

## Part Two: Who Are We?

Our story is the story of the Generation of the State, the generation forged during the founding of the State of Israel. Two generations of Zionist life in the land of Palestine had preceded ours: the Founding Generation, led by Ben-Gurion, and the Palmach Generation, led by Moshe Dayan and Yigal Allon. The iconic generals Yitzhak Rabin and Ariel Sharon were also groomed in the Palmach days.

We are the Third Generation, born in the thirties and forties. One after another, the pieces of our adolescent landscape unfolded with WWII and the Holocaust, the influx of illegal refugees from occupied Europe, the struggle against the British, the War of Independence, a still more earth-shaking wave of Mizrahi and Ashkenzi immigrants and still further Arab attacks on the newborn state. After the Suez War, in the fifties, our leaders claimed that the era of war had given way to the era of peace. We, of course, took these claims seriously, though they had no basis in reality, so we never considered the army our highest calling – as the Palmach generation had. We pursued other interests, namely: science, business, sports and art. Beyond the communal life of the nation, each of us delved into our own personal experience, and these individual narratives will be presented in full, unvarnished and whole, as without them none of us can truly be known. While the Hadassim tale deals in a miracle, the tales of its students are sometimes quite difficult to bear. Some of our parents were murdered in the Holocaust, while still others fell in the War of Independence. The remainder survived to build the state, handing their flag down to us at the twilight of their days.

Part Two tells the story of that youthful lot, hailing from all over the world, which first gathered together in Hadassim under one banner, and then charged toward their futures with an energy that no other place could have given them.

# THE OASIS OF DREAMS



## Chapter Three: Children of the Holocaust

### A. The Seemingly Impossible

In order to create the conditions for true dialogue among Hadassim students, in order to stir in them a life of creativity, Jeremiah and Rachel Shapirah determined that students would be selected in equal numbers from three groups: Holocaust survivors, children of broken or troubled homes, and lastly those children of a comparatively privileged status – heirs of comfortable hearths and homes whose parents were simply too busy to tend to them, for a variety of reasons. The three groups integrated well: the rich kids grappled with new realities; the troubled kids were introduced to better realities, and learned in their guts that they could succeed if they would only make the effort; and the holocaust survivors encountered the new, versatile world of a versatile Israeli identity. In the end, these children of the Holocaust became Israelis, while the troubled kids ascended to the elite and the elite learned to live uncorrupted by their privileges.



**The first eight Holocaust children in August, 1947**

Many of the kids in Hadassim who'd lived through the Holocaust were, in fact, the moral and intellectual elite of our generation. Not only had they been better cultivated in the European Diaspora, but their hard-won battles for survival had endowed them with moral and psychological virtues of far greater reach. In order to harness their latent strength, however, they first needed a warm and understanding home; they needed friends who would keep close to them rather than labeling

them "soaps" -- a cruel jibe at their near-immolation at the concentration camps – as was so

much the custom in the cities and Kibbutzim. They needed teachers who would also be friends.

The children of the Holocaust were given all of these things in Hadassim. The following are some of their stories, starting with Ephraim Shtinkler-Gat and ending with Avigdor Shachan. The majority of their age group hadn't survived, and those who did

carried scars in their souls that compromised their full development. But in Hadassim, Ephraim, Avigdor and their friends did the seemingly impossible.

## B. A Child in the Closet



**Ephraim Shtinkler-Gat**

As his parents were being murdered in Auschwitz,<sup>1</sup> the five year old Ephraim Shtinkler-Gat would end up spending two years imprisoned inside a coat-closet in a Polish family's apartment. It was in that closet that he ate, drank, grappled with lice and breathed naphthalene – all without so much as coughing or sneezing or uttering a single word. He slept with his knees curled up in a sitting position. Whole days and nights he would spend in the dark, motionless, taking in the conversations outside his little sanctuary, listening to the family exchange words with SS agents who would exterminate him within the span of seconds if they but discovered him. These weren't healthy conditions for a five year old's development, to say the least. Our estimate is that most children could not survive in such circumstances, and that those who could would remain forever tortured. Not Ephraim.

Most families who risked their lives hiding Jewish children lived in crowded conditions, often sharing a single room with friends, relatives and neighbors. The child, a fugitive from Nazi justice, would usually be kept a secret even from most of these co-inhabitants, as most of them would otherwise have run straight to the Gestapo for sheer bigotry and material gain. Today, there's hardly a father or a grandfather who would believe that Ephraim sat still and silent over the course of those two years.

Though I'd already read about his background, I could hardly believe my own ears when Ephraim recounted his story. As we sat together in my kitchen in 2005, on a tempestuous winter night, I searched for any sign of a wounded and tortured soul, the kind I would have expected from the war veterans I'd written about all these years. But I found nothing of the kind. Instead, his casual smile evoked something entirely different –

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<sup>1</sup> He learned the precise date when his mother was sent to the gas chambers when he visited the camp in later years.

as if Hadassim had reduced his childhood trauma to an amusing memory. If this is what happened, I thought to myself, our school's success had indeed been unparalleled.

Ephraim came with the first eight Holocaust children in August, 1947. It was for them that WIZO celebrated the founding of Hadassim on Normandy.

"It was worth the effort just for him," Helena Glazer, president of World WIZO told us after reading this chapter in her Tel Aviv office. As she turned page after page, she kept whispering "Unbelievable, unbelievable..." as she wiped tears off her face.



**Helena Glazer, president of World WIZO**

And there were many like him to arrive at Hadassim.

He was a pale, blond child with brown eyes and Slavic features – handsome, in short – who seemed to have emotionally distanced himself from his past, who seemed ready to embrace life ("we have everything to look forward to!"). It might have been his DNA, it might have been the closet that been his abode, and it was probably also the immediate influence of Rachel and Jeremiah's educational ideology, which encouraged us to embrace the future. He

was alive by dint of his hair color and facial features, by dint of a Polish family's superstition -- that Jesus had commanded them to save a Jewish boy at their doorstep from certain death. He remained alive by sheer discipline and plenty of luck.

It occurred to me that luck – or fate, more precisely – was the name of the game that God had played with us in the years 1939-1945. Though Einstein could never accept notion that "God plays dice with the universe," it became clear in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that our maker was doing just that – with a vengeance. The Holocaust finally ended for Ephraim when he was seven years old, parentless, illiterate, his childhood so far eviscerated. Yet he had gained incomparable survival insights. He'd conversed with spiders, learning the lessons of endurance from them, learning to depend on his own mind, to ignore open wounds and not to scratch the scarred-over ones. Hadassim taught him to let the scars go.

Avinoam Kaplan was his first instructor. The first time Kaplan met with the eight children he showed them a bunch of small animals, pulling them out of his pockets one by one, including spiders. "These are my best friends," Ephraim yelled out, and Kaplan chuckled because he thought the boy was making some kind of a joke. Kaplan would later tell us that he loved Ephraim as a son, and this is also one of Hadassim's miracles: teachers were to their students as parents.

While we were serving in a paratrooper unit together, I once asked Ephraim how he survived the Holocaust.

“That’s a long story,” he answered.

“Well, I have time.”

“Then use it for more constructive things.”

“Like what, for instance?”

“To make plans for your vacation.”

While we were growing up together, Ephraim thought it better not to tell his story, that there were more “productive” things to be getting on with. Now, at the age of 68, his edge softened a bit, he was more willing to explore his earliest trials. I was so grateful that I wanted to hug him, but I was afraid that even that would cut the conversation off very quickly.

Who would have believed that this Holocaust orphan could serve in one of the finest battalions, that he could spill blood with his brothers in ‘67 and ‘73, that he would go on to take a bachelor’s in chemistry and biology and master’s in botany (in Kaplan’s footsteps), that he would then study computer science and attain a senior position within the sophisticated Israeli aviation industry? It was men like Ephraim, born of the Holocaust but bred in Hadassim, that allowed the Israeli state to endure the multiple threats against her.

After our first interview with him, we called him to go over certain details regarding his childhood survival. “How are you doing?” We asked.

“Couldn’t be better!”

Was he exaggerating? Was it possible he was merely hiding behind psychological fortifications? To our eyes, Ephraim had always embodied the “nice Israeli” archetype. We asked him how Hadassim had helped him, how he made the transition to the “normal” Israeli persona.

“We came into an atmosphere where the past was dead, where we were now reborn in our true homeland. Almost nothing was said in Hadassim about the “thing” that happened. During the Holocaust, everything was forbidden (except some very limited things) but in Hadassim everything was permitted (except that which was forbidden). So almost overnight we found ourselves in unadulterated freedom, something that even normal children rarely experience. That freedom neutralized the otherwise inevitable compulsions and fears -- of the unknown, of trying new things – that children of our backgrounds would have. Unfortunately not many other survivors were so lucky. The nurturing and encouragement we received at the get-go from our first counselor, Malka Kashtan, helped us a great deal.”

It is astounding, and telling of Hadassim’s magic, that a Tel-Avivian bourgeoisie accustomed to thrice-weekly hair-treatments from her mother became a mother in her own right to these eight Polish children. Her care taught them that it was possible to bond with fellow human beings, something they’d never learned in all their constant dislocations before and after the war. Malka also looked after us, the native Israelis, for a whole year, and was able to give many of those with troubled family backgrounds – Gideon Ariel, Asher Barnea, Shula Druker, Esther Korkidi and others – the same level of care and psychological security. The dialogic educational concept was given a personal dimension through her. Sadly, at the age of eighty-four, her daily routine is now sealed inside her house; having survived her husband and even her two daughters, she only waits for her own death. We sense, with heavy hearts, that her kindnesses have gone unrewarded.

Ephraim was born in 1938, in the city of Bielsko-Biala in West Galicia – the birth-place of Arthur Schnabel, the same Jewish pianist whose performance of the “Phoenix” Beethoven sonata so enraptured us on that magical Tikun Leil Shavuot night. Dr. Michael Berkowitz, an assistant of Theodor Herzl and the Hebrew translator of his book *Der Judenstaat* (“The Jewish State”), was a high-school religion instructor in Bielsko-Biala in the years 1911-1934. He was one of the main transmitters for the Herzl Effect on Judaism<sup>2</sup>, and his influence in the city is crucial to understanding the story of Ephraim Shtinkler-Gat.

The city of Bielsko-Biala was a fusion of two elements divided by the Biala River. Jews had settled there from the 17th century; their population had exceeded 4000 by WWII, and Zionism had flourished there since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Besides Arthur Schnabel, other well-known Jews native to the city included Zelma Kurtz, one of the more renowned European Divas tutored under Gustav Mahler’s baton in the Vienna State Opera; Herman Freishler, director of the Vienna Volksoper; and Jan Smeterlin, another accomplished pianist and Chopin interpreter. Thus, before the war Bielsko-Biala was a city of great culture, its high cosmopolitan threshold touching on the life of Jews

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<sup>2</sup> Like the Normandy Effect

and Poles equally, rich and poor. The baby Ephraim breathed it all in despite his modest roots (his father was a blacksmith) and working-class heritage – a heritage that proved potent indeed when it came time for him to survive in that wretched closet.

The Germans conquered the region encompassing Bielsko-Biala on the third day of the war, and two weeks later they had already burned the synagogues and looted the Jewish shops.<sup>3</sup>



**Yaakov and Sara Shtinkler**

Ephraim was the only child of Yaakov and Sara. He has only one genuine memory of the town: his father walking along with him as he showed him how to ride a bike. In 1941, his family moved to Zawiercie to live with his grandfather. Ephraim remembers the train-ride – the depressed passengers, their terror-stricken eyes longing to be both invisible and blind.

The Shtinklers resided in the Jewish quarter of Zawiercie. In 1942 the Jewish quarter was converted into a ghetto, a kind of prelude to extermination, whose inhabitants needed permission to exit. Luckily Yaakov, a resourceful and self-sufficient man who by now owned his own smithy in the Polish worker's quarter, had such permission. He'd also befriended the Novak's, a family that lived above his workshop, and did many of their house repairs for free. He told them all about his sharp-witted and lively young son.

Ephraim's father dedicated all his energy to save him. The Novak's had fallen in love with the boy before they even met him. Ephraim would soon learn that life and death can hinge on the power of the tongue at these moments.

Ephraim told us his first memory of the Ghetto:

“My father and I were directed to one group, my mother to another, with a road separating the two. My mother was chosen for the group that was to be exterminated. But she found the strength to approach one of the officers and ask to be allowed to join us and live, and he agreed, though it was probably a one in a million chance that he did.

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<sup>3</sup> Sources: Beit Hatfutzot, Community system and family names.

Mother got an extension on her life, while the others were sent away to be swallowed up by the earth. Not everything in life is black or white; there are hues of grey and dark brown, and in hell the grey stands for light and brown can mean salvation.”

His second memory:



**Yaakov Shtinkler**

“We lived on the ground floor in the Ghetto. I remember lying on the bed, surrounded by chairs to prevent me from falling or bother my mom while she was doing house cleaning. I heard her washing the floors and singing in Polish, ‘All the fish are sleeping in the lake, though you are still awake...’ To this day I hum that song, always picturing her luminous face. As she kept cleaning I imagined to myself that she was a queen and that we would soon fly off back to King Boris’ palace.”

“Why didn’t your parents try to rebel?” We asked.

“I can’t really answer for my parents, but the kids were mesmerized by the soldiers’ obvious power, their imposing and always neatly-ironed uniforms, their organization and efficiency. They commanded, and everyone obeyed instinctively.”

“So the German were allowed to murder and people did nothing? How could you let that happen?”

“All of us, the ‘good’ kids, we all believed that if we could do what was demanded of us they would keep us alive. We felt guilty, like we had all done something wrong; we never thought of hurling stones at them the way the Palestinians do today – we lacked that sense of justice, the kind that motivates you for action. Guilt only allows for resignation. We felt guilty, so we were powerless – and they were strong.”

I’ve always asked myself: Who is to blame for the inherent weakness that allowed for the Jews to be eaten alive? What could bring on a sense of guilt that would let the Nazis destroy with impunity? And the answer: Jewish leaders, ever busy poring over the Torah and raising capital, had deserted their communities and come to Israel to build and be built up into a nation-state. In that dire moment of history, European Jewry needed the right leadership to fight guiltlessly and ferociously. Thus, what was tantamount to mass suicide was both the price of Judaism and of Zionism. The occupation zones were unlikely sources of rebellion in any case, given the general anti-Semitism of the native

residents, who were at the very least going to be unwitting participants in the slaughter. They would neither assist any uprising nor lift a finger to deter the Germans from brutal retaliation, nor admit too many Jews into their partisan (resistance) fold in the surrounding forests.

On the other hand, there were many individual acts of rebellion, many of them life-saving. Ephraim's life was preserved by such a rebellion, by his father's. Shevach Weiss, Metuka and Alex Orlander, Eliza Bar-Shwartzwald and Moshe Fromin were all promised a new life in Israel by such rebellions.

In August 1943, there were six thousand Jews in the Zawiercie Ghetto. The Germans eventually sent everyone they could get their hands on to Auschwitz, among them Rabbi Shlomo Rabinovitch, the last great rabbi of the town. Rumors of the liquidation began to spread the day before, specifically that the Germans were going to be killing a certain number of the children.

Yaakov acted quickly to save his son. His own, quiet rebellion called for him to enlist his new Polish friends. Franchise Novak agreed to send his two daughters Rosalia and Wislava out to the Ghetto's border at a pre-arranged time, where they would pretend



**Franchise Novak**

to busy themselves in games and wait for Ephraim. Once they recognized him, in his prearranged clothes, it was simply a matter of letting him into the game as casually as possible. Then they slowly moved back toward the workshop, careful not to alert any of the policemen – just two little girls and an even younger boy, strolling and giggling innocently together. It was a simple plan, and it worked brilliantly.

While the girls climbed back up to their apartment, Ephraim locked himself inside the smithy, where the darkness was complete. He sat on a lathe and softly hummed his mother's song about the little fish sleeping in the lake, thinking of his parents as knight and queen. The Novak felt so much pity for the five year old, immersed in machinery and dust, that they risked their own lives sneaking him up the serpentine stairway up to their apartment. "There are Christians who want the Jews to suffer for the murder of Jesus, and then there are those who wish them salvation. The Novak's belonged to the second group," Ephraim told us.

The day after, when Yaakov confirmed that his son was alright, he decided to find somewhere even safer for him and asked the Novak's to keep him for another 24 hours. Unfortunately, Yaakov didn't know at that point that he didn't have 24 hours: the Germans chose the same day for their "liquidation," and Yaakov and Sara Shtinkler were

both sent to Auschwitz. Only eight Jews remained in the Zawiercie Ghetto, two of them children. Ephraim was one of them.

[Ephraim]:

The entrance to the Novak's house was through the kitchen, which led to the sparsest living room. The only bathrooms were in the courtyard, and since there weren't any showers everyone was obliged to wash themselves in a large bucket. The living room had enough room for one bed (and a closet), for the parents, Franchisek and Genovepa, and two of the girls, while Genovepa's mother and her dwarf sister slept in the kitchen. So besides me, kindly relegated to the eighty centimeters in the closet, there were six people altogether. I knew very well that the Germans would kill me in an instant, that I had to keep quiet even to the point of repressing the dimmest sneeze or cough, that the neighbors who strolled in day and night could just as easily turn everyone over to the authorities. That sustained condition dictated the next two years for me and my tiny capsule, disconnected from day and night. Still, I began to experience something akin to meditation, without either boredom or anxiety; I stopped asking when all of this would end, when evening or the next meal would come.

Regardless, I was very attentive to all the goings-on in the apartment. I tensed up whenever I heard a strange voice, or whenever a neighbor came by, and I kept as silent as mouse. None of that had to be explained to me. I was only allowed to relieve myself at night, when I would be rushed out of the closet to get cleaned up and then pushed back inside just as quickly. On one occasion, they'd taken me out to treat me for lice, when there was a sudden knock on the door that sent me back into the closet trembling and naked. Wislava threw herself into the bucket in my place, tearing her clothes off just in time for the neighbor to stroll in complaining about being made to wait in the hallway.

As far as I was concerned, this situation could have gone on forever.

Franchisek took seriously ill after a short while, and no amount of cupping his chest with hot glasses could help him without any other available level of care. He lay dying on the bed surrounded by candlelight for four days, and I kept breathlessly still in my little closet space as all manner of friends and neighbors came in to say their goodbyes. Without a breadwinner, it was left to Rosalia and Wislava to support the family, including me. So everyday they marched to the nearby village, where they could get milk and eggs for cheap and then sell them back for a profit in town. As young as they were, they still kept quiet about me – even with their closest friends.

Two months before the Russian occupation, the Nazis appropriated the living room for two of its officers, and the family was moved into the kitchen, where I soon joined them -- covered by the sliver of cloth that hung around the dinner table. I sat there day and night on a low bench, where I could gaze at the officers' feet as they took their meals.



**The closet**

As Russian soldiers replaced Germans, Ephraim was finally allowed out of the closet. He was every bit as illiterate as the mythical boys raised by Roman wolves, yet he still had the gleam in his eye of his native city's culture, one that remained with him always. Genovepa, now a widow,

smuggled him to her sister-in-law's in a nearby town for

two weeks. The Novak's were afraid they had taken too great a risk even with their neighbors' lives, though Ephraim was now well-versed in the proper Christian prayers and rituals and could probably pass for a common Polish boy.

He was now seven years old. After another several months, Genovepa met another Jewish survivor, a factory owner, and told him about the boy she had hidden for two years. When he came to visit, the man suggested that they send Ephraim to a Jewish orphanage, and the boy was soon traveling the escape routes, stopping in one of the refugee camps (where he briefly met Shevach Weiss) on the way to the children's camp in Furten, Germany. There, one of the instructors, Masha Zarivetch, promised him that he would soon "reach Eretz Israel and be reborn in a new paradise."

Masha and Eizik Zarivetch eventually came to live in Hadassim. On our first Holocaust Memorial Day, Eizik told us all about life at the Furten camp, and one of the other sabras (native Israelis) remarked, "So the Holocaust wasn't so bad, then." To which Eizik replied, "Furten was heaven compared to what this boy had to endure," nodding toward Ephraim. He turned to him and asked if he might tell his story. Ephraim looked up at him and went deathly silent.

### C. Kneeling at Mary's Feet

Elisa Shwartzwald-Bar was one of the orphans to arrive with the first eight children to Hadassim. She was born in 1938 in Lvov, the capital of Galicia,<sup>4</sup> known as a “Paragon of Beauty” in Jewish parlance. Jews had been in Lvov since the 13<sup>th</sup> century; there were 150,000 of them there – a full third of the city’s population – up until the Holocaust. When the war erupted, the Soviet Union annexed the city to the Soviet Republic of Ukraine and took freely of its possessions, while the Germans would end up taking the rest when they came in July of 1941.



**Elisa Shwartzwald-Bar**

Elisa was the single daughter of a wealthy and established merchant family; she was two years old when the Germans occupied the city. As she recounts her first memory of it, “the Germans burst into the house and tore all the pictures out of their frames, tossing everything into chaotic piles and marking a bold X on every item worth looting.” The family was thrown into the Ghetto in November, 1941, and from that day her father, Randolph, did everything he could to save her. For anyone who would doubt that a two year old girl could remember these things, we answer that no one was left to recount them to her: her parents and remaining close family were exterminated to the last man.

Elisa would go on to spend twelve years in Hadassim. “Hadassim’s strength owed itself to people’s immense energies, far more than the usual, in every field.” As she put it to us, remembering back fifty years, “They invested everything they had in us – they didn’t hold back, they were absolutely reckless about it – and asked nothing in return. They poured all their strength into us. Life in a boarding school can be like that, it can serve as a social laboratory for collective action. The combination of that commitment with that environment had an indelible effect on us.”



**Elisa Shwartzwald-Bar**

After graduating from a teachers’ seminary in Hadassim, Elisa went on to do a bachelors in Bible Studies and Literature and then a master’s in education at the Hebrew University. Today she works at the Council for the Sheltered Child in Israel, helping to rehabilitate some 550 children of broken homes, ages K-3, 92% of whom passed exams in reading and math with better scores than the current 8<sup>th</sup> grade national averages. “The

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<sup>4</sup> Current capital of Eastern Ukraine

only relative I have left, a very distant one, used to tell me I'd end up as a seamstress. But for Hadassim, he could easily have been proven right.”

Elisa remembers:

“Part of our family was smuggled out of the Ghetto to live with a Polish family. They'd received a handsome sum from my father in exchange for housing us, but the neighborhood Ukrainians, even more than the Germans, were always spying after families that sheltered Jews, were always suspicious that someone buying extra groceries could be a Jew-lover. So eventually the Poles threw us out, and we scattered about the town at night, my aunt Berta and I, knocking on doors and looking for shelter. For a while no one would let us in, and with fear ruling the streets, my aunt, in an act of desperation, left me behind in one of the back rooms of the house we'd been thrown out of. Fortunately, our Polish hosts discovered me in the morning and decided to keep me anyway. They were too devout to get rid of me. Father would send them more money from time to time, and eventually they saw that they could keep me openly – I was blond, had blue eyes and spoke Polish well enough, so it was easy for them to pretend I was their granddaughter.”

“Father made a few rare, nightly visits, always bringing more money and occasionally leaving me brief notes. One of them read: ‘Remember that your name is Elisa Shwartzwald, a Jew. Tell no one, but always remember.’ We lost contact toward the end of the war, and I assume he was probably caught and murdered.

“During that period of shelter, I learned all the Christian practices and accompanied my hosts to church. They even gave me their surname, though I can't remember it today. The only friends I had were the few mice who would eagerly await my daily portion of yellow bread. I used to hide the leftovers underneath the sofa in the bedroom, then lie in the dark and listen to them twitter about underneath as they ate it up. I can hardly remember it ever being cold, really – I remember only the bountiful summer gardens, the wonderful pea pods and poppies. The Germans came to the house from time to time, but never suspected I could be a Jew. I was still very afraid, of the planes and bombs, of the secret I had to carry with me that I hardly even understood.”

Only eight thousand remained of the original 150,000 Jews of Lvov after the German occupation. The rest were dispensed with in the Janovsky and Belzec death camps<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Belzec was one of the three extermination camps that were part of the framework for the Reinhardt Operation (together with Treblinka and Sobibor), where at least half a million of Jews were murdered.

When the occupation had ended, Elisa's caretakers kept expecting someone to come for her, but they waited in vain. Despite everything, they'd never really bonded with her; it was clear they had tended to her from religious and material motives. Now they were desperate to escape west, away from the Soviet occupied zones, so they sent Elisa to the Jewish community center where most of the effort to reunite families was concentrated.

So there she was, a six year old girl sitting alone, listening to reams of Yiddish gibberish passing wildly from one pathetic face to another, waiting politely for someone in the crowd to recognize her. Finally, a woman came to her and asked, "Can you give me any names of relatives? Any name you can think of." Elisa gave her one name that was familiar, 'Mandel,' and the lady sent a note on her behalf to the family listed under that name. Elisa's Polish caretaker took her to their address in the city, and as luck would have it they identified her immediately. That was the last Elisa saw of her Polish hosts.

The Mandels were distant relatives, and they gladly adopted her. Curiously, she continued to attend church in secret. When they asked where she was spending that time, she told them she'd gone out to play. They had their own suspicions after a while, though, and one day when she gave the same alibi they laughed and said, "Nah, you were seen in church, kneeling at Mary's feet and praying to the icons! Don't you know you're Jewish? You don't have to go there anymore."

Soon enough, the Mandels were off wandering through Poland themselves to escape from the Soviets. They finally stopped at Lignitz, where Elisa met Metuka.

Sixty years later, the little blond Jewish girl who knelt at Mary's feet in a Polish church is a senior officer of Israel's educational system -- another Hadassim miracle.

#### **D. "It is God's Hand"**

Alex Orlander was born in 1935, near Lvov in the town of Zolkiew<sup>6</sup> in Eastern Galicia. His sister, Metuka, was born four and half years later. Their mother, Rachel, came from one of the richest families in the area, the Reitzfeld's, who owned a nearby oil and barley factory. Their father, Hirsh Leib, orphaned at a tender age, was a successful fur manufacturer – and Zolkiew was the center for Poland's fur industry, center of fur manufacturing for the whole world. Hirsh's aunt had adopted him and he had learned the fur business from his cousin.

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<sup>6</sup> Currently Nesterov

The big guns of the industry were all mostly Jews, in fact. Prior to the war, many of them had taken their commerce to Paris, London and Brussels, quickly flourishing there and maintaining their network throughout Europe. But Zolkiew remained the nexus of activity in this line; its furs could be found in the most elegant shops in every capital of the world. Metuka would certainly have enjoyed this facet of life herself – and Alex would certainly have risen up in the business – were it not for the war.



**Alex Orlander and his sister, Metuka**

Zolkiew was originally built as a fortress in the sixteenth century. There were Jews there from the beginning, and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Jewish community had built its central synagogue there with contributions from rich Spanish Jews. True to the city's origin, the synagogue was actually planned as a citadel for Jews in times of invasion or war – a prescient notion, no doubt, but one that fell short of the right conclusion: a national homeland in Israel. A “Soldier's home” based on a model of the Zolkiew synagogue was built in Beer Sheva by David Tuvyahu, a former resident of the Polish city, to keep the tradition alive.

The composer of the Israeli national anthem, Naphtali Herz Imber, was born in Zolkiew in 1856. The famous Yiddish poet Moshe Leib Halpern was born there thirty years later. Zolkiew saw the birth of the Jewish-American poet, playwright and chemistry Nobel laureate for 1981, Ronald Hoffmann in 1937. The city was home to 5000 Jews at the outset of the war. Nobody then believed – certainly not the Reitzfelds or the Orlanders – that there was a safer or more pleasant place to live. Nevertheless, the city was full of Zionist activity; Alex and his uncle Manek (Rachel's brother) both tried incessantly to persuade their rich grandfather of buying land in Eretz Israel and directing some of his assets there. A conservative businessman par excellence, he rejected the idea with a charitable smile. Sometimes it is the naïve, not the canny, who are in the right.

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The Orlanders lived comfortably in the countryside. Their estate at the city's periphery was ensconced in orchards and gardens. It was the ideal life that Rachel and Hirsh Leib had wished for their children, one that Alex nostalgically pines for seventy years later – the explosion of happy summers, the excitement of picking fruit off neighbors' trees. He was rather hyperactive as a child in Zolkiew, but the overspill of energy became initiative as he became a man in Hadassim and an officer in the IDF.

After the army he became a businessman, and he has remained a successful one – affirming the tenacity of his grandfather’s genes.

The Reitzfelds had always lived in prosperity, and Rachel herself was a benevolent and loving hostess and homemaker, always providing a joyful atmosphere. Both she and Hirsh had believed that God would take care of them and theirs. It was an infectious, steady loyalty to happiness, and even after sixty years, in spite of what they endured in the Holocaust, Alex and Metuka, along with their children and grandchildren, are still as optimistic and open-hearted, and just as generous with their guests. We interviewed both of them several times for long hours, and we feel that their story is a microcosm of Hadassim’s success. We felt that their story is Hadassim’s Success story. Both of them have affirmed this last, and encouraged us to make clear that very little would have been left of them without Hadassim.



**Metuka**

Several days into the war, the Orlander’s welcomed several relatives who were escaping from Krakow into their home. Despite the nature of the visit, the atmosphere in the house was stubbornly happy and even light. With the din of war in the background, they actually played cards.

No one saw the writing on the wall; no one even spoke of trying to escape, of finding real shelter from what history had promised all these years. They’d all thought of Uncle Manek, always harping about moving to Israel, as adorably neurotic. Sure, the Soviet border wasn’t far, but the Russians were easily dismissed as philistines, but the implications of the combined German and Ukrainian attacks against the Jews of Zolkiew, in September 1939, seems to have been utterly lost on this family. It should have been clear what was waiting for them if German and Ukrainian anti-Semitism would join forces.

The Germans turned the city over to the Soviets after only five days. “It was then that the population really began to feel the war,” Alex remembers. Members of the communist party, some of them Jews, readily handed the Russians the names of all wealthy citizens; relatives denounced relatives, each hoping to bring about utopia. Everyone of substantial wealth was arrested, and by June of 1940 most of them were exiled in Uzbekistan. These included many members of the Reitzfeld family – the grandfather, the aging pater familias, included.

This prefatory exile seemed catastrophic, of course. But in the end, many of the exiled survived while most of those left behind in the city did not. With the Germans

pressing against the Soviet Union in June 1941, many Jews fled east alongside the Russians. But the Reitzfelds and Orlanders stayed in the city.

On June 28, the Germans occupied Zolkiew, and by the next day they had already burned down its ancient synagogue. The mass abduction of Jews for forced labor began after a month, once they were properly sealed and helpless – and still they didn't realize what was going on, not fully. "It was common to hear that the 'barbarians' who had come in initially and exiled the rich were gone, that our German captors, the 'civilized Germans' had taken their place, and once Romanian allies entered the city some people thought we were saved. They [the Romanians] brought lemons with them, and we even bought lemons from them in exchange for food! Then the Gestapo arrived, and slowly rumors descended that they were going to kill Jews. As it turned out, there were no murders in the city, and people continued their lives, but trains were passing through, transporting Jews to the Belzec camp which wasn't far. Some of them had been able to jump from the trains, and they started telling stories of horrible cruelty and random murder in the outlying villages. My cousin Clara and some of her friends knew first aid, so they treated some of these people. Mother had just then bought a cow for the family, so we'd have more milk for the kids.

"When the Germans began fighting Russia, Father was recruited into a Soviet Polish unit, and we eventually heard that he'd died near Ternopol, eastward toward the Soviet border."

As German actions became frequent in the city, with Jews butchered in plain sight and others sent to the extermination camps, sixteen people from the Patronch, Melman and Reitzfeld families holed up together under the Melman residence. But they refused to have Rachel, Alex and Metuka with them for fear that the two year old Metuka wouldn't hold still and silent and that they would all be exposed. The three of them were therefore forced to leave and move in with Aunt Cohen in the Ghetto at the end of 1941.

Overpopulation in the Ghetto eventually spread plague – typhoid fever – and the rate was atrocious, with one tenth of the population succumbing every day. Cousin Akiva lay dying right before our eyes, and then their mother's condition began to deteriorate as well. Aunt Sara snuck out of the Melmans' hole and came into the Ghetto temporarily to help her. Thankfully, Rachel soon recovered and the three of them moved into the Ghetto center to avoid the epidemic.

Metuka: "On my fourth birthday, April 3, mother went out with uncle Joseph searching for food, so that we would at least have something to eat on my birthday. My eyes followed her from behind the shutters. Most of the Jews had already been murdered at that point, or sent to the camps. Mother probably also intended to go and consult with her family on how to rescue us from this inferno, but along the way suddenly German

cars burst through the streets and started shooting in all directions. It was one of their tricks: baiting with an announcement of food supplies, then switching once the Jews had crawled out from their hiding places. They drew them in and then shot them wholesale. This is what it meant, their ‘Judenrein’ – Jew cleansing. Some were killed right there in the streets, while others, some 3000 of them, were taken to the Borek Forest to be shot to death. The Germans left about sixty of them alive, my mother and uncle among them, to ‘clean’ the streets.

“Two days later, in the evening, mother and Joseph finally tried to come back to our hiding place, but they were captured and executed almost immediately. I didn’t see them hurt, but the sound of the bullets still pierce and echo in my ears to this day. Alex and I were left alone in the attic. He was seven years old, and I four.”

David Maneck was still busy along with fifty or so others in cleaning the Ghetto and carrying out corpses. After two days, he managed to sneak up the attic and tell the two children that “Mama will be back in a few days,” and leave them some food. Several days later, on a Sunday morning, he led them out to the Ghetto gates. He instructed Alex to walk hand in hand with Metuka to his friend Igor Melman’s house, where they would meet Valenti Back<sup>7</sup> and ask for Aunt Sara.

So on they walked on the main road, and as it was indeed Sunday most of the Poles and Ukrainians, who were quite religious, were busy praying inside their churches, allowing for them to cross the city safely back to the Melman house. Metuka remembers every little detail of this trip:

“People in all manner of austere clothes were walking past us in the other direction; various higher-class Poles could be seen riding their carriages. I asked David Maneck, years later, if any of this had really happened or I’d dreamt it all. He told me, ‘No, you weren’t dreaming at all. Your only chance of getting past the Gestapo was that Sunday, when everyone was at church.’”

Valenti recognized Alex and Metuka as soon as he opened the door, and he was genuinely shocked. It was only a year since he’d refused to have Rachel and her children under his house, and her death was now clearly on his conscience. “What are you doing here?” he asked tentatively.

“We know that Aunt Sara is here. Can we see her?”

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<sup>7</sup> As covered in the first chapter, the Germans turned the Melman house over to the Back family during the occupation.

Valenti pulled the children inside quickly, before any of the neighbors could notice, and he repeated his warning to Alex that Metuka would not be allowed to stay – that she couldn't be trusted to stay silent. Alex already seemed to know what he would say. "I'm almost a man now. I'll leave and join the resistance in the forest, so she can take my place. Please – just let her stay in the house."

Valenti was expectedly moved by this. It was an astounding gesture, an unheard of thing for a boy of seven. So he took them both into the attic, handed them toys belonging to the Melman children, and then left them to talk to the family in the burrow.

"Are you willing to have these children?" The families then held a long discussion, culminating in a disgraceful majority vote to the effect that it would be too dangerous to take Alex and Metuka in – that they should be sent away. It was left to a Pole of German ancestry – an unimaginable reversal of fate – to persuade them: "These children found their way here from all the way back in the center of town; no one saw them, no one harmed them. I tell you, it is God's hand in this. Only God could decide to allow them here, it is his command. Therefore, as the owner of the house I veto your decision. They stay." Then he brought Clara and Sara up to the attic, where they washed the two children, cut their hair off and led them back down where they joined the other dwellers. Their number had now grown to eighteen.

It was very soon afterwards that major catastrophe took place: a fire had spread through some twenty houses, and whole blocks were incinerated, including the nearby oil refinery. The Melman's roof started burning, and as more and more smoke seeped into the house the residents began to suffocate. While their lives were in danger inside, their fates were equally vulnerable outside, where neighbors could easily spot them and report them to the Gestapo. Luckily the house had extra underground sanctuary built at the start of the war, and only a wall separated them from this additional space. As the smoke grew denser everyone clawed harder at the wall, looking for a loose opening they could pry through. One of the girls, a fourteen year old girl by the name of Manya, couldn't take the panic, and she decided to leave the house altogether. She ran upstairs and out to the courtyard, where she cried back, "Father, I won't be buried alive – I want to live!" The fire was extinguished shortly thereafter, but for Manya it was too late. She had already run out to the street from the courtyard, where some of her old peers from school identified her. When the Gestapo got wind of it, she was arrested and taken to their headquarters, where she was interrogated and tortured – but she revealed nothing about the location of the burrow or its inhabitants. She died, of course, but her loyalty inspired fierce rebellion in the other prisoners. "These soldiers are nothing but dogs – you can talk, but they'll murder you anyway..."

On July 10, 1942, two months after Alex and Metuka were accepted into the burrow underneath the Melman house, the Germans ended their liquidation of the

Zolkiew labor camp and finished off the remaining forty prisoners in the nearby forest. The hunt continued for the last scattered remains of Zolkiew's Jews, with the last victims executed on the grounds of ancient Jewish cemetery. It was with this ultimate desecration that the Nazis declared the city "Judenrein".

The burrow and its dwellers, however, were still intact. There were four young children there now, including Alex and Metuka. Clara entertained them by drawing comical stick figures on newspapers, which they clipped out and goofed around with. She taught Alex how to read Polish, and eventually began reading all the books the families had brought down with them, along with those that Valenti occasionally smuggled in.

As for Valenti, his incessant drinking became worrisome. He worked at a local police station, so there was ample reason to suspect he could let something slip if he wasn't careful with his Vodka. He even had his colleagues over at the house for weekly card games, in order to buy their trust. Local policemen and Gestapo men played gin and drank to their hearts' content while Alex and Metuka listened silently, inches below their feet. Some of them would occasionally stay the night, and towards the end of the war the authorities even appropriated part of the house for two of its soldiers. One of the latter was in charge of the nearby train station that saw the transport of Jews to the Belzec camp.

One of the things Valenti smuggled into the burrow was a globe, which the children could use to follow the course of the war while listening to BBC broadcasts through their ceiling. "Eretz Isreal was a frequent topic of discussion for us at the time," Metuka remembers. "Many of the adults argued bitterly about what the Jews might have been able to do if they'd only had a state of their own prior to the war."

On July 27, after days of constant bombardment, the Soviets finally entered the city. Some of the bombs and shells had exploded very close to the Melman house. Metuka describes it:

"Shells were blasting heavily outside, and many were dying. I remember thinking how unbelievable it was that we could die now from some random explosion, after having made it this far. The only thing I wanted and looked forward to was a big slice of bread covered in butter and jam; it's all I could picture to myself now.

"Suddenly, there was dead silence. Valenti knocked on the burrow entrance and we let him in. 'The Russian are here. You're free...'

“We were stunned. It just didn’t seem possible, it couldn’t be happening – and we were hesitant to move at first. We waited another half-day to make sure it was really safe enough. The adults could hardly even move, as their muscles had atrophied after all this time. The light outside was piercing white. My eyes went straight to the Katopiski flower – big and yellow, smooth as silk on the inside and shaped like a duck’s beak. I’d hardly remembered that there could be something so beautiful out there in the world.”

Metuka, born and plucked away from her mother in springtime, had only discovered the real wonders of spring at the age of five. And yet, she would go on to live through eleven years of uninterrupted spring in the paradise of Hadassim. There she blossomed like the flower she was destined to become, and took flight as the prima ballerina of the dancing troupe. That was the nature of Hadassim: a school in the mold of a rising Phoenix.

Only five thousand were left of what had originally been seventy-thousand Jews. Ukrainian gangs now took to wandering the streets at night and fell upon the survivors, while Russian soldiers could be seen taking freely and cruelly of defenseless women. It was an expression of the new regime’s hostility, a regime that felt every bit as comfortable dealing in violence. Mass expropriation of homes and possession, along with implacable intolerance toward any criticism, was the order of the day.

Valenti couldn’t hold back his reams of obscenity at the soldiers who had come to strip bare the Melman house. He was immediately arrested and sentenced to death, and he fell to the ground pleading for his life. When his claims to have saved Jews during the war fell on deaf ears, Metuka and Alex came running to help him. The commander’s heart softened at such a display from the children, and Valenti was released. He subsequently took his family west away from Soviet territory.

In 1945, when the whole region was formally annexed to the Soviet Union, Alex and Metuka, along with the rest of the families, found their way to the city of Lignitz in western Poland. There the families rehabilitated an oil factory, and their economic situation improved quickly: Jews had once again proved their tenacity – their unbreakable will to survive. They had an accountant by the name of Moshe Altshuler-Eshel who eventually became treasurer of Hadassim.

Metuka: “We lived in a big apartment, and as more money came in we started eating like crazy. Meanwhile, I kept hearing that mother was still in Russia and kept expecting her to come back. It was really two years later that I realized she would never return to me, and I actually started calling Aunt Sara ‘mother’.

“Our building was solely occupied by Jews, and as I was the youngest I had no one to play with. One day Elisa Bar and her relatives moved in. She was as thin as a matchstick, with little blue eyes. She looked pallid green with malnutrition.

But it was great to have her with me, and we bonded immediately. We ended up taking the escape routes through Europe together on the way to Eretz Israel, where we grew up together in Hadassim.”

## E. Wandering Through Uzbekistan

Moshe Frumin was born in 1940 in the city of Rovna, a northwestern Ukrainian city formerly of the Polish region of Wohlin. At the beginning of WWII, the city’s population numbered about 57,000, half of them Jews.



**Moshe Frumin**

Moshe was one of our classmates. He was the only son of Israel and Yehudit. His mother was the head counselor for the village, and his Aunt Shoshanna was the counselor in our unit in the ninth grade. As our experiences in the village were often shared, Moshe and I grew very close.

Israel Frumin was one of the founders of the Gordonia<sup>8</sup> youth movement and its leader in Poland. He made his living as a tax broker, but most of his time was spent in Zionist-pioneering activity. He’d been born into a very rich family of porcelain factory owners in the town of Kurtz; his grandfather was in the custom of sending every new model of the porcelain series to his daughter (Moshe’s aunt) in Israel, where she had immigrated as an early pioneer and settled in Rishon Le-Zion. Such was the family tradition.

The Frumin’s lived in a comfortable, two-story house. Throughout the years, they hosted several meetings of international Zionist leaders including Moshe Sharet, head of the political wing of the Jewish Agency (later the Israeli foreign and then prime minister) and Pinchas Lavon (head of Gordonia and subsequently a defense minister). Emissaries from Israel were frequent guests at their house. Prior to their marriage, Israel and Yehudit spent four years with a Godronia unit that was later destined to join the Kibbutz Mishmar Hasharon. In 1936, the leadership of Gordonia had arranged for their immigration and told them they were free to marry, but the visas never reached them – at the time, they were simply delayed because no replacement to head the Gordonia unit could be found. In the meantime, Moshe was born.

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<sup>8</sup> Gordonia was a Zionist pioneering youth movement named after Aaron David Gordon, a philosopher of Labor Zionism, who idealized physical labor

Several days after WWII erupted the city of Rovna was conquered by the Soviet Union. The German onslaught added thousands of refugees to the population, and as of June 1941 there were 30,000 Jews in the city. The Soviet authorities dismantled all Jewish institutions, including both schools and Zionist parties. Zionism moved underground at that point, and Israel Frumin was naturally one of its main activists.

After Germany declared war on the Soviets, Israel hired a coachman to drive his whole family east to Uzbekistan, where they would end up traveling from village to village for three years.



**Yehudit. the head counselor for the village,**

Moshe: “I was three years old. My father had taken ill, and I remember watching him on the carriage, waving goodbye. I never saw him after that, and nobody ever mentioned him again or told me what happened. My grandfather also died then. When my uncle abandoned us, the coachman ran away with our possessions.

“So my mother, grandmother, aunt and I were on our own. We went from one village to another, from door to door. Sometimes we were turned away, and sometimes we were shown extraordinary kindness – a glass of milk, a warm bath. The better portion of time was spent fighting off the unbearable hunger.”

In 1943 they reached the Moyen Kolkhoz in Uzbekistan, close to Kuvasai. The three women went out cotton picking, returning with bloodied hands. “They left me with Frieda, my grandmother. We were famished, of course. I remember actually crying out in hunger, and mother said, ‘When we come back you’ll have bread to eat, and you’ll eat as much as you want.’ But I went to sleep hungry that night, too.

“The Uzbeks, being Moslems, have dietary restrictions similar to those of Jews. One day I noticed a cow choking to death (rendering it untouchable by a Muslim) out in the field, and then I immediately heard our neighbor yelling at all thirteen of her kids, “Away! Get away from it, you dogs!” I was only three years old, but somehow I grasped what was going on and I immediately took my grandmother by the hand and led her toward the field, where we cut as much meat from the cow as we could carry back with us. Then we buried all the pieces under the clay floor, which functioned as our refrigerator, and this was enough to keep us alive for a while.

“The situation improved a great deal when mother found a real job, as a research assistant for an anti-communist agriculturalist exiled in Uzbekistan. There, on his orchards, I could have as much fruit as I desired.

“We returned to Poland when the war ended, and from there we took the escape routes all the way down to Eretz Israel.”

## F. The Escape

In 1944, after the Ukraine was liberated by the Red Army, Jewish ex-resistance fighters formed a survivor center in Rovna for young Zionists who wanted to settle in Israel. These were joined by non-Zionists who were now shaken enough to view immigration as mandatory – living on what now amounted to an immense Jewish graveyard was no longer tenable. The kind of Soviet barbarity that drove their activities underground effectively ruled out any normal life for them in Eastern Europe. When they learned that Israeli agents were readying ships in Romania for mass immigration, the underground Zionists of Rovna moved quickly to join those efforts. The “Escape Movement” had begun.



**Abba Kovner**

Similar developments took place in the Lithuanian capital of Vilna, without any connection to the Rovna group. Led by Abba Kovner, Jewish partisan fighters left their forest dwellings and joined with members of the Ghetto resistance, and together they determined to gather as many survivors and escape to Israel. News of the Romanian efforts reached them soon enough, and they, too decided to head for the Black sea and sail to the Promised Land. Leaders of the Rovna and Vilna groups knew nothing of one another until they met in Romania. Unluckily, the KGB was ready for them there, and many were eventually tried on charges of Zionism and the smuggling of Jews. The “Escape” of Vilna and Rovna was blocked off.

Poland was liberated later that year. Many Jews who’d fled at the start of the war and found themselves under Soviet rule – like the families of Alex, Metuka and Elisa -- now returned to Poland. But it was Israel they wanted now, above all.

Most were concentrated in Lublin and Cracow. They began heading for Romania – by foot, by train or by car, almost all of them with false papers – as quickly as the war allowed. (When the war was over, many were able to travel and escape through Italy, Austria and Germany.) Illegal checkpoints were propping up faster than you could count them on Poland’s, Romanian and Czech borders.

All the while, none of these movements were coordinated either with the broad spectrum of European Zionist groups or the ongoing rescue efforts from the Zionist Organization in Israel.

The first organized framework for an overarching “escape” movement started with Abba Kovner – a partisan fighter, poet and member of the left-wing Hashomer Hatzair youth movement. On April 26, he inaugurated the Organization of Eastern European Jewish Survivors, but it was dismantled through Ben-Gurion’s influence. The wily politician was worried that his position would deteriorate without having control over such an organization. More importantly, however, Ben-Gurion intended to use the European refugee problem to his advantage, to bring about an Israeli state by exploiting world pity for ailing European Jews. It was a political move that required dislocated Eastern European Jews to remain dislocated, if only for the time being.

Once mass immigration efforts fell short in Romania, the wave quickly turned westward toward Italy, where units of the Jewish Brigade of the British Army were already stationed. The soldiers there established a central organization for the incoming refugees, led by a coalition of various Zionist parties. By August 1945, 15,000 Jews had arrived in Italy. But immigration into Israel was still technically illegal and strongly curtailed, and a practical decision was made to direct the flow of refugees back into Germany.

After the war, what had previously been a more or less spontaneous “escape” movement was consolidated into one enormous and brazenly illegal organization, whose bold aim would now be to move as many Eastern European Jews westward and thence to Israel. The new organization was spearheaded by Shaul Avigur. The first Israeli emissaries arrived in Europe in September 1945, helping to direct refugees through several points in the Polish-Slovakian Mountains and through higher Silesia to the Nachod district in Bohemia, or through Stettin to Berlin. Those escaping through Czechoslovakia had to move through Prague into Bavaria, or else through Bratislava to Vienna and thence to Salzburg. Though the Soviets had tightened their grip on Eastern Europe, they usually let these movements proceed apace, sometimes even abetting them. In other cases, however, they arrested refugees and hunted their organizers, condemning them to years of torture and even death in the Gulag archipelago. So it might have been capricious, but the standard Soviet attitude was: see no evil, hear no evil.

The British response to these developments, of course, was decidedly hostile. Nevertheless, American forces eventually facilitated such rescue efforts. Whether it was out of concern for public opinion, or whether it was the fact that American soldiers weren’t going to fire at helpless refugees, the result was the same.

The Jewish Brigade joined in this endeavor. Prominent among them was one Moshe Zeiri, who directed an orphanage in Slavino, Italy. He subsequently became a cultural coordinator at Hadassim. Many Holocaust survivors led the effort as well, including one of our future teachers, Zeev Alon, as well as Masha and Eizik Zarivetch and Yizhak Lerner -- all three destined to work at Hadassim.

In 1945, Jews in Poland began to flee in panicked waves when the blood libel reared its ugly head throughout the countryside, stirring random murders of Jewish refugees. Ten thousand Jewish Poles now penetrated en masse into Germany, including those who had originally had every intention of resettling in their native cities. These pogroms were more than enough to clarify, for those who needed it, that anti-Semitism would not end with the fall of Nazi Germany<sup>9</sup>.

### G. The Children's Journey in Europe



**The Children's Journey in Europe**

Israeli emissaries of the "Escape" Organization arrived in Poland in 1946. There, Holocaust survivors were made to understand that British prohibitions on settlement in Palestine made exceptions for children -- especially orphans. The emissaries proposed to take as many children as possible with them to Israel, where they would be brought up in the finest educational establishments in the country. Relatives were promised that these children, who had miraculously survived the Holocaust, would arrive safe and sound in Israel within two weeks. That was the beginning of the Israeli journeys of Shevach, Metuka, Alex, Elisa and Ephraim.

But these promises turned out to be unfounded, and may even have been a conscious deception. Who authorized them? Was it actual policy, or was it nothing more than an improvisation on the part of a sabra who assumed it would somehow "work out" in the end, come what may?

Documents exposed in recent years show that the World Zionist Organization resisted any immigration initiatives outside of its designated purview.<sup>10</sup> Its formal policy

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<sup>9</sup> Source: The Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial institute website – center for information about the Holocaust.

<sup>10</sup> "...The [Zionist] Organization resisted in those days every form of illegal immigration because it did not want to lose control of the immigration to Eretz Israel. The socialist Zionist parties maintained that pioneers who will join agricultural work in

was one of “selection” – the selection and salvation of people it specifically determined as fit and skilled to serve a Jewish State. That meant the explicit abandonment of those it deemed “unfit”. “Such selection is directed toward those young European men and women who are trained for productive ends. ...It would be giving the most dangerous ammunition to Zion’s enemies to conspire in flooding Eretz Israel with the elderly or undesirable...”<sup>11</sup>

With the extermination of Jews at its peak – and there were those in Eretz Israel who knew the full extent of it – with only a decimal of Warsaw’s Jews still alive after the second liquidation of the Ghetto, Dr. Yitzhak Grinboym (leader of the Polish Zionist movement between the wars and subsequently chief minister of internal affairs in Israel) was faced with a dilemma: Jewish lives or Jewish settlement. He opted for settlement. He opted not to save lives.



### **The Children’s Journey in Europe**

The following is the relevant protocol of the World Zionist Organization’s directorate:

Yizhak Grinboym: “When I was asked [whether money should be requested] from Keren Hayesod<sup>12</sup> [to finance] the rescue of Diaspora Jews, I said no. And I’ll say no again! I’ve been disputing exactly this point for months now, with someone who knows what he’s talking about! His name is Rabbi Itche Meir Levine, and he always tells me the following: go and ask Keren Haysod’s for money... ‘Couldn’t you suspend the work on Eretz Israel at a time like this, when Jews are being massacred in the hundreds of thousands, in the millions? Spend the money on them – no new settlements!...’ No, on the contrary, it must be said here today that Zionism stands above everything else.”

Sofisky: “But surely even from a Zionist point of view we are obliged to steer part of the budget toward any possible rescue efforts...”

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collective frameworks must be brought to the country and the immigration of urban merchant Jews must be avoided. Yitzhak Grinboym, the World Zionist Organization appointee for immigration issues declared in a closed session held in Warsaw that he will fight by all means the illegal tourism” – Yehuda Lapidot, *The Illegal Immigration, The Birth of an Underground*, Jerusalem, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> From a letter about the rescue policy of the official institutions, February the 1<sup>st</sup> 1940 – Ben Hecht, *Denial*, Tel Aviv: 1970, pg 291, in *Daat* -Humanistic and Jewish studies center, Hungarian Jewry’s Holocaust website.

<sup>12</sup> Keren Hayesod is the central funding organization for Israel.

Yosef Sprinzak [subsequently the first speaker of the Knesset]: “My handiwork is drowning in the sea<sup>13</sup> and here you talk to me about a Zionist program?”

Grinboym: “They’ll call me an anti-Semite, [they’ll say] I don’t want to save the Diaspora...But I will never demand that from the organization’s budget, I won’t demand it from what precious little we have. No, I won’t ask for a sum of 300,000 [to save the European Jews]. I will never demand that. And I think whoever demands it is committing an anti-Zionist act<sup>14</sup>.”



**Yizhak Grinboym**

Eretz Israel?!”<sup>15</sup>

Some of the emissaries to the “escape” operation sent by the Zionist Organization were unimpressed with the caliber of refugees they encountered, so they acted to prevent or at least delay their immigration. When they returned from their duties in Poland early in 1946, some of them met with Ben-Gurion and told him outright that it would be a disaster if all these survivors were allowed to immigrate. “To have all this filth already roaming the earth is bad enough...but you’ll have them here, in



**Yosef Sprinzak**

.....ice to God’s reprimand of the angels who sang while the Egyptians were drowning, according to a Jewish narrative of the biblical story of exodus.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million*, pg. 89, in Daat’s website, Ghetto Warsaw website, *Historic aspects of the Holocaust: Epilogue:” What is more preferable, saving or settlement?”*

<sup>15</sup> Edit Zartal, *The Jews’ Gold* Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1996 pg 418-419.

<sup>16</sup> Zartal, pg 419

This kind of sentiment toward Holocaust survivors actually resonated widely with the Zionist elite in Israel. To quote David Shlatiel, a Hagana commander and a relative of Ben-Gurion: “That somebody was in a [concentration] camp can’t be reason enough to have him in Eretz Israel. Those who survived did so because they were egoistic and cared primarily for themselves.”<sup>16</sup> Shlatiel warned against these “egoistic” people who would endanger the project of settlement.

The “escape” activists who drew a quarter-million refugees into Western Europe put the Allied command in an impossible situation. Had Britain opened Israel’s gates to a hundred-thousand

of these refugees, they might well have placated Jewish demands without necessarily risking Arab revolt. Israel's Arabs were frightened and rather off balance when the Germans lost. As it turned out, however, an inflexible British policy combined with American sympathy for the Zionist cause spurred the rise of Jewish sovereignty in Israel. In that context, the children of the "escape" operation and the myriad camps of uprooted and suffering Jews all served as powerful ammunition in Ben-Gurion's hands.

Metuka, Alex and Elisa were supposed to take several days to arrive in Israel. In the end, their journey lasted about two years. At the same time, on the very same roads, the Weiss and Frumin families -- together with a quarter-million Jews -- were poring into European escape routes. These children, these hundreds of thousands of human flesh and misery, would serve as the diplomatic ammunition which Ben-Gurion would wield in creating a Jewish state.

Alex: "My uncle, my adopted father, spent a great deal of money for our official immigration. It turned out that the emissary's commitment was unreliable at best. One thing is certain: when they made their commitment to us they did so without authority, and told us things that weren't true. It's been sixty years since then, and it's still unclear to me even now if it was simple fraud from the beginning, plain misfortune or else wishful thinking on both sides.

Ultimately, Metuka, Alex and Elisa were herded onto a train with a hundred-fifty other orphans and driven to the Polish-Czech border, but since they lacked passports, and since all the states had long sealed their borders subsequent to the war, the children had to wander around disguised as gypsies to avoid scrutiny. They waited till nightfall to cross the border and found an unguarded section.

Metuka: "We traveled in military trucks left over from the war, and many were clearly unreliable. We infiltrated borders in secret, always after excruciatingly tiring journeys. Disease was rampant, especially severe ear infections. I can remember Elisa walking in front of me through the forests, like a human skeleton, barely conscious from all the pain and dripping with pus from infections. That was how we spent the European winter. One day we took shelter in an abandoned military camp, and what did we see there? Another orphan's group -- wandering around Europe just like us. Another camp we passed through in Esau, near Munich, was directed by a future teacher of ours in Hadassim, Zeev Alon.

"We were finally able to rest for a relatively long stretch when we settled in the Furten camp. Our counselor there was Masha Zarivetch, and her husband, Eizik was one of the directors. And it was there that Ephraim Gat joined us. We awoke every morning to a loud alarm; I used to lunge out of my bed in terror at the first sound of it. To this day

I keep wondering how our counselors could have been so inconsiderate in this respect. They could easily have used a gentler means to wake us up, given our war traumas.

“It was there that we were first taught a little bit of Hebrew and some math. We would get packages every so often, with chocolate and toothpaste, and soap. Of course, we exchanged the soap and toothpaste with the Germans in return for apples, plumes and pears. “



**Furten**

Elisa: “In Furten we stayed in these giant military halls. Sometimes we’d go into the forest to pick blueberries. I got pretty sick on one of those trips, and they took me to a hospital in Munich. I was left there by myself, and became very frightened all of a sudden to be alone around all those Germans. I felt like I’d been abandoned there forever.”

Around the same time, Alex and Metuka’s relatives found their way to a refugee camp in Austria. It was there that their aunt Sara learned that, far from being in Israel, her niece and nephew were still out in the harsh cold of European winter. She realized that her “escape” agent had made a fool out of her, and asked her brother Maneck (who had just arrived back from Russia) to bring them back. But Maneck happened to arrive in Furten the very same day that travel certificates arrived for the first group of children (and their counselor) destined for Hadassim.

Metuka was supposed to be among those first eight children, but Maneck had no way of knowing that by the time he dragged her off with him back to Germany. Alex stayed in Furten and was eventually slated to join the famous “Exodus” ship to Israel.

The group of eight left with Masha Zarivetz the very next day. Their first stop was in a sanatorium on the Warburg estate in Belkanza (near Hamburg) devoted to prospective child-immigrants to Israel.

Elisa: “What kind of things would any clinician or psychologist look for in such an institution? He might have asked whether there were warm beds, whether the counselors showed affection – how often the kids were hugged, for example -- whether the environment allowed for laughter and the freedom to say ‘no!’ He might have asked whether the kids were finally allowed to cry and pour out their emotions after what they’d seen, what kind of emotions were treated as normal.

“Any health professional by today’s standards would have noted the presence of these crucial factors at Belkanza. Most of us, aged five to nine, had managed to remain intact through the war, but we still needed something to help us move on. They projected onto us their own strange notions of what a ‘child’ and ‘childhood’ are supposed to be, and there was still a pure instinct to dim our emotions in order to go through a kind of intermediate, cleansing stage. We knew deep down that we would have to leave this horrible period of our lives behind, even by repressing and running away from it. So we basked in the light, we lived in the moment. The past would come to be seen as an era of darkness, much too painful to delve into even if it could shed some light on our own demons. In many ways this remains the case. How does one close Pandora’s Box once it’s opened?

“There were other ways that Belkanza gave us a bridge to a real childhood. We were taught Hebrew for the first time. They used an introductory booklet that showed all the letters. The process was almost hypnotic for me; the sounds of the language were completely new, with strange symbols indicating vowel sounds (nikud). None of it matched the language and sounds that we knew, yet this was the first alphabet we’d really seen. ‘What about the sounds I already know?’ I thought to myself. ‘Does Polish have symbols like these?’ We didn’t ask those questions, so naturally they weren’t answered. Then, some of it was just hilarious. ‘Why is the picture of the horse shown twice, only the second time it’s called a ‘donkey’?’ Yet we were finally allowed to be children; we were being taught in a classroom, we were looking at pictures, we were at the center of attention. We were part of the human race again.

“The Belkanza team could probably have taught beyond this rudimentary level, and there were indeed prizes handed out to those who accelerated their studies. I don’t remember any harsh discipline or punishments, really. I do remember the gifts, of course – the jump-rope, the little wooden dog that jerked every which way at the push of a button. Those were all the possessions I had, for a while. The whole group of us wore out that jump-rope completely. Then, finally, we were shipped off to France, and from there to Israel.”<sup>17</sup>

## H. Camp 55 in Cyprus

“Moshe Frumin, his mother and grandmother had crossed the Polish border into Czechoslovakia and found their way to Italy through Germany and Austria. On their arrival at the Milan train station, the seven year old Moshe suddenly found himself alone

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<sup>17</sup> Elisa Bar, editor Yizhak Tadmor *Cherries on the Elba-The Story of the Children’s house in Belkanza 1946-1948*, Publishing house Beit Yaar with Ghetto Fighters House 1996, pg 139-140.



**Moshe Frumin**

with his grandmother. His mom had momentarily disappeared among the crowds. Grandma Frieda was having more and more difficulty even standing up, having strained her leg along the journey. “We sat against a pole for a few minutes, and then suddenly I wasn’t feeling very well. There was a small medical office nearby with a children’s wing. There were some toys laying around, the first I’d ever seen. A doctor came in to see me. When he left, I turned to grandma and said, ‘Let’s get out of here. We’ll never find mother if they hospitalize me.’ So we came back to the train station, and suddenly I saw two young men walking close to us wearing green ties – the Gordonia emblem. I immediately grabbed one of them by the hand and

didn’t let go; I felt that my whole family’s destiny was on the line. Though I was very young, I realized it wasn’t right that our journey should stop in liberated Italy. I told him what we’d been through, and he told me they’d actually been looking for us the whole time we were in the hospital. He said to wait there for someone to pick us up, and eventually a man wearing a long black coat arrived. He looked around to check that we were along, and then handed me a stack of Italian liras and told me to take the train to the naval school of the ‘Schola Kadrona.’

“We arrived at the naval school, which was located inside a giant three-story building, and were immediately shown to our beds. I ran down to the basement to bring some mattresses, grappling with all the other refugees for an extra bed for mother when she would join us. The director of the school had promised that my mom was on her way, but she never showed up. After about a week we were finally told that she was being held in jail cell on Via Unone St, and when we went there the police wouldn’t let us near her. I could only see her from a distance, looking at us from behind the bars.”

At this point in the interview, Frumin’s voice was shaking slightly, and his eyes filled with tears. As an artist, he has used his craft to overcome his separation from his mother. The Pieta motif runs through his “Mother and Child” statues.

“Apparently she’d been arrested at a border crossing-station. So we went back to the school, and soon afterwards mother was released and was able to join us, along with aunt Shoshanna and her husband Yitzhak.”

From Milan we traveled to Bari, where we stepped onto a small fishing boat and sailed into the heart of the summer sea and boarded a ship headed for Israel via Sicily. We arrived at the coast of Haifa on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1945. Seven large British ships surrounded the port entrance, and up above we could see three airplanes circling. It was as if Holocaust survivors were suddenly the most terrifying enemies of the British Empire. We were guided down toward the pier, where they registered all the passengers and

stripped us of all our possessions. I tried in vain to hold on to my mandolin, a gift from my uncle Yitzhak, as it had always symbolized freedom for me. They practically tore it out of my hands. It was an important moment for me, because I realized then that Germany's enemies weren't necessarily our allies. It wasn't long before they packed us onto a warship and sent us to Cyprus"

Sitting in Frumin's studio near Akká, we gazed admiringly at his various sculptures. One of them in particular caught our eye, a magnificent rendering of King David's lyre. The story was that young David's lyre had tamed the savage breast of Saul. Moshe had likewise cheated death more than once, and thus the lyre topic was clearly one more articulation of his own narrative -- it was his way of internalizing his own childhood struggles, of reclaiming the mandolin that the British had taken from him.

"In Cyprus, the British placed us in an Indian tent in a makeshift refugee camp, referred to simply as camp 55. The inhabitants were organized on ideological lines, so we were thrown in with the "Gordonia" group. When Moroccan Jews started arriving, quarrels between them and the Poles became common. It was a reflection of times to come, of Israel's future social and ethnic divisions"

There was a couple at the camp, Shoshanna and Yitzhak Lerner. Shoshanna had just given birth to a daughter, Lea, and the British allowed them entry to Israel. They came to live in Hadassim at Rachel's invitation – Yitzhak was her cousin – and he became an official driver for the school.

"We only immigrated after statehood was declared. Initially we were sent to a transit camp 89, near Pardes Hanna, but Yitzhak arrived to take us to Hadassim the very next day. I was placed in the third grade together with Yakir Laufer and Moshe Lieberman, and we were later joined by Metuka (who we called "the old lady"). Our primary teacher was Bluma Katabursky, Rachel Shapirah's sister. Mother was eventually accepted there as a counselor."

## **I. Aliyah Gimel**

The British White Paper was issued in May 1939. It called for a unified Palestinian State but put strict limits on Jewish immigration and land acquisition, and it affirmed British commitment to a Jewish homeland in Palestine but precluded Jewish statehood. Subsequent to this development, David Ben Gurion, head of the Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel, initiated steps toward a third mass wave of immigration – the Aliyah Gimel – combined with an intelligent, clearly-defined revolt against the British Mandate. Ships filled to the brim with immigrants would break through to the shores by



force, bringing with them the young talent to fill the ranks of Ben-Gurion's army.<sup>18</sup> He had begun to toy with the idea of an "immigrant's revolt" about a half-year earlier. In December of 1938, he had spoken before members of the Zionist General Council. "We need a new policy as well as new tactics. We need to make it clear to the British that we will no longer cooperate [with her]. That would require your formal resignation, and we would then need to organize a world conference in America and declare an open war of immigration. This will ensure that we will take charge of the immigration efforts ourselves, as well as confront England with the problem of having to use massive force against such efforts. We can't resort to the Arab's terrorist means, but we can declare to the whole world that Eretz Israel is ours... This is what it will mean to fight for the political goal of our homeland."<sup>19</sup>

In a May 31 meeting with members of the Maccabbi group, Ben-Gurion outlined his plan to bring 100,000 new young immigrants into the country, young men with military training, as well as thousands of machine guns. He indicated that fighter planes might also be an important factor in eventually subduing the country. He met with the General Council again the very next day: "If it comes to war, it is imperative that we establish a Jewish military force capable of waging it."<sup>20</sup>

In July 1945, the British Labor Party won the general election in England. The new government, headed by Clement Attlee, rejected the Morrison Committee's recommendation for the immigration of 100,000 Jews, allowing instead for an immigration rate of 1,500 per month. Ben-Gurion was in Paris when he heard about this, and he immediately ordered (at the encouragement of Moshe Sneh, chief of Hagana headquarters) his previous plans and designs into effect, calling for mass illegal immigration ("Aliya Bet") and acts of armed resistance ("Aliyah Gimel"). In the beginning of October 1945, Dr. Sneh sent a message to Ben-Gurion in Paris: "The Jewish settlement and the executive committee are behind you, but there won't be any battle without you."<sup>21</sup> In response, Ben-Gurion expounded the principles of the resistance in an eight page revolutionary document. The second page contained the following: "The very

<sup>18</sup> The idea is similar in spirit to Zeev Zabotinsky's idea in the 1930s, of an organized rebellion against the British by Jewish troops on the country's ports.

<sup>19</sup> Yoseph Heller, *In the Fight for the State*. Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1985, pg 249-254.

<sup>20</sup> Yitzhak Avneri, *the Immigration Rebellion – Ben Gurion's Plan for Illegal Immigration*. Cathedra 44, Tamuz 1987, pg 144-145

<sup>21</sup> Meaning, Terror. *Ben Gurion's Journal, October the 7<sup>th</sup> 1945*, Ben Gurion's Archive's website in Sdeh-Boker.

heart of it: Aliyah Gimel must be added to Aliyah Bet, as an armed resistance force that will allow each unit to stand its ground against the security apparatus on sea or land. Every caravan has to include troops with machine guns, revolvers and grenades. Command of each Aliyah Gimel ship will be in the hands of a native Israeli boy.”

The third section included specific plans for activity in Europe: arms acquisition, training, financing, communications, transfer, and recruitment efforts for Aliyah Bet and Aliyah Gimel. “Conditions dictate that central headquarters be in France.” Therefore, “Ehud Avriel must be transferred to Paris immediately. He must arrive while I’m still here, and additionally Shaul Avigur is to leave immediately for further consultations, either in London or Paris.” The fourth section contains the following: “We shouldn’t wait until there’s an official policy declaration from the British to initiate our revolt.<sup>22</sup> We can’t even know if there’s going to be such a declaration. The only thing that counts at this point is the ‘White Paper’. That in itself constitutes a declaration of war on our people – who are tyrannized and stateless – so we must fight with every means at our disposal.

In the seventh section Ben Gurion declared that it would be “a courageous and considerably long war,” and he warned of overly optimistic expectations: “don’t hope for a ‘last’ battle or expect a quick and easy victory.” The eighth section discusses “the importance of propaganda for world opinion, something almost as important as the revolt itself.” It was monumentally imperative for Ben-Gurion that public opinion would be on Israel’s side; it was an essential component of the plan itself, and every strategy and tactic had to reflect that priority. He believed that no Western government would support the blocking of refugees into Eretz Israel if the right propaganda was implemented in coordination with the right tactics.<sup>23</sup>

Ben Gurion wasn’t satisfied with the course of planning to this point. His people had arranged for the acquisition and storage of light weapons for Aliyah Gimel, as well as pursuing efforts to train young recruits in the use of such weapons.<sup>24</sup> Ben-Gurion had met with friends from the old Arme Juive – the Jewish wing of the French Resistance in WWII – and received assurances that they would help coordinate the plan of revolt.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Meaning - using terror strikes in conjunction with Aliyah Beit and Aliyah Gimel.

<sup>23</sup> Zartal, 439-440.

<sup>24</sup> *Ben Gurion’s Journal, November the 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945.*

<sup>25</sup> Nahum Bogner, *The Mutiny Boats –Haapala Ha'apala* (Hebrew: העפלה), is a Hebrew term used for the immigration by Jews to the British Mandate of Palestine in violation of British restrictions against such immigration. It was also known as Aliya Bet), 1945-48. Tel Aviv published by the Ministry of Defense, 1993, pg 19.

Ben-Gurion wasn't in direct contact with the Hagana at the time. Until 1945, Eliahu Golomb had been his sole contact with the organization, and when he died Ben-Gurion was no longer connected to its goings-on. So at least from mid-1945 to August of 1946, Moshe Sneh directed the course of the Hagana, and he radicalized it, pushing for a professional guerrilla and terror-strike force. The Hagana organization was officially subordinated to the Palmach, but it nevertheless focused on terror attacks against the British and on immigration for world-propaganda purposes, at the cost of preparing for an ultimate war for independence. As leader of the Jewish Agency, which controlled the Palmach, Ben-Gurion should have had oversight over activities at Hagana headquarters. But the sympathies of the Palmach were largely with his political rivals, Tabenkin's people. When he finally realized that he had no control over the Palmach, and when he subsequently failed at dismantling it, he attempted to turn things back his way by activating cells in the Hagana who'd served in the British army. Most of his appeals went unanswered, however. Those who did -- Nahum Golan and Israel Tal, for example -- got miserable results.<sup>26</sup> Ben Gurion tried using encouraging words in his journal: "The practical difficulties are immense, but it is not impossible. The salient feature is the iron will of man."<sup>27</sup> Moshe Sneh and Israel Galili refused to cooperate with him on the Aliyah Gimmel plan<sup>28</sup>.

Beginning in October 1945, while still in Paris, Ben Gurion decided to start new defense organization, "Mishmeret Tzlechim" ("The Guards of Success") which would be entirely under his command and exclusively loyal -- something like a Sultan's guard -- a secret brotherhood of the most elite and committed Zionist sons. His journal describes the desired profile of members of Mishmeret Tzlechim: men of both action and intellect, dedicated to the worship of Israel and ready to lay down their lives for the organization. The journal defines their specific enterprise: to unite the nation in the Diaspora, to educate them in the principles of an integrated Israel and intensify their love of the land, to establish underground networks wherever necessary, and finally to train pioneers for settlement. The fourth section of the journal said that each accepted member of the organization would have to swear allegiance to Jewish statehood, to the Hagana in Israel and to the execution of his mission even at the cost of his own life. The fifth section included the following: "Membership in the Guard is personal and covert. Loyalty to it comes before loyalty to any other organization."<sup>29</sup>

Plans for Mishmeret Tzlechim show that Ben Gurion's idea of a proper defense organization in the 1940s was akin to those of Russian underground organizations in the

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<sup>26</sup> Bogner, 18.

<sup>27</sup> *Ben Gurion's Journal* October the 3<sup>rd</sup> 2945

<sup>28</sup> *Ben Gurion Journal*, pg 19

<sup>29</sup> Zartal 442-444y

19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as clandestine organizations during the Second Aliyah (the second wave of immigration, 1904-1914): the “Bar Giora,” “Hashomer” (underground Jewish defense and settlement organizations), “The Histadrut Minor” (the Israeli trade union congress), The Jaffa Group (a secret security establishment for Tel Aviv and Jaffa), the “Benei Pinchas” and “NILI” (secret, pro-British spy organization in WWI). His designs drew much more from the Zionist past than they did from any modern systems or military organizations.

For example, take the founding principles of the “Young Histadrut of Herzliah” gymnasium (where Moshe Sharet was educated), formulated in 1913 : “Absolute dedication and discipline; gearing young comrades to the spirit of the Histadrut; assisting Histadrut members in their private life; maintaining secrecy regarding the Histadrut’s activities and internal affairs.”<sup>30</sup>

In October of 1945, Ben-Gurion visited the refugee camps of Dachau and Bergen-Belzen. His intention was very practical: he wanted to find as many worthy recruits as possible for Aliyah Gimme operations. Several weeks later, when he informed the elected assembly in Israel about this visit, he said nothing to them about his real plans: “Today I bring brotherly regards from those who somehow managed to survive the gas chambers, the various torments and agonies, the relentless abuse and insults. They have asked me to convey two wishes on their behalf: the first one is for Jewish unity. For those who suffered irrespective of ethnic and political differences. Their executioners were indiscriminant. And the second wish: A Jewish state, the State of Israel. This is the last will and testament of the millions of our saintly brothers who perished. We have been decimated only for want of having a nation, for being a people without a homeland or a state; liberty and justice will never find us if we can’t correct that historical deformity in our people’s history.”<sup>31</sup>

After his visit to the camps, Ben-Gurion met in Frankfurt with General Eisenhower and his second in command, Brigadier General Walter Bedell-Smith. They promised him that Eastern European Jews would have complete freedom to enter the American occupied zones.<sup>32</sup> In the memorandum he presented to the Jewish Agency in November of the same year, Ben-Gurion wrote the following:

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<sup>30</sup> Uri Milstein, *Yehuda in Blood and Fire*, Bat-Yam; Levin-Epstein, Fourth edition, 1978, pg 30.

<sup>31</sup> David Ben Gurion, *Bamaaracha He*, pg 9

<sup>32</sup> Yehuda Bauer, “*The Power Formation in the Way to Jewish independence in Eretz Israel*”. Monthly Review 11, November 1976.

If we can concentrate a quarter-million of our people in the American Zone, that would intensify American pressure [on the British], not financially, since that's not as crucial for them, but because the Americans don't recognize any future for these people anywhere but in Eretz Israel.<sup>33</sup>

Professor Yehuda Bauer, the Holocaust researcher, noted that the Zionist leadership was concerned that if Israel were closed off for too long Jewish refugees would begin to look elsewhere for immigration. When the number of refugees in western zones swelled to 300,000 Ben-Gurion's predictions proved to be accurate. According to Bauer, "A big reservoir of potential immigrants was under America's protection, and the American government was looking for ways to get rid of the hassle... The only alternative they saw was Eretz Israel. For that, pressure on Britain was necessary. That was therefore the crucial political determinant in those days, the crucial transition point."<sup>34</sup>

In December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1945, when Ben-Gurion returned to Israel, the directorate of the Jewish Agency came to a decision. "The current phase of the Zionist struggle necessitates... in addition to the regular political and defensive actions, a special emphasis in their distribution: A. The intensification of immigration from all countries; B. Proactive defense of the sea-immigration efforts, including aggressive protection on the coasts; C. The full consolidation and protection of European immigration, according to Section B., spread over the whole Jewish Diaspora; D. Removal of all obstacles for immigration to Israel"<sup>35</sup>

Ben-Gurion and his colleagues used the Jewish refugee problem for broader aim of founding a state.<sup>36</sup> Their strategy was based on the historical model of the "Haapala," the Hebrew term for illegal Jewish immigration during the British Mandate. They knew that they wouldn't necessarily succeed in getting all the refugees, but that they would probably get those refugees onto the pages of every major newspaper in the West, especially America. The refugees weren't let in on this line of thinking, nor did most of the "escape" agents know about it. Yehuda Arazi, head of the Italian branch of Mosad Aliyah Beit (a branch of the Hagana that comprised the organizing body of illegal immigration beginning in 1938) was aware of it. During a 1949 interview, he admitted

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<sup>33</sup> Bauer, there.

<sup>34</sup> Bauer, "*The Power Formation in the Way to Jewish independence in Eretz Israel*"

<sup>35</sup> David Ben Gurion, Internet.

<sup>36</sup> In 1971 P. Kotler and G. Zaltzman published the essay: "Social Marketing: An Approach to planning of social changes," in the *Journal of Marketing* 35, pg 3-12. In my view, Ben Gurion and his friends applied the principles of this theory intuitively, before the scientists formulated them and before they became a vital instrument in the public relations and persuasive communication fields.

that he had seen the Holocaust survivors as “wonderful propaganda material...which no earthly power could resist.”<sup>37</sup>

Since WWII, writers and journalists have written that the purpose of organized, illicit Israeli immigration was giving a safe haven to as many survivors as possible – but that isn’t true. The real purpose, in retrospect, was to secure a safe haven for a Jewish state. Ben-Gurion’s maneuver was so successful that even today most Israelis buy into the original explanation.<sup>38</sup>

In August of 1946, after the bombing of British secret police headquarters in Jerusalem’s King David Hotel, Ben-Gurion made the decision to split the Hagana from ETZEL and LECHI. His decision put the Hagana in an impossible situation: the other two organizations kept upping the ante on terrorist attacks against the British, creating frustration and envy for Palmach veterans who now sat on the sidelines. In 1946, no one was telling the Hagana to ready for conventional war, and it was utterly incapable of it then. The guerrilla cum terror approach was the order of the day.

But just then a dialectical switch began to surface among the Hagana elite: Moshe Sneh, Israel Galili, Yitzhak Sade, Yigal Alon and others – all of whom had been pro-terror strikes in 1946, had wanted to activate the Aliyha Bet branch of the Hagana to intensify illicit immigration and who had sabotaged Ben-Gurion’s designs – these men now turned the Aliah Beit into Aliah Gimmel. They did so specifically to get the Palmach back into the action, to keep their reputation strong with the hardened young settlers. Although it was Ben-Gurion who’d conceived the plan, he wasn’t the one to implement it – that honor went to his opponents in the labor movement. Ben-Gurion still had enough authority to stymie this development or steer it according to his original design, but he chose not to do that. Ben-Gurion certainly had the authority to prevent this development, or direct it according to his original plan, but he chose not to. The Aliyah Beit was turned into an Aliyah Gimmel through the initiatives Yigal Alon, commander of the Palmach, and David Nmeri, the contact man between the Palmach and the Mosad

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<sup>37</sup> Zartal, pg 276.

<sup>38</sup> In August 10<sup>th</sup> 1997 for example The Haaretz newspaper published a letter of ex Colonels Aaron Doron, Shlomo Gazit, Mordechai Rosman, head of the “Exodus’s immigrants’ board, in the name of the immigrants’ board, the country’s organization of Hagana’s members, and the PALMACH’s Generation board – following a screening of a documentary film about the “Exodus” affair. In their letter they wrote about “The struggle of the Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel, the struggle of the survivors who found themselves wandering in Europe’s forsaken roads, and the demand of most of them to have Israel’s gates open for them.” The presentation of the Jewish settlement’s political, strategic and communicative calculations in the use of the illegal immigration operation they named “slander against the Zionist movement, against the settlement in Israel and its leadership and against Ben Gurion personally”.

Aliyah Beit, who had been with the Palmach organization from the beginning. Both of them had been raised in the Kibbutz Hameuchad (a left-wing Bolshevik group); both were almost fanatical in their vision.

The pretext for switching the strategy of mass illicit immigration into outright revolt was the British government's decision, on August 7, 1946, to begin wholesale expulsion of refugees from the country. The British operation's codename was "Igloo." They were trying to block the entry of 2684 new immigrants who had arrived at the port of Haifa on four ships earlier in the month. The Jewish National Council (the elected governing board of Jews in the British Mandate) held an emergency session during which Abraham Katzenelson said that if the refugees turned on the British at this point there would be hundreds dead.<sup>39</sup> On August 8, Mosad Aliya Beit headquarters sent an order to the commanders of five other refugee boats on their way to the coastline:

We suspect that the government will try to intercept and redirect you to another location...Only stop in case of warning shots. If they try to board you outside territorial waters you must put up some resistance, perhaps even sabotage the boats if they succeed in gaining control...if they succeed in redirecting you to another port, you'll have to put up a fierce resistance, even to the point that they have to drag you out to the last man.<sup>40</sup>

On August 12, Nmeri sent a telegram from Haifa to Mosad Headquarters in Tel Aviv, begging for permission to act forcefully. "It cannot end like this, with crying and impotent cursing, but with action. Orders must be issued...we can't just sit around and make preparations. If they're allowed to be tossed back into the sea then no one will ever forgive us."<sup>41</sup>

Because all the senior leaders of the Zionist movement were in Paris or in the Latroon prison camp at the time, Nmeri and his activists managed to blackmail those temporarily in charge for permission to engage in violent actions.<sup>42</sup>

The historian Edit Zartal wrote, "Yigal Alon was the most fanatic of the participants in the refugee-boat crisis. That issue was prominent on the agenda for months; ever since the "Exodus" affair in August 1946, for longer than a year, Alon demanded to carry on the resistance, always looking to radicalize it further. He was also

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<sup>39</sup> Bogner, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Bogner, 55.

<sup>41</sup> The Archives of the history of the Hagana, 14/231 – from Freedom to My Country, 12 August 1946

<sup>42</sup> Bogner, 58-59

demanding authority for Palmach to carry on independently, with his choice of commander, of course.<sup>43</sup>

During the fifties, Alon bragged that he had thought of every possible operation and resistance strategy, including strikes on British naval bases in Israel and other Mediterranean ports, though allegedly that plan was only accepted in small part. It was apparently limited only to resisting mass deportations as well as few isolated strikes on British navy vehicles. The orders for Palmach sailors were now harsh and crystal clear: “Any refugee boat captured by an enemy ship will not allow the enemy on deck [sailors were already ordered to seal off their ship-decks with wire-fences, sand bags, etc.]...refugees should be organized for their own defense against possible expulsion. Passive resistance is preferable, but ammunition must be available since violent action can’t be ruled out...All refugees, save women, children and the elderly must take part in their own defense.”<sup>44</sup>

A Palmach bulletin from January 1947 noted that the true purpose of helping the refugee confront his British oppressors was to transform his self-image, from passive victim to a heroic, self-determining human being. But such notions are testimony of the monumentally arrogant attitude of Eretz Israel towards its refugees – that it was somehow proper to throw them into a blood-bath in order to forge a new man and a new image.<sup>45</sup>

The first confrontation occurred on the “Yagur,” a boat intercepted on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1946. Moshe Mark was the commander on board:



**Yagur**

“There were many women on deck, many of them pregnant. Almost everyone was half naked. The soldiers were dragging women by their hair and feet, and the women scratched and clawed and hit back with what they could...The struggle lasted about three hours. One of the women was seriously wounded and lost her pregnancy on account of it.”<sup>46</sup>

The second big clash involving a refugee boat was the ship “Henrietta Sold,” bearing 536 immigrants. Here, again, there were many pregnant women on board, as

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<sup>43</sup> Zartal, 296.

<sup>44</sup> Zrubabel Gilead and Mati Meged (editors), *The PALMACH BOOK* Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1987.

<sup>45</sup> Zartal, 296-297

<sup>46</sup> Bogner pg 60.

well as 28 infants and 180 children aged two to sixteen.<sup>47</sup> On September 22, 1946 a veritable battle took place on the deck of the “Palmach,” a refugee-ship bearing 615 immigrants. When the British attempted to board the “Palmach,” they were met by a brutal hail of rocks and metal, anything these ferociously prepared refugees could get their hands on. In response, the British used water jets and tear gas. Eventually they even opened fire with light ammunition, killing Yoni Dov Schwartz, and wounding thirty-one other passengers and accompanying sailors. Among the latter was Moshe Rabinovitz, the Palmach commander on board and the only member of the organization wounded during this period of transformation from Aliah Beit to Aliyah Gimmel. According to him, Schwartz probably drowned when he fell overboard, rather than dying from his bullet-wounds. Nevertheless, Ben-Gurion mentioned him side by side with Trumpeldor in an October 1946 letter to Abba Hillel Silver, turning him into a new martyr for the Zionist cause.<sup>48</sup>

On November 28, another significant battle took place, this one on the ship “Knesset Israel.” There were a total of 3850 immigrants on board; 1500 of them were young boys, many of them orphans. As with the “Henrietta Sold,” these refugees were well prepared to fight for their lives with any scrap of metal or stone, and the struggle lasted over three hours. Eizik Rosenbaum, a sixteen year old boy, was killed and dozens were wounded, but on the other side there were thirty soldiers seriously wounded. Quoting the report of the commander on board, Yosi Harel:

“I think that somebody owes me an explanation: without any actual fighting on the shore, why must the immigrants fight these battles in the sea? These people are all that remains of six million exterminated Jews; they’ve already endured a hell that hardly anyone could imagine. Why must they be the victims yet again? No, it must be declared to them openly that they should not resist, that every further resistance spills even more needless blood; that it’s not acceptable they do the fighting while those on the land sit idly by. It has to be one way or the other, a full fight or nothing: the current situation is simply unacceptable.”<sup>49</sup>

It wasn’t only Yosi Harel that complained about sending these Holocaust survivors to the battlefield while most of the Jewish settlement did nothing substantial against the British. On December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1946, the newspaper “Davar” published a poem by Nathan Alterman addressed to the Knesset:

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<sup>47</sup> Bogner, pg 60.

<sup>48</sup> Bogner, 109, Zartal, 293.

<sup>49</sup> Bogner, 113-126

“In response to the story headlined, “The Knesset Israel’s refugee resistance collapsed in smoke bombs,” this poem tells the story of a girl refugee as she scrambles around for a breath of clean air:

“But suddenly she remembered that she is nothing if not the community!  
 I commanded her: Stand up![...]  
 Don’t move! Even when the soldiers come for you  
 Don’t go willingly!  
 Resist!  
 Resist!  
 [...] And yet she might still reckon with me:  
 What part of it was given to her  
 And what part of it I took for myself [...]  
 And she will say, speaking for all of her young friends,  
 That the settlement cannot demand of her  
 That which it does not demand from itself and its children”

Beyond these ethical issues, the transformation of Aliyah Bet to Aliyah Gimmel focused the Palmach commanders on demonstrating their capacity for violence, which, though it may have helped along the political process, did great harm to preparation for full out war upon the declaration of Jewish statehood. The involvement of the Palmach in stirring a spirit of resistance against expulsion, as well as the organization of a naval “Intifada” of women and children, solidified and radicalized the ideological wing of Hagana’s recruits at the expense of its military professionalism. It allowed many of the Palmach that weren’t involved in illicit immigration efforts to stand idle and atrophy during the crucial run-up to the War of Independence.

## **J. Exodus**

In the summer of 1947, the twelve year old Alex Orlander was moved along with some of his Furten peers to Marseille in Southern France. There began his ascendancy as a “soldier” of the Aliyah Gimel in its struggle on the refugee ship “Exodus”.

Alex: “4500 people were compressed into the ship, where we lay in as miserable a condition as I’d already known in the burrow underneath Valenti Back’s house. The only difference was that the ship had four floors instead of one. So it was incredibly crowded. It was appalling. And yet, there wasn’t one moment when I was sad. We had plenty of food: canned food from America; vegetables and baguettes from France. I experienced

horrible seasickness as we were rounding Crete, and I pretty much lay there like a corpse for two days. When we reached the Haifa port we threw our cans at the British -- and they responded with smoke grenades. Our superiors told us to 'Piss in the handkerchiefs and use them to your eyes. It'll protect you from the gas..' This only helped to a certain point, but it still showed me something important about the knack of Israelis for improvising.

"The battle lasted several hours, until the British finally captured the ship and forced us to board a few other ships. For next three months we moved aimlessly from one side of the Mediterranean to the other, essentially marooned at sea. The French government offered us citizenship at one point, but we were intent on nothing short of Aliyah. We were finally forced to land in Hamburg, where I was able to see my sister, at least."

Metuka had stayed in a refugee camp in Germany, along with her relatives, and she'd never heard that Alex had left on board the "Exodus" in the first place. All of them found out about it the same day, when they read in the newspaper that "Sigismund Orlander" had been on the illegal refugee ship. Maneck quickly left for Hamburg, where he spotted the twelve year old Alex in the middle of a football game. He "kidnapped" him in short order and reunited him with the family.

Together they spent 1949 in a transitional camp in the mountains of Marseille. A week before they left on board the ship "Negba" en route to Israel, God decided to test Metuka – so she believed, at least – when she injured her head and developed a serious infection. There was a definite possibility that she would have to miss the departure to France, as she needed serious treatment at a hospital. Fortunately, however, she was able to have surgery in time for the voyage. She had to wear a bandage on her head, and in order to treat the infection the Ship's Dr. said she would need to shave off all her hair. She burst out crying at this; it brought back the trauma of having to stay bald when they all lived in the burrow under the Melmann's home. Aunt Sara pleaded with the nurse to leave her hair intact.

They were in Haifa within a week's time, staying in the Shaar Haliyah camp for three months before moving to a transitional camp in Netanya.

[Metuka]:

When we found out that there was a spot for us in the Netanya camp, we were naïve enough to picture it as a quaint little village. We had no idea what was waiting for us. We loaded our possessions onto a truck and left for Netanya's shores, near Avichail. It was an especially hot day. Our hearts fell when we

finally arrived there, where a vista was revealed of endless lines tents, half-naked savages, piles of half-eaten and overripe watermelon on the sidewalks, flies, filthy children running around barefoot with military-style kitchenware...

At that point the truck driver turned to us and said, "This is your new home." Mother burst into tears, refusing to get out of her seat. The adults looked around and began discussing their options when the driver shouted, "Look! You aren't the only people who need my services today. Get off the bus already!"

My dad tried to comfort mother. "Look, Selka, it's not so terrible...It'll be okay, let's get off the bus, everyone's Jewish here..."

"I don't understand...get off what? Where?" She was clearly unhinged by all this.

A policeman wearing a tight uniform was walking passed us, and father looked at me with a playful gleam in his eye and said, "Selka, look! A Jewish policeman!" Obviously this wasn't something any of us were accustomed to seeing...

So we finally got off the bus. There really wasn't much of a choice.

After a few days, we received a visit from Moshe Eshel Altshuler, the accountant for my parents' oil company in Lignitz. He'd also immigrated to Israel, eventually ending up doing accounting work for Hadassim. When he found us, he took one look at our tent and said, "Listen, Selka: I can't really help you, but the children have a right to be educated properly. They're orphans, Holocaust children. I can get them enrolled at Hadassim."

She remembered how the "escape" emissaries had taken us from her and what had happened then. "It's the same thing all over again, someone wants to take them from me. Well I won't let that happen, I promise you. I can't even believe you would ask such a thing of me. If you ever want to see me again you won't ask it -- I'm never letting them go."

But Moshe insisted. "Selka, this isn't like any institution you knew of in Poland. It's not an orphanage. The children are treated well and left free. It's something completely different."

She started crying. “After everything we’ve been through, surviving the war together...and now you want to take them away from us?!”

Moshe saw how difficult it was for her. So he made a more tentative proposition: “How about this, then: I’ll come with the car on Saturday. All of you can come with me and see the place for yourselves, and then you can decide. And if you say no, I won’t suggest it again.”

So on Saturday we all drove together to see Hadassim for the first time. I’ll never forget my first glimpse of the place: a blooming garden sprawling through the entrance. As someone who went through the Holocaust as a child, spending over a year suspended underground and later enduring the endless winding roads and the endless series of filthy camps, this was the first time I saw such beauty – a place filled with nothing but flourishing gardens and vivid grass. It was the peak of summertime then, and the Dahlia and Zinnia flowers were in full bloom. The buildings were new and clean, the dining hall was charming and comfortable. We encountered all sorts of children moving about as they pleased - - the sense of freedom was palpable. It was just...Paradise. I prayed in my heart that mother would let us stay here. “Only until we get an apartment of our own, Metuka. But in the meantime you can stay,” she said.

It was relief to hear that from her. As it turned out, this “meanwhile” continued uninterrupted for eleven years. I entered the place when I was ten and graduated from the Hadassim Teacher Seminary when I was twenty one.

Back at the transit camp in Netanya, Moshe had asked me if I’d be interested to see Elisa again. She was staying at seashore resort at the time. “Of course,” I told him happily. When he took me to meet her, I wore a special dress for the occasion, with glittery shoes and bows, the full gamut. I was so excited to see her that I even tried a new hairdo. When we approached the shore, I saw a whole camp of tents and across from them a bunch of children kicking a football around. We asked to see Elisa, and soon enough a very tall, tanned, wildly curly-haired girl was walking toward me in her sandals. I could only recognize her by her eyes, she’d changed so much. It was the shock of my life: here was the ugly duckling, the green-tinged skeleton dripping ooze and sadness that I’d known only two years ago. She was utterly resurrected. We walked side by side; she was the epitome of the sabra girl, and I stood for the Diaspora. We kissed and embraced, and in my heart I told myself: in Hadassim, I’ll learn to become like her.

## K. “Master, You and Your Family Won’t Go With The Other Jews”



**Yehudit Lorber**

Yehudit Lorber joined our ninth grade class in 1954. Every new girl attracted attention. But there was something else quite mysterious about this one. We’d encountered one another without knowing it five years ago. My father, Abraham, was the assistant director for a transitional settlement in Raanana, and Yehudit had lived there for a few years. I’d visited there many times, always making an effort to help all the new young immigrants adjust to Israeli life, to help them discover their identity in their new homeland. So when I met Yehudit in Hadassim I felt like we were already friends somehow.

When I interviewed her in 2006, I felt something similar, like we’d never really said goodbye in the first place. I wanted to keep that relation with her. The dialogical bond we’d begun at the transitional camp, one that continued throughout our years in Hadassim, had survived all the way to the 2005 battle reconstruction event that I’d organized for the people who form the subject of this book. Now, sitting together in her sophisticated Tel Aviv apartment, we held a long, Buberian “I-Thou” dialogue. Yehudit’s music conversed with my philosophical ideas, just as Pythagoras had envisioned 2,600 years ago.

Yehudit was a real beauty, but her passion for reading also astonished us. I read a lot too, of course, and we often competed on who could read farther and deeper into a text. I remember, in particular, a conversation we had on *War and Peace*. I was claiming that the hero was Pier, and she claimed it was Natasha. I was very interested in the character of Kutuzov,<sup>50</sup> and she in old Prince Bolkonsky. It was springtime evening, and we were sitting together on the balcony of unit five. I told her that I was used to conversing with flowers, and she told me that she conversed with the stars. We laughed without really knowing why. Maybe it was because we both loved purely but weren’t mature enough just yet to admit it. By my eyes, Yehudit was a sabra girl par excellence, but I didn’t know then that she had lived through the Holocaust. I didn’t know it until she told me her story in March of 2006. I regretted deeply that I’d never conversed with her about that experience when we knew each other in Hadassim. I wanted to ask her now whether repressing that experience had allowed her to rise anew, like the Phoenix of the Beethoven Sonata, or whether it had relegated part of her inner self to a psychic prison-cell. But I didn’t dare bring that up at this point, not even when we were safe in the year 2006. I figured that the year was still young, that we might still to talk in the

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<sup>50</sup> Prince Mikhail Illarionovitch Kutuzov, (1745-1813) a Russian General considered to be a national hero and the one who saved Russia from Napoleon Bonaparte.

coming months. According to Buber, writing is an act of dialogue too, and I know that she will be reading these lines.



**Yehudit Lorber**

Yehudit was born in 1939 to a wealthy family in the city of Kushitza. She was the daughter of Esther and Moshe Lorber, and a sister to Aaron and Shraga. Kushitza is the second largest city in Slovakia, and until the end of WWI it belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A major center of commerce and agriculture, it was also the location of the Slovakian Supreme Court and the seat of an Archbishop. It was tied to the republic of Czechoslovakia in 1918, following the war. By the outbreak of the next war, it was a home for 15,000 Jews, equally divided among reformed, orthodox, Zionist and assimilated Jews.

In November 1938, a year before the war, parts of Slovakia were annexed to Hungary, Kushitza among them. Unfortunately that meant the immediate imposition of Hungary's anti-Semitic laws and regulations; every facet of public Jewish life was closed down. Jewish organizations continued to function underground, and young Jews began escaping to Eretz Israel via the Romanian port of Constanta. In 1940, Slovakian and Polish Jewish refugees began arriving in Kushitza.

Two years later, with the beginning of mass deportation of Slovakian Jews to the Polish death camps, a new wave of refugees again poured through the city. It was March 1944, and the Nazis had invaded Hungary. Jews were immediately carted off along with their property, and in April 28 a Ghetto was officially designated for the consolidation of the remaining Jewish population. All of them were eventually taken from there and forced to work in a brick and construction factory, and shortly thereafter a typhoid plague erupted, no doubt spurred on by the crowded conditions. That was just a prelude, of course. It wasn't long until the first group of them would be herded aboard trains and sent to Auschwitz. By June 7, most of the city was thoroughly "cleansed".

Moshe Lorber owned a big lumber mill. A special trail was built between his wooden warehouse and the train station, where train specially assigned to his mill cut across the forests of Romania. The mill continued to function under his ownership and management, employing dozens of workers, until the Germans arrived in 1944 and imposed direct control. Moshe was an upright and beloved manager, always paying on time every Sunday; his workers would have walked through fire and water to help him.

The liquidation and transfer of Kushitza's Jews directly to Auschwitz happened on a Sunday. Esther packed all of their clothes, money and jewellery and intended to arrive at the train station along with the rest of the family at the appointed time. Moshe left the house for the mill on the same hour. When she asked him where he was going, he

answered that he was going to see his workers and pay them as usual. Esther was concerned that he was taking a big chance, that the family would be separated from each other if he left at this point. But Moshe insisted on going anyway.

Just as he was locking up his office, two of his workers approached him. “Master, the workers have decided not to let you go. We can’t let you and your family go with the rest of the Jews. We want to protect you.”

Yehudit: “I was four years old then. Papa and the workers all came home and dressed me in peasant clothes, and they assigned one of the workers to me, Uri Oravetz. He told me that if we’re stopped on the way I should say that I’m his daughter, Agnes, and that we’re returning from Sunday prayer. We walked together -- Uri, mother and I -- hand in hand, just like any Christian family walking home through the town from church. My two brothers walked behind me together with the other worker, and Papa walked parallel to us, on the other side of the road. He was very well known in the city, but somehow people ignored him as they passed us. It seems as if the whole city had conspired to save us.

“We arrived at a Gypsy neighborhood on the outskirts of town. As we approached one of the houses, an old gypsy woman was standing at her porch. When she noticed we were coming in her direction she suddenly signaled for us to stop, like she knew something was happening. It turned out that there was a policeman patrolling near her house. She signaled us again when he was gone so we could continue. Finally we arrived at the Oravetz’ residence, a small house with one room, a kitchen, and a little warehouse in the backyard next to the pig-shed. They were a family of five. Their neighbor across the fence was a Nazi, and his sons had long since been serving in the military. There was a long-standing hatred between the two houses.

“One of our cousins soon joined us, so that made six of us, altogether. The Oravetz family gave us the living room, while they took the kitchen. Our parents slept on the bed and we on the floor. My aunt and her husband joined us after two days, but the woman of the house initially refused to accept them, fearing that our food would run out. My father calmed her down, saying that from the German point of view it didn’t matter how many people she was hiding. As far as food was concerned, he gave her a big stack of money.

“We hid in that house for ten months, and our situation deteriorated more as time went by. The Germans would make thorough searches of the neighborhood, and they showed no mercy for Jew-loving gentiles. They would hang them to death without a second’s thought. Father gave Oravetz money to buy lumber from our old mill, and we used it to build a wall across the main room, covering it with wall-paper for safe measure. We left a small opening at the center. There was a little bench built into the wooden wall

in the small adjacent room, and moved in there to hide. One day there were loud knocks on the door. A policeman had come to ask some questions, and while he was at it he asked why one of the doors was locked in the middle of the day. She told him that her daughter had been out buying groceries, and that she didn't want her sister meddling with her notebooks in the meantime. We sat there behind the door through the whole conversation, frozen like stones. I literally put my fist in my mouth at some point, terrified that I would cry and possibly ruin everything. There was another search, this one in the middle of the night. Father had left the bag containing his tefillin and the prayer shawl on the bed, but somehow the policemen didn't notice it there in the dark.

“Soon after that, Oravetz was conscripted into the army, and his son started hiding with us to avoid the same fate. Oravetz would occasionally sneak out from his base in the middle of the night and bring us some meat. He used to get drunk so often that father was worried he might unwittingly give us away. When he mentioned this to Oravetz, the old bear just patted his cheek and said, ‘Moshe – you I’ll never surrender...’”

The Red Army finally liberated Kushitza in February of 1945. The Lorbers decided to return to their house, joining the maid they had originally asked to look after everything. The woman had grown comfortable with her new property in their ten month absence, however, and she steadily refused to give back many of the valuables. Then came Friday: Esther lit the candles and the family performed the Kiddush, sitting for dinner in their now emptier house. Suddenly the door opened, and a drunk Russian soldier barged in and decided to loot everything in sight – alcohol, gold watches, whatever. He grabbed my brother and reached into his pocket, but he hurt himself somehow. When he saw that his hand was bleeding he took his gun and pointed it at my brother. We yelled for one of our neighbors who knew Russian, and luckily he was able to calm him down. He poured the soldier some coffee, and slowly the man sobered up and even joined us at the dinner table.

Then he noticed the candles. “Jews?” he asked. They nodded.

The soldier smiled. He said he remembered some Yiddish and told them about his grandmother, and how he used to watch her lighting Friday night candles.

After dinner he asked them if they had any problems, if he could help with anything. Within ten minutes the servant turned up at the house with all their valuables.

Yehudit: “A few days later, the Russian general Yegorov knocked on our front door. He’d brought several officers and soldiers with him, and was looking for my cousin Katia, who was staying in our house now that the war was over. Her parents had died during the war, and she had joined the partisans in the forests and committed several outstanding acts of heroism. So Yegorov was here to present her with her metal, in

person. They performed the formal ritual in our house, and we were absolutely brimming with pride that one of our own was being recognized for brave acts against the Nazis.

Yehudit was in a brief state of shock after they came out of hiding. She was suddenly afraid of strangers, and eventually even refused to leave her bedroom. This went on for ten months. “All I did was play with my rag dolls. I’d sit them down next to one another and tell them children’s stories. When I finally overcame my fears, I started going to a Slovak school and stayed there till fourth grade.”

After the Soviets finished capturing Czechoslovakia, they took the keys to the mill away from Moshe, telling him that from now on he was just like every other simple worker. That was the day he decided to move his family to Israel. He sent his sons there first, but they were deported to Cyprus. They finally managed to immigrate during the War of Independence. Yehudit and her parents got there in May 1949.

Yehudit: “We arrived on Haifa’s shore on Independence Day. There were lights everywhere and music glaring in the streets; people were standing up and crying on the deck. I didn’t really understand what was going on. Adults didn’t really communicate well with their children in those days. We were told nothing. It caused a strange frustration. The very next day we were greeted by the coastguard; two handsome, tanned and sculpted young sabras came on board, bringing us peanuts, fresh bread and chocolate, hard boiled eggs – and bundles of whole oranges! They were a delicacy in Europe, so much so that you could expect to have maybe one a year, if you were lucky. My stomach almost exploded from the orange binge in those first few weeks, but it’s still my favorite fruit to this day. From the port we went directly to camp Shaar Haliyah. My uncle who’d been here for years picked us up and brought us to the transitional camp in Raanana.

“In Raanana we were assigned a shared tent with a bachelor neighbor. When I saw how poor the beds were I burst into tears. It was difficult for me to adjust from a spacious and comfortable home back in Europe to this crowded, miserable tent we were given. But my father would have none of it, and slapped me right across the face – the only time I was ever literally jolted back to reality. Starting at that moment I never complained again, even though we continued to live in the same camp for the next year and a half until we upgraded to a tin hut. I began attending a religious school, Yavne, which was close to the camp. I was the only new immigrant in a class full of Sabras, with no knowledge of the language or any social skills.

“Having kippas on their heads didn’t take anything away from the boys’ cruelty. So the adjustment was quite hard on me, but by the end of the year I was one of the three outstanding students in the class. I studied like crazy. After another year, my family moved into a slightly better place, and the year after that papa finally bought an

apartment in a venerable immigrants' quarter with some of the money he'd been able to smuggle from Slovakia."

"It was hard for me to assimilate into the Sabra world. That was a process I only got a handle on in Hadassim. My best friend there was Nurit Gantz – we arrived there together. My parents thought it was catastrophic that I was moving to that school. 'How could a child live away from home like that?' they kept saying. But for me, Hadassim was the euphoric freedom I needed; it was a marked contrast from the loving yet stifling embrace of my family."

I knew Nurit myself in Raanana, in kindergarten and the first grade. I played the "great priest" for the Shavuot celebrations in Malka's kindergarten, and Nurit was one of the dancers. The three of us, Nurit, Yehudit and I comprised the Raanana posse in Hadassim.

In Hadassim, Yehudit drank and got drunk to her heart's content from the wide spaces, from milking cows and volunteering as a nurse assistant. She excelled in musical study, as the only violinist in her class to perform in Gil Aldema's orchestra. But she could also challenge the smartest of us in literature, displaying a unique literary sensibility, an ability to expound deeply into a text. At the age of seventeen, she seemed perfectly able to climb all the way up to the stars. Everything was within her reach. But then her loving father died, and suddenly the repressed shadow of the Holocaust reared its ugly head. She regressed further and further into the choking bosom of family love, a love that disguises the survivors' permanent terror of death. Her family had survived the Holocaust, but they had paid for it with a covenant, a victim's covenant.



**Yehudit Lorber and  
GIDEON**

Yehudit: "I received word that my father was in the hospital upon returning to Hadassim from a weekend vacation. The next day, when I went to school as usual, I got a call from the office that I was to return home immediately. It infuriates me to this day that they didn't at least offer to drive me home or accompany me. They let me leave alone by foot and wait for a bus, all while my father lay dying. When I got back to Raanana a husband of one of my cousins was waiting for me. He didn't tell me the truth; he just said that father wasn't well. We walked back to my neighborhood, and it's only there I finally discovered he was dead. It's not a happy memory.

"I'm not certain I've clarified the full meaning of implications for my life of having studied at Hadassim. I've said a lot about the sense of freedom there, but beyond everything else I also learned that freedom comes with taking responsibility for my life, which requires a knack for making tough decisions. So it transpired that, after my

father's death, I came to realize that scholarship wasn't an option for me, so I turned to something more practical, like nursing. My grades in junior year were already enough for that field, so at the end of the year I left Hadassim and began my studies at the Beilinson Hospital Nursing School. I transformed myself from a dependent person to a person my family could depend on...I started supporting my widowed mother. In retrospect, the course I took was the right one from every possible angle. Whatever I've missed in formal education, I can still catch up now that I'm retired and have enough time to study a broad spectrum in many fields. And that's a very satisfying life! And instead of two diplomas, I have two wonderful children – the source of my pride and happiness.

### L. One with a Big Ass and the Other a Dwarf

Hadassim also welcomed a couple of Europeans who had spent their wartime years in far better circumstances than others. Their first years were spent under German control, but their parents weren't murdered and they endured the war without any serious traumas. These were Yoseph Tanner from Romania, Rachel Basan- Margalit from Bulgaria and Albert Benveniste from Greece. Yoseph Tanner felt uncomfortable with the manuscript version of this chapter, and he told us why: "I don't belong with the Holocaust survivors." On the contrary, we think that Yoseph, Rachel and Albert indeed belong with this group, except the reasons they were saved, along with their families, were the special circumstances of their lands of origin. From our point of view – from the point of view of the Sabra – Yoseph, Rachel and Albert all come from that one historical experience – the Holocaust.



**Yoseph Tanner**

The day I arrived at Hadassim with my mother, I saw Yoseph Tanner there with his mother, too. Tanner's first memory of Hadassim: "Two girls playing with marbles, one with a big ass and the other tiny as a dwarf. The one with the big ass was Gila Hellman (of blessed memory), and the dwarf was Zafrira Shimel-Hauber."

My own first memory of Hadassim was my interview with Drora Aharoni, the executive assistant, in the office at the village entrance. Rachel Shapirah had told Drora that "The poet Rachel's niece will arrive today, and she's bringing her son. I have to be at the WIZO directorate in Tel Aviv, so you should interview him and find out what he's about." I remember walking into Drora's office with my mom. She looked surprisingly like my sixth grade teacher, Sara Hashiloni. I had loved Sara to the point of tears, and I'd even started to consider the question, at the time, of whether love was really one continuity, of whether every individual love could just be a different embodiment of one, single love. And it turned out that Love would be a central theme in Hadassim. We were geared and educated to love, and we did.

Drora asked why I wanted to choose Hadassim. She smiled a very soft, kind smile at me. She still had the same smile when I interviewed her for this book, fifty-three years later. She still remembered me as the grandson of the poet Rachel's sister on his first day at Hadassim. Of course, when my mother was asked why she thought I should be at this school, her answer was unhesitant: she and my father were simply overloaded with work and couldn't dedicate enough time to me. After all, they already had to work extra to finance my brother's studies in the U.S. At that point Drora turned to me with some eagerness. She wanted to know what I had to say. I answered her that I wanted to accumulate different experiences. I had already experienced enough urban school life, and now wanted to experience studying in a boarding school in the country.

"Well, besides experiencing things you'll also need to study," Drora replied.

"But studying is the most fascinating kind of experience for me," I told her.

After interviewing her for this book, and being impressed by her acute memory, I asked myself if she might still remember my answer. I speculated that she very well might. After all, in the eyes of the teachers at Hadassim I was an anarchistic kid. Today, some of them see me as contentious. My tenacity for myth-breaking is unpleasant for them.

My second memory of Hadassim is tied to Yoseph Tanner: Drora pointed me and my mother to a room in Unit 3, where I was destined to stay. I was surprised by the look of the long, flowing purple drapes. Our home in Yad Eliyahu didn't have any curtains, only wooden shades -- My parents belonged to the intellectual labor class of the third immigration wave. These drapes looked slightly bourgeois to me, similar to ones I'd seen in Northern Tel Aviv. I put my suitcase on the bed and looked up. Right above one of the beds hung a poster of the world discus champion. Drora mentioned that Gideon slept there. "Why should I care who sleeps there?" I thought to myself. "Judging by the poster, he doesn't deserve my attention. Probably some dumb ape!" I'd only hung one poster in my life, of course, of Albert Einstein -- sticking out his tongue.

I opened up my suitcase to start piling my things, and just then another student arrived. It was Yoseph Tanner, along with his mother. He was rather quiet, I thought. Definitely inhibited, as his eyes looked pretty sad. "A recent immigrant," I thought to myself. The two mothers in the room started conversing in Yiddish. My mother told him all about Rachel and Jeremiah, their work in Ben Shemen, the character of the studies in Hadassim and its unique qualities. Tanner's mom said that she had had to find a boarding school for him, because they were already sharing a house in Jalil with two more families, and because he didn't have any friends to play with. She wanted him to be around kids he could learn Hebrew from. Tanner and I were looking each other

without saying a word. He was older than me, taller and wider. I wondered to myself whether he was worth talking to.

Tanner would subsequently fill me in on his first impression of me: “You struck me as a typical Sabra - rough, lacking the European kind of manners, very laid back and frank.”

A short while later, Gideon Ariel, Chilli and Yakir Laufer came in very noisily. It's hard to say if I was really interested in this group. Gideon didn't say a word, not a squeak. He kept completely silent. Chilli told a joke, and Yakir was holding a lizard in his hand. The two mothers had left, and Tanner and I were left with these older kids. I couldn't have known then that I would be writing a book with Gideon – in fifty-two years.

Yoseph Tanner was born in 1938 in the city of Alba Julia, Transylvania (in central Romania), to Max and Clara Tanner. His grandfather, Berl, was a rich farmer. He owned a big wine-cellar and vineyard spread over 300 dunams, and he also grew flowers, wheat and barley, and exported their produce far and wide, especially to Austria. The earth in the region of Transylvania was a good fit for wine grapes. So Berl specialized in their growth at Alba Julia, and the European rich stood in lines and waited for their portions. Nonetheless the Tanners were genuine Zionists. They trained pioneers for settlement on their farm, and they longed for immigration to Eretz Israel.

Young Yoseph lived with his parents in their comfortable, sprawling house by the farm. He studied in a Jewish kindergarten and school, although they weren't taught in Hebrew. At the start of the war, the Tanners' property was expropriated by the state when Romania allied with Germany. They were allowed to share their house with other residents, and his father was conscripted to do heavy labor as the family managed to persevere with its savings. When the Red Army approached the city, the family took a carriage to one of the outlying neighborhood villages, where they leased an apartment and waited for the storm to pass.

Their property was promptly returned to them after the war. After a short period the Communists finally took complete control of Romania, at which time it applied the full gamut of communist policies: mass expropriations, forced communal residencies, and the breakdown of the family as means of righting the historical wrongs of the bourgeoisies. This only sped up the Tanners' immigration plans, and in 1950 they finally did move to Israel, staying with a relative for a year at first. The father found work as a street sweeper in Ramat Gan and Givaataim. Subsequently they moved to live in Jalil, where Max could work at the airport and Clara could commute to Ramat Aviv, where she worked in a hotel. That's where she met and befriended Yehudit Schwabe, and they used to meet there often for coffee with the rest of her Yekke girlfriends. Yehudit was the one

to suggest to Clara that Yoseph be sent to Hadassim. She took the whole family to visit the village. They took to it immediately, and Yoseph Tanner was allowed to join in our story.

## M. The Russians were Crueler than the Germans

Rachel Basan was born into a family of wealthy cheese makers in Sliven, Bulgaria. The parents, Raphael and Regina, were cultivated Zionists who spoke many languages, including Hebrew. According to the historian Martin Gilbert, a miracle descended on 48,000 or so Jews who lived in Bulgaria: they were spared the extermination camps, even after it had looked like they were all doomed. The Bulgarian government had indeed ordered the expulsion of the Jews, and a small number of them had already been transported to various camps. But the Bulgarian people reacted harshly to the expulsion order, including many intellectuals and church figures, and the government eventually caved to pressure and reversed their decision.



**The parents, Raphael and Regina**

In northern Bulgaria, peasants had forced trains to stop by throwing their own bodies on the tracks. The King himself intervened. Despite his German roots (he was a member of the Coburg family), he fiercely challenged anti-Semitic policies and confronted the Nazis. The liberation of the Jews of Bulgaria, on March 10, 1944, is known and celebrated in Bulgaria as “The Miracle of the Jewish people.”<sup>51</sup>

Rachel Basan: “We lived in a three-story private villa on Sliven’s main road, overlooking a huge courtyard and garden. There was a girl’s school facing our house which the German’s eventually appropriated for their headquarters. There were always two soldiers

standing guard at the gate, and every so often they took to washing their faces in the courtyard fountain and walking around half naked. They were especially careful about maintain cleanliness. I used to taunt and amuse them during wintertime, asking them whether it ‘frustrated’ them to have to stand in the cold. They called me ‘Baba.’

“One day the order finally came down for us to collect our things and present ourselves at the ‘collection station’ – the designated location where Jews were expected to surrender their lives and herded, like cattle, onto the trains destined for Auschwitz. The Jews had readied themselves for such an order. When the time came, my parents helped us (my sister, Simcha, and I) prepare for the trip, and then we left the house with our suitcases. We gave our house keys to one of our neighbors before walking toward

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<sup>51</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust- A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War*. An Owl book, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1987, p. 547.

the collection station at the school. The Germans were separating parents from their children, preparing to haul them off in separate groups, when they received a countermarching order and released us. My girlfriend's grandmother jumped up and down on the street corner and yelling 'We're staying! We're staying...'"



**Rachel Basan**

"But when the Russians freed Bulgaria from Germany's grip, the situation actually deteriorated. At least in Bulgaria, the Russians were even crueler than the Germans. That alone was the precursor for the mass immigration of Bulgarian Jews to Israel in 1949. My family had already left in 1948; we were actually among the first 34 people who received travel certificates from the Mandate government."

The Basan family arrived in Israel during the War of Independence. They came in without any of their previous wealth, and quickly settled in the Beit-Olim ("Immigrant Residence") in Pardes Hanna, while Rachel and her sister were sent to Kibbutz Ramat Rachel (just south of Jerusalem) to be integrated. Once the war intensified, they were sent to the "Onim" institution, near Kfar Sabba, along with the rest of the children. They returned to Ramat Rachel after the war, but the Kibbutz now refused to keep the "outsider," immigrant kids. Simcha was then sent to "Shfeya" while Rachel was sent to a girl's agricultural school in Ein Kerem, in Jerusalem. Being one of the younger girls in the school, she moved in with the director, Rachel Yanait Ben-Tzvi. She was soon moved again, this time to Shfeya, before finally settling in Hadassim.

Rachel: "I became very close with the Dotan family, often babysitting for them. The two Dotan daughters had subscriptions to the children's newsletter Haaretz Shelanu ("Our Country"), which included a correspondence section for stamp collectors. One of the kids in our class submitted a letter to Haaretz Shelanu that read, 'My name is Shalom Dotan, and I'm ten years old. I live in Hadassim and enjoy stamp collecting.'

"About a month later, Shalom Dotan came to class with two huge boxes full of letters, and he said, 'I haven't been able to verify which of you rascals sent that letter, but I know that any of you would be happy to pull off that kind of prank. So, here's something for you all to ponder: people who request responses to their ads tend to expect some responses. Each of you, therefore, will send a letter in response to every single one of these here letters, at your own expense.'"

It was an instructive lesson in vengeance, of the cleverest sort. I've always adored Shalom Dotan since then; his dialogic mentality, his sensitivity to the children who had innocently sent in responses to the prank ad, absolutely captured my heart. But on the other hand, the prank itself showed how deeply ingrained our class had become with the dialogic frame of reference.

## N. False Papers

Albert Benveniste was born in Salonika, Greece in 1940, the offspring of two ancient and aristocratic Sephardic families: Benveniste, on his father's side, and Gattegno from his mother's. Until WWII, the Jewish community was 70,000 strong in Salonika; it was an important and long-standing center of the Jewish Diaspora on the Mediterranean, rooted in centuries of cultural contribution. Salonika was part of the Ottoman Empire until the end of WWI, a polyglot and pluralistic oasis in which diverse communities enjoyed a healthy degree of autonomy.<sup>52</sup> It was a community whose collective consciousness was untouched by the European brand of anti-Semitism, and it was tragically unprepared for the ruin that the Germans brought with them when they reached Salonika in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Nazis injected



**Albert Benveniste**

this innocent Jewish community with their horrors, wholesale and unvarnished; ancient, venerable synagogues were burned to the ground, and the Jews were driven along with their bibles and books into the ovens of Auschwitz.

The half-year old baby Benveniste and his family were only spared these horrors by one man's crucial decision. The Greek minister of internal affairs offered the Benveniste family a chance to adopt false papers under Christian names (an offer allegedly extended to all the Jews, though apparently few of them understood it was necessary), and Albert's maternal grandfather, Vital Cohen, gratefully accepted. The identity switch obliged them to leave the Jewish community and live clandestinely, on the periphery of Athens, under their Christian names. Albert's Christianized name was Takis Vamvas.

Thus, Albert remembers the war years as a peaceful time. The family stayed in a private house in the suburbs. He fondly recollects playing under a pistachio tree with a group of friends and coming home with sticky fingers and mangled, dirty clothes -- to his mother's evident disgust. With the end of WWII, however, a terrible civil war broke out between the communists and nationalists. His parents intended to immigrate to Israel (his father was supposed to work for DUBEK, as he was friends with Martin Gehl) so when Albert was done with elementary school, rather than having him start high school in Greece, they sent him to Hadassim, so that at least one member of the family would speak Hebrew. He joined us there in 1952, when he was twelve years old.

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<sup>52</sup> Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, *Christians and Jews In the Ottoman Empire: The Function Of A Plural Society*. Homes & Meir Publishers, 1982.

Albert spoke Seven languages: Greek, English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Ladino. Now he added Hebrew to the list. “The teachers there were simply wonderful, and I absolutely adored living there. If anyone says that he hasn’t felt the impact of Hadassim, then he’s insane.”

As the deal with Dubek didn’t work out, his parents brought him back to Greece. He’s made a life for himself in France, where he works in the tourism business.

### O. ”Kid, what do you see through that window glass?”

Avigdor Shachan survived the Holocaust of the Jews of Transnistria (in the region of Bessarabia). A celebrated poet and author, philosopher and master of the Kabbalah, an educator and military historian, he survived the depths of hell only to expose it in all of its grim details to the rest of the world, documenting for the first time the extent of the Bessarabian Holocaust. Thus, his story is greater even than ours. The nucleus of his narrative is the Immovable Mover; his is the secret behind the struggle against the angel of death. His own words will testify here:



**Avigdor Shachan**

“I was born in 1934 in the Bessarabian city of Chutin. My parents moved 70 kms east to the village of Comarov when I was only a year old. My mother’s parents had lived in that village since its inception: my maternal grandfather, Rabbi Mordechai Forman, his wife Liba, along with his eight sons and daughters. My father was a merchant, and in keeping with traditions back then my family also kept a small shop, which my mother managed. My only sister, Miriam, was born three years after me. She was both a sister and a friend; together we organized a wedding ceremony for the cat and the goat out in the courtyard. We put a lot of effort into dressing them both up for the occasion, but the cat ran away after lapping up the ceremonial food, leaving the goat alone on the altar.

“Our days in Comarov were the happiest that we had before life in Israel. When I turned three, my grandfather, wrapped up in his beard and the Tallith as a rabbi should be, dragged me to the village Heder [traditional Jewish elementary school]. I remember vividly how he led me there through the garden beds, his gray beard tickling my cheek throughout. He introduced me to the teacher and left, but not before giving the children some sweets that he had brought with him. When I went back to the Heder a few days later, I had a bad feeling about going in. I knocked on the door, just to prove that I had been there, and ran back home. When my mother saw me she lunged for me with her dough-stained hands and yelled at me. I mumbled something to the effect that there wasn’t any school that day. To this day the cries that issued from her still ring in my ears. ‘Yankle!’ – short for father’s name – ‘Take him back to the Heder immediately!’

He was a little more sympathetic, and he smiled at me and said, ‘I never liked going to the Heder myself....maybe we can let him stay home, just today...’ When she heard that she immediately ran to wash her hands in the sink, gripped my hand and dragged me back to the Heder with all her might. And it wasn’t a short walk, either. When we got there she stormed in and yelled, to everyone, ‘My son lied to me – he said there weren’t any lessons today!’

“Then, like a fiery tempest, she walked out forcefully and left me there, blushing like a tomato. I still feel that same blushing and trembling shame today when I remember it, but I’ve ever missed a single day of school or work after that, not for any reason.

“I remember learning the Hebrew Alphabet, which I loved from the first time it was shown to me. I imagined the letters were birds nesting inside me, buried there from the beginning of time. When finally unleashed they allowed me to fly far above. I still feel that way about the Hebrew script; I can’t even pass by a Hebrew book without peering into it.

“In June 1940, forty-eight hours after the Soviets issued Romania an ultimatum to evacuate Bessarabia (which was Russian territory before 1919), the Red Army invaded. The Zionist left tended to greet Russian soldiers with flowers and cheer, as heroes and liberators. That rather warm reception would haunt the Jews when, only a year later in June 1941, the Romanians’ ‘liberating’ army (flanked by Germany) reinvaded in full force, turning the grounds of Bessarabia into a theatre of rape and murder, leaving 50,000 Jewish corpses in their wake.

“When the Red Army had originally entered Bessarabia and installed their communist regime, it closed down all the Jewish schools (the only disseminators of Hebrew) and forbade all religious rituals. I had only recently been given permission to begin the study of the Mishna [Codified Jewish Law] and Gemara [Commentary on Jewish Law – both texts together constitute the Talmud]. With the Heder forced to close shop, however, and with the tutors now afraid to visit any of the villages, my mother decided that we would move to Chutin, my father’s birthplace, where we would be close to his family and old friends. The idea didn’t excite him at all, but mother kept nagging with the idea that her ‘genius’ son (as my tutor had nicknamed me) needed the clandestine home schooling that was available there. Once he’d had enough of it, he arranged to rent a house in his old town, and soon we were off. We had to leave all of our possessions in the old village in order to avert suspicion from the local communist union.”

“The house that we rented in Chutin stood on the main avenue of the town, a very noisy location. I hated having to move there from the village, as I’d preferred the old atmosphere a great deal. Indeed, on the very night of our arrival, my parents woke us all

up, wrapped us in covers, and we all ran outside terrified. The streets were filled with people looking up at the flying ‘stars,’ as bomber planes assembled on their way to the Ukraine, letting loose in the far distance, the bombs echoing all the way across the Dniester.

“The next day I began nagging and crying to my parents about going home – meaning back to our village in Comarov. My father could hardly stand to hear it, and eventually all my begging seemed to work when he harnessed the carriage back on the horses. Then he said something about how it was impossible to ride back, that we would have to go by foot, but it turned out that he was just trying to calm me down. He was also looking for a basement we could use for shelter. We finally left the house; father closed the heavy gate to our house, and we walked out into the main street. We only managed to pass a short distance when we saw a Ukrainian man up about fifty steps ahead of us. He was carrying water buckets tied to a pole that he carried on his shoulders, when all of a sudden we heard the hissing sound of shell. And then, just like that, the man’s head was no longer on his shoulders and his body drooped and fell to the ground. Father led us into a nearby house and we found ourselves walking down the steps to a basement full of people overwhelmed with fright. Minutes later, someone was yelling outside that the city’s four corners were on fire. We ran outside to see it for ourselves, and indeed Chutin was burning. The whole Jewish section of town was built of connected housing blocks, all sharing one long roof made of wood or tin. Once the fire caught on edge of the roof, it spread very quickly through the whole length of the street, scorching the building units with manic abandon. The tin roofs were the most vulnerable and dangerous, because they would collapse in very short order, reeling off the buildings and sending little roof-morsels flying down on the street like mini-bombs.



**Avigdor Shachan and his sister**

“Father yelled for us to follow him and we ran back toward our house. When we finally got there father struggled hard to open the heavy entrance gate, and he finally managed to climb over it and leap down onto the carriage he’d harnessed to the horses on the other side. We could hear him yelling at the horses to plow into the fence, finally managing to bring it down and then roaring for us to climb onto it. The whole city was aflame, with smoke rising and filling the streets from every corner.

“Father stirred the horses through the blazing hot streets, with piles of tin roof falling all around us. Lost in the chaos, parents and relatives ran around in search of their children, many of whom were just trying to escape the hellish fire. Many people screamed to be let on the carriage as we passed close to them, and father couldn’t refuse these people, many of whom were childhood friends. By the end, there were thirteen men, women and children riding with us, including one of father’s friends, “Shorty” Meirke. Shorty’s wife and children had already fled the town days earlier, and he had

remained, not wanting to desert his small shop. There was a Red Army soldier with us on the carriage, a Jew, who hadn't been able to get to the bridge in time to cross over to the Ukraine."

"My father struggled to maneuver the carriage through the burning streets, getting as far as he could before the path ahead was too severely blocked and the openings too narrow. At that point he stopped and jumped down, telling us to hold on as strongly as we could, and began pulling frantically on the harness and whipping the horses with all his might. Eventually we were able to get about five kilometers away from the city, at which point we stopped near one of the houses in a Christian village. Within minutes, a man came out and embraced my father. I found out that this man was the son of the house's owners, a couple who had known my father well before they died. My father and this man were both clearly shaken by what was happening to the city of their youth. We were invited to stay in the house until the danger had passed; the flames towering over the city landscape were so ferocious, visible from any point thirty kilometers away, that people still spoke of that night in the ghastliest terms for the next few decades.

"The house we stayed at that night was eminently peaceful, surrounded as it was by a small courtyard lined with fruit trees. That evening, my father offered some of his own clothes to the soldier who'd joined us as we fled the city; he told the boy that it was too dangerous to keep his uniform. The next morning, creeping smoke was still emanating from every corner of the dying city, and we stood around the carriage and gazed almost unwillingly at the carnage. Suddenly, around ten o'clock, we saw Shorty moving towards us on the road ahead; no one had noticed that he'd left, but apparently he'd snuck out of the courtyard earlier and walked back to the smoldering city. He was very excited now, and he explained that the Germans occupiers were apparently behaving quite generously, even treating the children to chocolate. In short, he thought we should go back.

"We turned to look at my father to gauge his reaction. He climbed onto the carriage and reached for Shorty's suitcase, then climbed back down and handed it to him. He told him that we would stay.

"But Shorty's reaction astonished me: 'I won't go alone; I won't let everyone risk their lives here. You brought us here and now you're going to take us back... We're in danger here...' Then an argument began, where everyone took Shorty's side while father insisted on his position -- he was a rock. A long time has passed since then, but I always recall this scene when I'm confronted with a dilemma. Everyone was certain that we had to choose, that the wrong choice meant death, so the argument only got louder, even scary. Finally my mother whispered to her husband: 'If everyone wants to go back, let's go back...' At that point my father's face turned completely pale and trembled with rage. Finally he said, in hushed voice, 'Good, let's go back, then. You've forced me to go. Now everyone onto the carriage!!' And then he jumped back up and started grabbing the

harness. The German scouts who had been watching all this from the treetop chose precisely that moment to jump down, catching us off our guard; two of them aimed their rifles at my father, while the third talked into his radio and reported that they'd found a group of Russian spies who were trying to escape across the Dniester. One of them forced my father off the carriage and grabbed the harness, and the other two ordered the rest of us to follow them back toward the front. All of this happened very quickly, and we could do nothing but follow them in abject obedience while shaking in fear. My sister walked and leaned against my mother, and I walked close to my father and the two soldiers behind us. The Jewish soldier leaned toward my father and whispered something in his ear. It turned out that father had put the Red Army uniform on the carriage, instead of throwing it away..."

"We reached the front. Lines and lines of German soldiers lying in makeshift ditches...our captors lying down against the carriage next to us...their commander issuing incessant orders, asking his superiors what he should do about us...shells exploding all around us.

"Suddenly, soviet planes appeared over the horizon and began their bombardment, and craters began appearing all around. Then one of the intelligence officers who was coming toward us was hit. When the air raid was over, we looked around and saw that the soldiers who'd dragged us toward the front were gone. We'd remained alone on the front, a lone 'unit' separate from the others, all the while still leaning back and kneeling up against the carriage that had taken us through the whole journey. And now Shorty was gone, too.

"Hours passed. More German units ran passed us, covering their heads and hugging whatever ditch they could to protect themselves from the relentless beating of shells, covering their ears to protect from the macabre noise of earth-shattering explosions and dying soldiers. As soon as there appeared to be a short respite, soldiers would line up and continue forward in disciplined fashion.

"In the evening a thin rain started coming down on the empty field. We were still alone. Suddenly two soldiers approached us, a major and a private. The officer stopped next to the carriage and asked what we were doing. Father started explaining that he used to be in the Romanian military and that we were escaping the fire and didn't know where to go. He told the officer that other soldiers had warned us to stay where we were.

"The officer responded, 'You were a sergeant major and you still don't know what to do?! Put your family on the carriage and go away from here...'

“My father urged the horses back toward the dark and deformed city. At the entrance to the city center stood a soldier that was visibly shaken and wet, trembling from cold, and when he saw us passing by he gestured for my father to stop. Father told us to hold tight as we accelerated through the street to avoid him, and we finally arrived at the house of a relative. We walked downstairs to the basement, where there were other people hiding out, a whole plethora of the city’s Jews. We found Shorty there, too. The next morning the Jews of the city were ordered to assemble in the Hebrew Gymnasium. Hundreds of us were crowded into the two-story building, where we were herded into the classrooms. We were locked inside.

“We stood there pressed tightly against one another -- one block of meat. I found myself pushed into the window sill, and my legs flung out helplessly as I tried to grab onto the window frame.

“Hours passed and we were still standing. Then suddenly the doors opened and a Romanian soldier came in and told everyone he was authorized to move all the Rabbis and other community leaders to a more hospitable room, and he also promised to find someplace more comfortable for a few others who could join them.

“A buzz spread through the crowd, and some people began arguing heatedly.

Everyone knew that this announcement meant that two groups were being separated here, that one group was doomed and the other wasn’t. But which group was which? Many people thought that the rabbis wouldn’t be touched – it simply couldn’t happen -- so they decided to sneak out with them. Mother looked at my father, searching him for an answer. So he answered: “We’re staying here.” And so it was, our own brand of Russian roulette: one group stayed, one group left.

“Just then, a group of people marched through the courtyard downstairs. Some were in black uniforms, others wore plain clothes, and both were accompanied by an armed Romanian guard unit. Then the courtyard was empty. One of the young men who’d stayed with us suddenly decided it was better to leave with the others, and ran to the door. I didn’t get a look at his eyes, but I glimpsed his sleek raincoat and his elegant black hat. Just as he stepped out to the corridor, however, he stopped, as if considering what to do; then he started taking a couple of steps back. A Romanian officer arrived just then and saw him hesitating. He decided to let the young man make a final decision, gesturing at the group of “notables” that had chosen to leave. The boy chose to go with them.

“This same group of ‘notables’ was taken to the shores of a lake near the city, one later known ‘the lake of bad waters.’ All forty-two of them were murdered there...

“A few years later, I found myself back in Chutin after returning from Transnistria. I was already eleven. I went for a visit to the ‘lake of bad waters’ with a group of my fellow Chutin survivors, to see where those Jewish men had stood, to see things through their eyes, and to honor them by digging up their sacred bones so we could bury them in the Jewish cemetery -- as was only just. Looking through the piles, I came upon what I thought were the bones that belonged to that boy, with the sleek gray raincoat and sporty hat. I was eight years old when I first saw that boy, standing there in the corridor outside the classroom, vacillating over his life or death bet. Ever since then, I never hesitate when I’m confronted with a difficult choice. I think carefully, and decide quickly.”

“By nighttime we’d been released from the school building, and looking through our dark windows we could see dozens upon dozens of Ukrainian carriages wading through town. Right before dawn the next day, we were ordered into the streets. The elderly were being placed in carriages so they’d be more comfortable – that’s what the soldiers said. Several hours later these defenseless old men and women were shot and buried in the forests. Our years-long journey had begun, a journey of agony to Transnistria.

“Trembling and wading through the heavy snow and freezing frost, we arrived in the village of Popovitz, near the town of Kopaigorod in Transnistria. So named by Hitler himself, it was a zone between the Dniester and the Bog rivers. The Romanian authorities used it to built Ghettos for the Jews of Bessarabia and Bukovina – as well as its own Jews. They assigned these prisoners to sundry deserted warehouses, pig sheds, and houses of already liquidated Ukrainian Jews. The empty house we took had a big entrance hall and two small rooms on the right side. Since we’d gotten there first, my father chose the bigger room for us, where there was a wooden table in addition to a big bed and two small chairs. The bed linen was still spread out neatly on the bed – a sizable featherbed with a big pillow and a thick comforter. Soon the house was crowded with deportees. By the next day, however, two were already dead, and many would soon follow; until our liberation by the Red Army, 180 would die there – men, women, the old and the young. They either starved or froze to death, and with every death there was room for newcomers. Bodies were carried away every morning as a matter of course; they were left in the snow at the entrance, since the far hill in the distance, the only other suitable location, was impossible to reach, and too bitterly frozen for a mass grave.

“The family that settled on the big bed in our house died very soon, one by one, and still others came to replace them. They, too, were dragged off in the snow in due time. People in the house became accustomed to referring to people by numbers and signs, since the dead were simply too many. It was only natural, of course; we hardly knew each other before any of this torture had beset us and entwined us together. Remembering these signs and numbers became tremendously important; perhaps even the main concern in the house. We became suddenly anxious if we forgot to count

someone, as it was a sign that no one would remember us when our own day would come.

“Among those we counted as dead – I would carry them in memory for years, until they became a part of me – was a family of three. All my years in this land of the living haven’t obscured the death of these people from me; I still hear their anguish.

“It was still our first winter in Transnistria, several months after we first arrived at this ‘Death House,’ which was our nickname for it. A heavy storm was running wild, and we’d already burned all the furniture in the house in order to keep warm in the preceding weeks. Only one chair was left, and I can’t really say I know why it survived. It was on that day, around noon, that the entrance door to the main room suddenly flew open, and in came a young man wearing a beautiful blue coat and a gray hat, followed by a woman with a sterling gray coat and wearing a handkerchief on her head. She carried something else with her – a three year old chubby girl. My attention turned to the girl’s orange coat, and the small peaked hat on her head. The man shut the door behind him and the three of them scanned the room, taking note of several people on the floor who were clearly dying. The other squatters observed these newcomers with cold indifference, the frank indifference that can only follow from knowing that the person you’re looking at is practically dead already. The ritual of counting all the dead was almost the only time people in the ‘Death House’ conversed with one another; there was no energy left for talking, and there was nothing to say – everything was already set, determined, written down – and only the Angel of Death was free.

“It wasn’t surprising, then, that the three standing at the entrance weren’t greeted with warm hugs and sunshine, or even a single word of acknowledgment. After turning a few times to look at the room with the big empty bed, the man pointed toward it and the woman followed him. No one could resist settling in that bed. They sat on the edge at first. The man sighed and covered his face with his hands, and the three of them just stayed silent. After a while, the woman laid the girl down and then took her place next to her; the young man continued to sit at the edge and cover his face for long hours. Finally he pulled up the blanket, took his shoes off and lay next to his wife and daughter. They stayed like that for three days, one long embrace. On the fourth day the man suddenly rose up and sat back on the edge; he put his shoes on and then whispered something in his wife’s ear. ‘No, don’t go...’ we heard her cry softly under the covers.

‘I have to go. I’ll sell the hat and return.’

“He walked out, careful not to step on anyone in the entrance hall. He reached the door and stopped, glancing at the people in the room and on the bed, and left.

“Under the only window in the big room lay the ‘Old Professor,’ a Ukrainian Jew with a most mysterious personality. We didn’t really know where he was from or how he came to be with us. One of the residents had heard secretly that the old man was a renowned psychology professor at an important university in Moscow, and that his son was a senior officer in the Red Army. The old man was pale-faced and short, with long silvery hair and a white beard that added nobility to his gentlemanly visage. ‘The Professor’ was respected by all the residents. All of us in the house belonged to a single class: the deathly hungry, the frozen, the psychically withdrawn. Nevertheless, when we looked at this man it was always with reverence. On rare occasions the professor would grace us with a brief utterance, long enough to reveal deep insight. When the first dead man lay in the center room, and all us had turned our heads away, the professor was the one to carry him outside and bury him in the snow with his bare hands, returning to his seat without saying a word. And thus he treated all of our dead, all those who departed for a better world than the one they knew in the ‘Dead House’.”

“And now, when the young man with the blue coat and sporty cap shut the door behind him, the professor whispered, ‘That’s the last you’ll see of him.’ Everyone heard this but the wife and daughter, both still locked in an embrace under the bed cover.

“The husband wasn’t back by evening. He wasn’t back the next day, either. The next night, the house was shaken by a soul-shattering cry – and all of the world’s grief was condensed into one. Never have I heard the like, not before or after. The woman’s grief descended to silence, and she began mumbling something to her daughter, mumbling the same syllables over and over, kissing her and pressing her to her chest.

‘The infant is dead, too,’ the professor whispered from the darkness.

All night the woman held her daughter, whispering stories to her.

“Four days after her husband had gone, the woman was still mumbling stories in a tired, hoarse voice. When afternoon came, the professor rose gently and approached the woman.

‘Give me the child...’ he said.

‘My child is asleep and I must not wake her up,’ she told him.

The professor didn’t move. ‘Give me the child,’ he repeated softly. His voice was gently pleading, genuinely sorrowful.

‘I won’t give up my daughter. She is asleep. It’s wrong to wake her...’ Her voice seemed firm, but with every word it began to trail off into nothingness.

The professor wouldn’t budge. ‘It is not comfortable for her to sleep here...Give her to me and I will lay her outside in the snow. She’ll feel warmer in the snow...’

‘I won’t surrender her...I will not...I will not give her to anyone,’ her voice grew dimmer and dimmer.

The Professor knelt over her on the bed, moved his hands to her protective arms, gently gripped the child and then pulled her away.

‘Let me just say goodbye to her.’ She embraced her daughter once more, putting her lips to her baby girl’s face. He pulled her away for the last time and slowly turned toward the door. When she heard the door shut, when her girl was finally taken from her, she uttered a final, anguished, deafening scream.

The Professor returned and lay down on his spot. His steps were weaker now. Around midnight, one final excruciating scream radiated through the house, and we all covered our heads and waited.

‘She’s dead,’ whispered the professor.

In the morning, with his last rays of energy, he walked toward the woman on the bed. He took her corpse and carried it outside, leaving it amongst the others. He stayed out there for a long time. When he finally returned to his sack under the window, he looked up toward the ceiling. Then, with his eyes pressed shut and his face twisted in eviscerated grief, he muttered ‘I put them to sleep, embraced in each other’s arms...When the snow will melt, I pray that you burry them as I laid them...’

The same evening, two men dragged the professor’s frozen body out the door. When they returned they said, ‘We lay him together with them...’

On an evening in March, 1944, an unfamiliar man appeared in our house in Popovitz, Transnistria. He told us that he was a partisan fighter, and that he knew that the Red Army was getting nearer to us. From that day we began seeing the German army preparing to withdraw, loading up their trucks outside the village. The rumor in those

days was that a withdrawing German army tended to kill the Jews in its custody. Several days passed and another bad rumor spread in the ghetto: An action was planned for our village the next day. Most of the men panicked. My father had recently managed to get his hands on some skis, and I used to sneak out of the ghetto to use them. On one such occasion I met several Ukrainian boys. That was right after president Roosevelt had announced on the radio that whoever assisted in the murder of Jews would be punished after the war. It was already after the battle of Stalingrad, where the Germans were dealt an overwhelming defeat, so many Ukrainians in the region began to change their attitude. They often smiled, even offered food – all to ensure an alibi for themselves in case the Russians would return.”

“On the day the rumored Action was supposed to happen, my father and I were walking together, when he suddenly pulled me aside. ‘My son, you are almost eleven years old. An Action is about to happen in our Ghetto. Quickly, put on your coat; take your skis and get yourself out of here. And remember, my boy: if you hear gunshots, it means we’re being executed. If that happens you should get away as fast as you can, and join the partisan fighters...and then after the war, do everything you can in order to reach Eretz Israel...’

“When he saw that I wasn’t hurrying to do as he said, he picked up the skis and forced them into my hands, pushing me away. I got a few hundred feet away from the village when suddenly a group of Ukrainian boys noticed me. They looked like they were whispering to each other, then they approached me. ‘Vitia!’ – that was my Russian name -- ‘Let’s do some skiing! Come play with us!’

“‘Let’s compete!’ I responded. They’d already started down toward the fields, and I sped up to get to them. I was happy when they pulled up near the village. They stopped at the slope and said, ‘Let’s see who can go faster,’ and started quick-sliding with me following close behind. The slope kept getting longer and steeper than I expected, and I didn’t notice it when they slowed down to let me pass. Suddenly I found myself hovering in the air over an abyss of a wide riverbed. I pulled my legs in and pressed my eyes shut, landing on the edge of the riverbed. When I recovered, I checked myself for injuries. Meanwhile, my Ukrainian buddies stood above me on the rock and mocked me, then they left after they’d finished amusing themselves. I started to climb up but the rocks only got taller and less manageable, and then it sounded like an animal was howling somewhere close by. I was still slipping on the rocks, and my tears began freezing on my cheeks. Finally I managed to climb up all the way to the top, but the sun had already set, and I wouldn’t be able to find the village now.”

“It was dark, and the snow was shining bright to the end of the horizon. I continued downhill until I noticed sparks rising up with chimney smoke ahead, so I turned in that direction. It was my village, Popovitz. I approached the small church near my house, and stopped to check if there were any life signs coming from there. I’d never

seen the house like that before, at night from the outside. The silence was frightening. I went around it and observed from a distance; it was still completely dark, still not a sound came from it. My legs felt weak as I approached the window to peer inside: I could see absolutely nothing through the frozen glass. I turned to the door and opened it carefully; I saw everyone there lying in the big entrance hall exactly as they were when I left.”

“Two weeks later, Red Army entered our village. We were astonished to see our liberators, as they were nothing more than infantry battalion of boys. Children, even. They just passed through the village, and adult soldiers followed in their tracks, passing through on their way to Kopaigorod and from there to Mogilev on the Dniester. A communist board was installed in the village, and it called on everyone to enlist in the party. My father was one of the people to do so. When they gathered all the new party members in the village square, they arranged for an orchestra. The enlisted men lined up in three rows, with the orchestra marching before them. The rows marched forward all the way to Kupaigorod, where women appeared on the side of the road, accompanying the men, singing and crying out. Their cries mixed together with the melodies, and as I walked alongside my father I put my hand in his.”

“When I we got far enough from the village, my father begged me to go home. I began crying, and refused to leave him. He stood up straight, gave me a brisk hug and whispered close to my ear, ‘Now you’re the man in the house...Take care of the family...’

“Several days later my mother rented a house with a Ukrainian woman, a mother with two children. In exchange for some clothes – which the Ukrainians craved – she was able to secure a coachman who could take us to Mogilev. It was a spring morning and still quite cold, with my sister along with the Ukrainian and her two children on the carriage, and my mother and I walking after them. As we started to move farther from the ‘Death House,’ my mother turned to me and commanded the following: ‘You must tell everything you saw here...Promise me that...’ I promised it without even knowing what it would mean for me, because as it happens this promise moved in parallel with the course of my life.”

The spirit that dictated the course of his life, over and beyond his mother’s commandment, is the thing we began this story with, the beginning of the beginning - the Immoveable Mover. It was that spirit within him that can explain his struggle with the angel of death. The initial arena of this spiritual struggle was the house in Transnistria -- the “Death House” -- where Avigdor’s spirit allowed him to interface in a truly meaningful dialogue with the “Professor,” an interaction that shaped the rest of his life.

Avigdor: “I was already eight or nine when we lived in that house, an old child, mentally mature. It was only a year or two before that I’d studied Chumash and Rashi [a

classical Jewish commentator], and a little bit of Mishna. So it's not as if I came to the house as an ignorant child and then suddenly met the 'Professor' by chance.

"I was always inclined toward solitude and daydreaming, and from the first time I met this man I worshipped him. It was the bond of death between us – the bond that held between all of us at the 'Death House'. There was a man who lived there who had three kilos of gold, as rumor had it. He was originally from Tschernovitz, had traveled to the U.S. and made a lot of money before returning to Tschernovitz to get married. He'd brought all his gold and possessions back with him, only the war caught up to him too. He lost all his loved ones in the agonizing journey, and all of his gold lost its value in Transnistria – the Ukrainians didn't differentiate between gold and their own yellow metal. We all knew that he had gold, and we knew he was dying. He knew it, too. 'Don't get your hopes up,' he told us. 'I already threw all my gold in the river, since it couldn't even buy me a meal.' No amount of gold would have made us like this man, but on the other hand the professor was accorded the same reverence as any heroic personage, because he took leadership in the toughest situations, he was willing to lead in confrontation with death. He would say in one sentence what someone else needed an hour of conversation to say. He had a keen perceptiveness, an immediate, synaptic insight into the people he met. The entire house had only one unbroken chair, and I used to stand on it and admire the eerie geometrical beauty of the ice crystals on the window glass. I could spend whole days doing that, for hours at a time. I'd play imaginary games, pretending to change the color of the ice to yellow, or imagining that I was one of King David's soldiers during his escape from Saul, training with the sword and spear, or imagining the course of the lost tribes [of Israel]. And the Professor lay there on his sack, looked up at me and said, 'Child, what do you see in the glass?' And I answered, 'King Saul and the ten tribes...'

"And then he told me, 'Come, I'll show you something.' There was a pile of papers at the entrance, and he said, 'Bring me some of those pages.' This man could grab my attention like it was nothing. Apparently he wasn't just a psychology professor, but also one of the greatest graphologists in the world. So I brought him a few pages and sat down next to him as he began his lesson. 'Every human being has different hand-writing because his character is different; his personal qualities are expressed in his every gesture. I can show you how this is true when it comes to writing.'

"Years later, when I served in the army reserves, people would fight with each other over access to my handwriting analysis. I'd read a person's handwriting and decipher the man's character or locate where a man's disease was located. One time a father of a girlfriend of mine had died, and she asked me over to her house so I could look at someone's handwriting. I arrived there for tea-time, a common custom then. There was an older couple there, and the husband was rather elegantly dressed, with a nice suite and a tie – quite unusual in those simple times. I had no idea the whole situation was orchestrated from the start. They asked me to decipher a piece of handwriting; I said that its owner had a tumor in his brain, and the older gentleman in the suit asked me several times if I was certain about this. I told him I was, and said I was

willing to bet on it. Suddenly, I felt like somehow I'd caused this man some embarrassment, and the atmosphere wasn't so friendly. I only found out later that the sample I had diagnosed belonged to my girlfriend's father, and that the man with the suit had been his doctor – and he'd failed to diagnose her father's tumor at the time.”

“There was another time when I had a friend who worked for a graphologist, a German doctor. She used to write down his analysis. One day she brought along with her, and I was able to decipher in condensed form what took him up to three pages. He offered me partnership with him, though I refused. Years after that I was in Mexico as director of a Yeshiva where I was also a Kabbalah professor, and there was a graphology professor there who wanted me to do a doctorate in his field. I refused, because graphology was only one aspect of my life. The field in its earlier stage was deep and essential, not merely technical as it is today. The ‘professor’ had given me knowledge that was essential and holistic, a completely different method from the current one. Once there were principles, and the study of the principles enabled their proper application.

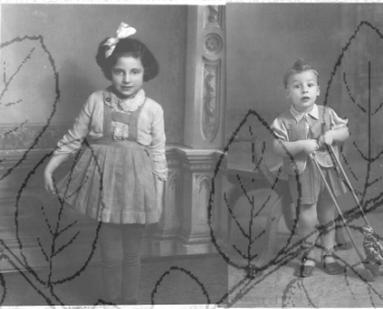
“The Professor's influence on my life was immense: his behavior was calm and his attitude pure; he always spoke in a highly essentialized way, which always impressed me. ‘Always see what the person is in his real nature...look, this one here: he's frivolous...’ People were dying everywhere and here he was rejuvenating them, practically bringing them back to life right in front of my eyes. His influence on me was also very intuitive and spiritual. He showed me a great deal of respect even when I was only a child. Subsequently I thought he'd consider me as someone who could continue his life work. But he would say, ‘Let me teach you, and then when all of you get out of here you'll have a profession in life.’ ‘He had beauty, nobility, gentleness. He would talk to you face to face. And that's the way I deal with my students. I learned it from him.

“He had a tremendous impact on me spiritually, and I can also say that he transformed my personality: I'm very hot-headed and excitable by nature, but through him I learned how to control and guide it. The professor was a human being of extraordinary character. I intend to write a book that describes his death, one that shows that his soul was allowed entry into Jerusalem. I've been holding on to this story for many years now.”

“Where can wisdom be found?” asked the author of The Book of Job, and we don't have the answer. Yet we are certain that the wisdom of young Shachan was crystallized in his Jungian play, in his journeys within, and in his early observations of the ice crystals in the window glass, where he was magically beyond the grasp of an otherwise omnipresent death. My path crossed with Shachan's several times throughout my life: in Hadassim, in the army, in the Academy and then in writing this book. The man has always embodied for me the generational wisdom and mystery of Judaism, a mystery which Zionism and especially Sabra culture tried to purge from the cultural

conversation. What I wanted from Shachan was only a modest pinch of that mystery and wisdom, as I craved to reconnect with Judaism. For his part, he was willing to show me everything. At the time, however, I wasn't willing to process his brand of wisdom unless I could benefit from it in some way. It's only now that I've traveled together with Gideon in a journey into the souls of my generation and genealogy, that I've grasped something of Shachan's wisdom. It's a Wisdom that Shachan offers with his seeming slowness, since haste is borne of the devil.

Shachan was the first man interviewed for this book. We sat together in my study, and he astonished me with details of his story and the level of his insights. What we have taken from him, and what we've begun to understand about the character of the "professor," has allowed us to interpret the educational marvel of Hadassim.



THE OASIS  
OF DREAMS

