

Koren Yosef (Coronel)

Born 17th July 1921 in Jerusalem

Joined the Hagana in 1937 at Mikve Yisrael

Joined the Police force in 1938

Joined the British Army in 1943

Joined Ha'Chavura ("The Gang") in 1945

This is the Way it Was

I was an instructor for the Hagana in the Nahalal area in field training and light weapons. I joined the British Army in 1943 and served in the 462nd (Transport) Company.

In June-July 1945 I joined "The Gang" that worked in northern Italy, where I drove trucks. I would get supplies from British Army bases and take them to storehouses for use by the ships that carried Olim to Palestine. All the vehicles of "The Gang", about 50 in number, were stolen from other transport units and fitted with different insignia and licenses, as occasions warranted.

As a driver, I would have to carefully memorize each outfit to which I belonged (supposedly) and who the commanders were, in case I was questioned at a checkpoint. The entire mission crashed at La Spezia. The Italian gendarmerie collected all the trucks at one spot, which was completely surrounded, and had the exit blocked with an armoured car. We had 42 trucks from the 179th and 650th Companies, which had been commandeered in order to move Olim from the camps to the ships in the port. After various negotiations, all of the trucks were returned to their units and six "sergeants" were held under arrest, among them Yisrael Libertovsky, the commander of this operation, Shalhevet Freier, his assistant, and Zelinger. After that, we drove like mad to get back to the outfits, which were in the Naples area, about 600 km to the south.

Two trucks headed back to Milan by a circuitous route in order to avoid checkpoints. We reported to Meir Davidson about the failure of the mission and once we reached Milan, we hid all of our equipment in hideaways which had been prepared. Three days later we traveled to Naples to join our units. When we reached the town of Caserta we saw signs of the location of the 650th Company. Just to be on the safe side, we parked the trucks at some distance from the camp and I approached on foot to make inquiries. I was dressed in work clothes and had a torn radiator belt with me. As soon as I entered I could tell that something was wrong.

Staff Sergeant Natan Horowitz, who was in on the secret of "The Gang", turned his back on me as soon as he saw me and grabbed another soldier and started 'chewing him out'. He called the other soldier by my name and yelled at him that I had fallen into a trap. The next moment two British Army military policemen appeared and asked me who I was and what was I doing there. I decided that I

would tell them that I was a Polish soldier and that my truck had broken down because of the torn radiator belt. The first thing I did when they approached was to salute in a Polish Army salute. They addressed me in English and of course I understood every word, but replied in my broken Jerusalem Polish with a few Russian curse words thrown in. The MP's marked me for some crazy bastard and told me to leave. Meanwhile, men of the Company had prepared a motorcycle and driver who waited for me outside the gate. I was taken to the 544th Company that was camped within the city of Naples, and there I met Avraham Shavit and Danny Stern. They took care of hiding the trucks and I went back to the 179th Company. That same night my staff sergeant woke me and told me to shave off my mustache. There was to be a roll call the following morning and I was on a 'wanted' list of missing men.

In preparation for the roll-call we all stood in three rows. Our chief cook gave me a potato cut in half and I put it into my mouth, one half in each cheek. That changed my looks considerable. That same night the furlough that was coming to me anyway, was advanced and I took off immediately, for my return to Palestine, and lived in Menachemia. In 1947 I was attached to Jordan Valley units and fought in the 12th (Lightning) Battalion of the Golani Brigade during the War of Independence. Today I am a member of Moshav Avigdor.