

**Hod, Mordechai (Fein)**

Nickname: Motik

Born 1926 in Dagania A, Palestine

With Ha'Chavura ("The Gang") in 1945 – 1946

Served in the Palmach 1946 – 1948

Was among the first men to receive pilot's wings in the Israeli Air Force

Commander of the Israeli Air Force from 1966 - 1973

**This is the Way it Was**

Mordechai grew up and was educated in the schools of the Jordan Valley. At the beginning of 1945 he joined the British Army and was assigned to the 178<sup>th</sup> Transport Company, which was later attached to the Jewish Brigade. He was a young and inexperienced driver, and in his period of training in the region of Genife in Egypt (near the Suez Canal) was given the rank of Lance Corporal, a sometimes undesirable grade without additional pay. He wrote: "Toward the end of that year I was called to the headquarters of the outfit, and swore allegiance for the second time, to the Hagana and was assigned to work in the TTG unit (the fictitious transport unit) for the Mosad for Aliya Bet. When the Jewish Brigade was disbanded by the British in 1946, I was given the false papers of a Jewish refugee from Poland and joined "The Gang" in Italy.

At the same time, Yoske Yariv (of blessed memory) told me that I had been suggested as a candidate for the Naval Company of the Palmach. That is how I became connected with the work of the Mosad for Aliya Bet, to save survivors of the Holocaust and bring them to Palestine. To do this, I was given the identity of a refugee named Gershon Rosengard. The real Gershon Rosengard was given the Identity of Mordechai Fein of Degania "A", and went to Palestine instead of me.

**Preparing to send the ship of Ma'apilim, "Yerushalayim Hanetzura" (Besieged Jerusalem) from Civitavecchia on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1948**

At the beginning of 1947, Ada Sereni was appointed head of the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Italy. She took over from Yehuda Arazi who was transferred to procurement in the USA. To assist her in her activities she was given a car, a black Citroen. Ada came from an aristocratic Roman family, the Ascarellis, and thought that it would be a good idea to employ an Italian driver, both to make her job easier and also as a cover for what she would be doing. On second thought however, it was decided that the driver should be Israeli; one of the boys who had driven in the British transport units.

I was suggested for the job and after mulling it over, decided to accept. In the course of time I became a partner to Ada's thoughts and actions during the long hours of our travels. Sometimes, after a meeting with someone important in the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Europe, or with important people from the Hagana or the Palmach from Palestine, she would ask my opinion on the subject discussed or of the individual we had met. During this period of Ada's being in charge of Mosad activity in Italy, 15,000 survivors of the Holocaust were sent on Aliya

from Italy aboard 19 vessels. Ada was personally involved in every aspect of the operation of loading the passengers onto the ships during the long nights. I would take part in rowing the rubber life rafts from shore to ship and back, sometimes with the help of a cable that was stretched from ship to shore. On many occasions we would visit the beach before the loading took place.

The ship, "Yerushalayim Hanetzura" was to be loaded with ma'apilim at Civitavecchia, several km north of Rome on February 3, 1948. It was outfitted to take 670 olim. Several days prior to the date of boarding, Ada asked Moshe Rabinowitz, (her number one assistant) to send a seaman to join her when she visited the beach where the Olim were to be loaded. A young seaman, named Peter, who was an old friend as well, joined us and we went to visit the spot on January 27th. There were tremendous waves that pounded the shore and the water temperature was about 10 degrees C°.

Peter took me aside and said that he wanted my help as he wasn't sure that he could handle himself in the water because he wasn't a good swimmer. His request seemed funny and I asked him to put it in writing. I would then have proof of why I went in instead of him. He took out his notebook and wrote: "Today, 27.1.48, I asked the driver, Motik to take my place and to check the depth of the water at this spot." Signed, Peter Hoffman. P.S. Peter didn't know Hebrew very well.. Peter Hoffman (of blessed memory) accompanied two ships of ma'apilim, the "Eliayahu Golomb" and the "Four Freedoms".

I told Ada that Peter didn't feel well and that I would check the water instead of him. We approved of the beach for the operation, so preparations continued. Several days later Ada told me that a group of American photographers had been given permission to photograph the operation. This photography would also be a cover for the activity close to the northern suburbs of Rome.

On the morning of February 3rd the weather wasn't very good, with rain and a strong wind. The operations of the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Italy were characterized by a certain inflexibility and there was no room for changes in plans. That noon, I suggested that Ada allow me to hop over to the shore and take a look at the beach to check the wind and height of the waves. I did so, and when we heard the weather report for the following day which predicted a moderation of the wind and rain. I told that to Ada and suggested that the operation proceed.

That night we arrived at the shore in darkness. The ship had already made contact and told us that the waves made it difficult to get closer to shore. It might have to remain at a greater distance from shore than originally planned. The system often employed in these instances was for the ship to drop anchor at a distance decided upon from the shore, and then a boat would be lowered into the water and row to shore with a cable that would be attached to a fixed point. Rubber rafts would then be pulled back and forth along the cable by Palyamniks, or other strong young fellows, while the olim would sit in the rafts and climb up ladders to get aboard the ship when the rafts came alongside.

As we stood on the shore waiting for the boat with the cable, we were told that the boat could not get through the high waves to reach the shore. It seemed that our only choice was to swim out to the boat with a light rope, tie the rope to the heavier cable, and pull the cable to shore. Ada stood there surrounded by her chief advisors and numerous seamen. When I made my suggestion, they all shook their heads in disagreement, and remarked, "Who can swim in water with such high waves?" I said: "Anyone who was born on the shore of the Jordan and knows how to swim since he was 3 or 4 years old." I was the best swimmer in the group, so I took off my clothes, and in my underpants entered the water with the light rope tied about my waist. I swam out to the boat and came back totally frozen. They wrapped me in a blanket and I went to dry out and hide from the wind behind some parked cars. Ada came to see me and had tears in her eyes.

Meanwhile the work of loading the ma'apilim went ahead and at the same time the crew of photographers fixed lights and took pictures. Once I warmed and dried out, I joined the group of seamen and helped load the olim into the boats. Loading them in rough water took longer than planned and from time to time the filming crew asked us to stop for a few minutes while they photographed something. In any case, suddenly the night was over but the loading was not. Ada decided to ask the help of the local police chief, who was a great admirer of hers. She woke him and asked that he close the area around the loading site so that work could continue uninterrupted, supposedly for the benefit of the American photographers. The police department of Rome was there in force at daybreak and cordoned off the entire area. The film-shooting was completed during the early morning hours and "Yerushalayim Hanetzura" sailed on its way under the command of Moshe Dafni, and accompanied by Yehuda Tsfati and Daniel Sandlar. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of February, the ship was captured by the British as it approached the shores of Palestine with 670 ma'apilim on board.

In 1973 I was honorably discharged from the Air Force with the rank of Major General. I studied for a time at the U.S, Naval Academy, served for a period as Assistant Minister of Defense, and CEO of El-Al Israel Airlines. I was Chairman of the Board of Israel Aircraft Industries, and also established a private business.