario Canda and his ship had sailed under the name of "Orde Wingate" from Palestrina, near Maestra, with 243 Ma'apilim. This fellow who looked so suspicious to me became a Zionist and continued to work for the Mosad for Aliya Bet.

When the La Spezia crisis was in the news, the convention of the Socialist Party of Italy was taking place at the same time in Milan. One day when I was in the soldier's hostel with Naomi and a few other fellows, all of a sudden I walked Raphael Cantoni, the President of the Jewish Communities of Italy. He had aided us a great deal in matters of immigration. He asked Naomi and me to accompany him and as he was not one to be questioned, we went. He proceeded to the theater where the Socialist Convention was being held and walked right in and up onto the stage. We walked up after him and he introduced us as the representatives of the socialist party of Palestine. We were all very young and I was in my British army uniform.

One day, in March 1946 Yehuda Arazi gave voice to an idea when he was in the base of "The Gang", in Milan: "The first seven vessels that had sailed from Italy sailed without an immigration permit. The eighth vessel would sail with everyoleh holding a 'certificate of aliya" issued by the nation of Israel. I prepared a form for this certificate, and had it printed.

Jews of Milan knew that there was a publisher in Livorno who printed in Hebrew so I took off that same night for Livorno and found that the publishing house had been badly damaged by British bombers. I started searching for Hebrew letters among the wreckage until I came across a sign that said, "Beware of booby traps!" It was thought that the Germans might have put some mines in among the wreckage before they left the town, so I left the scene. I returned to Milan and from there, flew to Rome. I had no doubt that the Vatican would be able to print in Hebrew. The manager of the printing shop agreed to cooperate but said that he would have to work overtime. I agreed to the overtime and left, and when I returned the job was done.

I returned to Milan and Yehuda was waiting for me at the airport. We went straight to Maestra, near Venice. Yehuda drove and I wrote the names of the

Ma'apilim and their personal particulars, on the forms. I had taken the information with me from Rome. I asked Yehuda what would happen if we were stopped on the way by military police and they found all the papers. He wasn't worried about it. He doubted that British policemen would find something suspicious about a document written in English and signed by immigration authorities.

Early in the morning of 14th March 1946 the "Wingate" left Maestra with 243 passengers, survivors of the Holocaust. Each Ma'apil had in his hand a certificate of the "State in Formation".

After this came the turn of the 1,014 Ma'apilim of the "Eliyahu Golomb" and the "Dov Hoz" who had been caught at La Spezia. They continued their trip to Israel, a journey that became a myth.

