

Miller, Chaim

Born in Austria in 1921

Made Aliya in 1939

Joined the German Platoon of the Palmach in 1942

Joined the British Army in 1944

Went to work for the Bricha in Europe in 1945

This is the Way it Was

Historical events develop on their own despite the attempts of people to plan them, and that is how I came to this story. I was in the Zionist Youth Movement in Austria and managed to go on Aliya Bet in 1939, half a year prior to the outbreak of WW II. After a period of training in a group that was to settle on the land, we ended up at a place called: Mitzpe HaSharon (Kfar Nachman) near Raanana. A shaliach from the Palmach found the place in order to mobilize people for what was called "the German Platoon". Since I spoke German fluently I was a natural candidate for this unit. This platoon was to fight the German Army if they succeeded in crossing the Suez. We were to fight behind their lines as a guerrilla force. This platoon had been set up and operating for about two years as a commando unit. Its commander was Shimon Avidan, "Givati". Since history made them redundant, the entire group was offered to the Jewish Brigade of the British Eighth Army, with the promise that the unit should remain intact. That is how we arrived in Europe almost at the end of WW II, having spent some time training in Egypt. Our first job was to smuggle two Palmachniks on our ship, disguised as soldiers.

When the war came to an end the base of the Brigade was in a triangular area bordering on Italy, Austria, and Yugoslavia. Even there we started our independent career as a unit. We gathered and took care of refugees who came from Eastern Europe, we smuggled refugees across borders, and we searched for Nazis and SS men hiding in the hills. This chapter appeared in detail in the television series "The Avengers", by Yaron Kimor. The Brigade moved to Western Europe and later, to Belgium and Holland. The unofficial business of our unit continued there as well, as we organized Ma'apilim for Alya Bet and trained groups of youths as Gideonim of the Palmach. That is how, when I was in Eindhoven, Holland, under the command of Lieutenant Aharon Yariv (Ahrale), a graduate of the British School for Officers, that I was sent to accompany a convoy of refugees from Antwerp, Belgium, to Marseilles, France.

The entire convoy, that included hundreds of people and vehicles that belonged to the Jewish Brigade, crossed boundaries and in three days traveled hundreds of kilometers. Everything was done with false documents. The commander of the convoy was Yisrael Carmi (see his book, in Hebrew, "Bedarkey Lochamim"). When we arrived at midnight at the UNRRA refugee camp, the people were handed over and the convoy turned to head back, with soldiers like me who had accompanied the refugees. However as I happened to walk down one of the streets of the camp I ran into an old friend, Mundek, Moshe Pasternak – Bar Tikva. "You are not going back", he said. "But I'm a soldier", I answered. "You

are staying, and that is final”, was his reply. And so, after having spent 3 days in Marseilles, I found myself in a sort of abandoned castle in the tiny port of La Ciotat, several kms east of Marseilles. There was to be a camp for refugees here and they would stay until they sailed for Palestine.

With the aid of a French Jew, we collected all the equipment needed for housing 350 people. They came one week later and remained for about a month. In order to control the group, they were divided into squads and each squad had a leader. Food was brought and people served themselves. This took a good deal of time, and in addition we taught them Hebrew, Hebrew songs and dances. We even gave them a bit of military training. Actually the refugees were a willing and cooperative group, and ready for all hardships. They were, on the whole, young. That was how a month went by, and then one day, our friend Ehud Avriel made an appearance. He was one of the important figures in the Mosad for Aliya Bet and told me that a ship would arrive in another two days. “You will put the people on the vessel and you will get onto it yourself”, he said. “But I’m a soldier”, I replied. His answer was, “Don’t worry”.

The next day Yisrael Rotem, a Palyamnik, showed up to coordinate things. We knew each other slightly. As advised, a vessel turned up the following day, called the “Asia”, and I loaded 350 people onto it. More people also came aboard from another camp. Ehud showed up once again, said goodbye, and even gave me a parting gift of a bottle of eau-de-cologne. Then off we sailed. The commander of the vessel was Yisrael Rotem, a Palyamnik and graduate of the course for naval officers. I was responsible for organizing the life of the 733 Ma’apilim on board. The conditions were as difficult as they usually were on such voyages. The Gideonim was Yoash Tzidon (Chatto). The captain and crew of the ship were Turkish and Greek.

The bottle of eau-de-cologne proved itself useful after three days at sea. I had been very busy getting things in order and shared a small cabin with Yisrael. After I took off my shoes for the first time in 3 days, the little bottle helped clear the air. Yisrael, the Greek captain, and I, ate our lunch together in a small cabin. There were three large canisters under the table on which we ate, for extinguishing fires. If the sea was a bit rough, they would roll around and bother us. I took the initiative, moved them and tied them to the deck railing. While doing so, I even took the time to read the instructions. Two days later I heard someone cry out, “Es brent!” (It’s burning!). The smoke stack of the engine had overheated from pressure, and the insulation material was not sufficient. I got the canisters into action very fast, and with the aid of a few young fellows, we soon had the fire under control. It was an exciting occurrence.

On the last day of the voyage, when we were about 100 miles from the shore of Palestine, there was danger of our being discovered by the British. The order was given that everyone had to be below deck during daylight hours, and the hatches were closed and covered. It is difficult to imagine the atmosphere down below at such a time. Guards with whistles were put on watch so that they could call us if there was need.

At 07:00 we were surprised to see a small Piper plane circling overhead. It came in low from the east and we did not see it because of the morning sun, and didn't hear it because it came in so low. We were identified and by noon a destroyer was at our side. Marines quickly came aboard and of course there was nothing more to hide. The Ma'apilim came up on deck in droves, hoisted the blue-white flag up the mast, and burst into singing "Hatikva". We were towed into Haifa and the crew mingled with the Ma'apilim. In port we were transferred to buses to be taken to Atlit Detention Camp. When I saw the crowd at the wharf and among them men of the Palmach-Palyam, I agilely jumped out the door on the bus-driver's left-hand side, and disappeared among the onlookers. Yisrael did the same. A false ID was thrust into my hand seconds later, not in my name but with my photo. These guys were organized. That ID was enough to get me out of the port and to wander about Palestine for several months.

Yisrael and I found a place to sleep at the Carmelia Court Hotel. In the morning, after a wonderful rest, we went out and bought some clothes. Before parting, Yisrael asked me what my plans were. I told him that I intended going to Mishmar Haemek where I had spent two and a half years and seriously knew a girl. Yisrael had not been there but wanted to know the girl's name. When I said that her name was Hadassah, he took a picture of her sister Pnina out of his pocket, and we have remained brothers-in-law ever since.

I had this fake ID until August, and when soldiers of the Brigade came back to Palestine to be discharged, I was called to the camp near Rehovot. I met buddies there who introduced me to a young soldier who had taken my place. He was a Dutch refugee. We exchanged uniforms and IDs and I was legally discharged.