

The Meeting Between the Jewish Soldiers from
Palestine Serving in the British Army and
“She’erit Hapletah”
by
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As the activities of the Palestinian soldiers among the Jews in the liberated countries are discussed extensively in my book,¹ I will not go into detail here. I will, however, attempt to spotlight some of the major aspects of this subject and to place the events in their broad historical context.

Late in 1942 there was a shift in the awareness and attitude of the Yishuv vis-a-vis the Holocaust and, concomitantly, in the motivating factors behind volunteering for service in the British army. The cause was twofold: the reports reaching Eretz Israel about the mass murders in Europe; and, especially, the arrival in the country, in November, of a group of exchangees from Poland. However, the change in attitude did not take the form of mass volunteering for the British army. Indeed, by the end of 1942, 80 percent of all those who would eventually volunteer had already enlisted; only about 20 percent of the volunteers enlisted after 1942, when the Holocaust became a known fact. The change of attitude occurred mainly among those who were *already* serving in the British army.

In late 1942 and early 1943, the soldiers from Palestine were seized with a desire to exact revenge and to fight the Germans directly. Of those who had joined up in 1940-1941 under the slogan of "the defense of Eretz Israel" and had been assigned to infantry and artillery units in Eretz Israel, many now sought to reach the front and see actual combat duty. Heightening their desire to be sent to the European theater was the knowledge that by early 1943 the front had moved away from Eretz Israel — in all probability, permanently.

¹ Yoav Gelber, *Jewish Palestinian Volunteering in the British Army During the Second World War, Vol. III: The Standard Bearers — Rescue Mission to the Jewish People*, Jerusalem, 1983.

The soldiers' aspiration to reach the front, which entailed leaving the country, aroused opposition, particularly from parties of the Zionist Left: "Si'ah Bet" of Mapai and Ha-Shomer ha-Za'ir. Objections to the idea of the soldiers being sent out of the country, voiced from the war's outset, had abated somewhat in the period when Eretz Israel faced imminent danger, and had now resurfaced. Thus, for example, in the renewed polemic over the territorial parameters that enlistment in the British army and participation in the war should obligate, Yitzhak Tabenkin accused those wishing to leave Eretz Israel for the front of "pursuing adventures." In short order the entire question became the subject of a public debate among the soldiers themselves and throughout the Yishuv and remained so all during 1943. Those who supported the idea of going to the front adduced two main arguments:

- (1) A desire to fight the Germans and exact revenge.
- (2) The hope of being able to participate in the liberation of the survivors and of being on hand to offer them the help they would need immediately afterward.

The assistance of the Jewish units to the Jews of Libya at the time of its liberation in late 1942, and in the years following, indicated the great potential that could be reaped from the service of Palestinian soldiers in a liberation army and in garrison duty in liberated areas. Those who opposed the idea of soldiers leaving the country maintained that the meeting of the Yishuv with the survivors could wait until their arrival in Eretz Israel and that, for the present, it was best to concentrate the effort at home and prepare for the absorption process and not to embark on what was at best a doubtful mission.

In the late summer of 1943, when the debate was at its height, the Yishuv leaders once again revised their attitude toward the Holocaust. They now grasped that the stand taken by the survivors in the camps and in Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and perhaps elsewhere, would be crucial in determining the fate of Eretz Israel after the war. With this in mind, the Yishuv leadership now sought to make contact with the survivors while the war was still in progress, in order to educate them and direct their thinking so that at the critical moment their actions would be guided by the Zionist credo. In large measure, this outlook explains the renewed impetus given to the mission of the parachutists in 1944, the increased involvement of the Zionist leadership in the attempts to rescue Hungarian Jewry, and the arrival of Yishuv leaders and emissaries in the Balkans immediately after their liberation.

In the autumn of 1943, the reports received from the delegation in Istanbul reinforced the reasoning of those who advocated going to the front. Moshe Sharett, who had just returned from Istanbul, and Venya Pomeranz (Ze'ev Hadari), a member of the Istanbul delegation, told how heartened the Jews in the Diaspora had been to learn about the very existence of Jewish military units. They saw the Jewish soldier as the Yishuv's most representative emissary to *She'erit Hapletah* when the time came. According to Pomeranz:

I think that if the movement is to have forces after the war, if it is to have internal moral power, they will be the *chaverim* who will return from the front and those who will return from the Polish diaspora. I could tell you a lot about what the Jewish soldier represents for the *chaverim* in the Underground. For them he is a cataclystic force — it is the feeling that somewhere there is a Jewish man from Eretz Israel who is bearing arms. For them the Jewish might in Eretz Israel and Jewish military strength is everything, and there is no army like it in the whole European diaspora, in the whole Underground of European Jewry.²

Pomeranz also described the single-minded spirit shared by the activists of the various movements in their work among *She'erit Hapletah*. This unity, which derived from a shared fate, engendered the united pioneering movement, which, two years later, would be at the center of the encounter between the Yishuv and *She'erit Hapletah*. In marked contrast to this situation, Sharett related, the Yishuv delegation in Istanbul was run strictly along party lines and was wracked by discord.

Once the Yishuv leadership had grasped the role the survivors would play in the Zionist struggle after the war, they underwent a gradual change in their attitude toward the Diaspora, and particularly toward the principle of selective *aliyah*. As the war progressed, they realized that once the fighting ended the Yishuv would have to admit all those who would survive the Holocaust, or, as Golda Meir (Meyerson) put it in the autumn of 1943:

A change has occurred. We can no longer talk about *aliyah* in the same terms that we did ten years ago. We can no longer deal with *aliyah* and with

² Minutes of Mapai Central Committee meeting, August 24, 1943, Labor Party Archives (hereafter, LPA) 24/43.²

hakhsharah as we used to. Now it is a question of bringing every Jew, not because he is a farmer, but because he is a Jew and is in the ghetto.³

Shaul Avigur (Meirov) had this to say about post-war *aliyah*:

There is no question now of carrying out a winnowing process among the *olim*, because the members of our movement are few in the extreme and no pioneering movement or [appropriate] frameworks exist there. In practice, we will have to take whatever comes, with the exception of absolutely antisocial types and incorrigible criminals. We need a large dose of love for the Jewish people. Perhaps only their children will suit us in terms of mental outlook. The only thing we can do for them is to bring them to Eretz Israel as soon as possible.⁴

Ben-Gurion extended this approach to encompass also the Jews of the Middle East. Speaking at a meeting of the Jewish Agency Executive on June 20, 1944, i.e., after the invasion of Normandy, when the end of the war seemed imminent and arrangements for the post-war period began to appear urgent, Ben-Gurion said:

I hope that after the destruction of the six million the fate of the million who remain in Hungary will be better, and as hundreds of thousands of Jews will remain in Christian Europe and will be prime candidates for the soup kitchens of America, I say to open soup kitchens for them in Eretz Israel: bring them here and feed them here. Bring all the Jewish refugees who will remain in Europe to Eretz Israel.⁵

These sentiments reflect the prevailing conception of *She'erit Hapletah* by the Yishuv. The Yishuv was preoccupied with Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Bulgaria, countries where, it was believed, most survivors were to be found. For this reason, the Yishuv emissaries were so late in getting to Poland.

Yet in late 1943, even as the Yishuv's hopes for the survivors grew, apprehensions were also voiced that these expectations were unrealistic. Ze'ev Schind, a member of Kibbutz Ayelet Ha-Shahar, who was assigned to the Mosad le-Aliyah delegation to Istanbul, warned against inordinate expectations when he returned home in December 1943:

³ Minutes of Histadrut Executive Committee Secretariat meeting, December 12, 1943.

⁴ Minutes of Mapai Central Committee meeting, May 3, 1943, LPA 24/43.

⁵ Minutes of Jewish Agency Executive meeting, June 20, 1944.

There is at this time no Jewish population in the Diaspora that views Eretz Israel as the main issue in the rescue of Jews. The Jews' major goal today is to live on equal footing with the Gentiles, to be rid of the [anti-Jewish] laws, of the yellow Star of David, of the ban on traveling from place to place. The Zionist goal means nothing to them, so let us be more cautious and let us not think that the moment the gates of Eretz Israel are opened thousands and tens of thousands will seek to enter. It has to be clear to Zionism that it must be first in the market. All the parties in the Diaspora will not have the strength to spur the Jews to a Zionist act, and our emissaries should go [there] together with the army.⁶

In the course of 1944, it became increasingly apparent that there were very limited opportunities for the Yishuv to establish contact with *She'erit Hapletah*. The parachutists' mission was extremely small-scale, and they were unable to fulfill their Jewish mission in every place they would have wished. There were more opportunities in Romania, fewer elsewhere. In December 1943, negotiations commenced for the establishment of *plugot sa'ad* ("relief units") under UNRRA aegis, but, because of various delays, it was not until April 1945 that the first unit embarked for Greece. Two full years elapsed from the start of the negotiations until the relief units reached the main survivor sites in Italy, Austria, and Germany in December 1945, and, more intensively, in early 1946. Underground missions were feasible only in countries with a direct land link to Eretz Israel, such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Libya, but even there the Jewish emissaries were unable to engage in meaningful activity except under the cover and with the assistance of the Palestinian soldiers stationed in those countries.

In the meantime, the developments in Italy at the end of 1943 and in 1944, began to reveal the potential benefits of the presence of Jewish soldiers in large numbers in a liberated country. By October 1943, there were already over 1,000 Palestinian soldiers in Italy; their number grew during the following year, and, together with the Jewish Brigade, which arrived in Italy in November 1944, stood at about 10,000. The soldiers were the first to locate the Jewish survivors in the cities and in the liberated internment camps; it was they who received the refugees arriving from Yugoslavia by sea or from German-occupied northern Italy; and it was they who proffered them

⁶ *Ibid.*, minutes of Mapai Central Committee meeting, December 15, 1943, LPA; and see also minutes of Histadrut Actions Committee meeting, December 16, 1943.

material aid and acted as their spokesmen in dealing with the Allied military authorities. The soldiers extricated Jewish children from Christian institutions and set up schools and orphanages for them. They rehabilitated community life and renewed the activity of the Zionist Organization, initially in the camps and later in Rome. Simultaneously the soldiers began to create an educational infra-structure to prepare the survivors for *aliyah*, and organized them for the trip to Eretz Israel.

In September 1943, the first four transport companies landed on the coast of Salerno. The number of units in the Italian war theater increased during the following year, until the arrival of the Jewish Brigade in Italy in the fall of 1944. Dozens of activists, who were exempted from all other duty in their units, took part in this mission and were assisted by hundreds of other soldiers. Overseeing the entire operation was an organizational network that encompassed all the units; it was headed by the "Refugee Center." Established at Bari in February 1944, the center was moved to Rome that summer; in October 1944, prior to the Brigade's arrival in Italy, and after incipient possibilities of extending relief activity to other countries in the Balkans and Central Europe presented themselves, it was renamed Merkaz la-Golah ("Center for the Diaspora").

The activity of the soldiers in Italy came months ahead of the other Yishuv emissaries, legal or illegal, and preceded even the work of the emissaries from Jewish organizations in the West. An office of the JDC (Joint Distribution Committee) had been set up in Italy in the spring of 1944, but because of its civilian status, the movement of its limited personnel was restricted. But even after the Joint had consolidated itself in Italy and was underwriting a large part of the soldiers' enterprise, the soldiers still retained the initiative and the operational momentum throughout Italy. Moreover, they had exclusive access to zones close to the front and other areas that were off limits to civilians.

As the war drew to a close, the desire to make contact with *She'erit Hapletah* grew accordingly. The Italian operation was perceived as heralding the Zionist message to the survivors, to be followed by their *aliyah*. The formation of the Brigade in the summer of 1944 rekindled this aspiration and bolstered the faith in the possibility of its realization. In his farewell speech to the Third Battalion, on the eve of its departure for Europe, Ben-Gurion addressed the soldiers, stressing their mission to the Jews of Europe:

Hitler not only destroyed one-third of the Jewish people, he also dealt the most mortal blow to Israel's hopes in its own land. The enemies of Zionism now have a new bone of contention: the question of the Jewish refugees and of *aliyah* has become less acute and less serious. Few Jews now remain in Europe, and they have more or less resettled themselves in their own countries. But the crucial question is: what are their intentions? Above all, the fate of our own struggle depends on the will and the steadfastness of a million and a half Jews in Europe: whether, when they are able to make their voice heard, they will stand crushed, beaten and apathetic, ready to make do with scraps of rights and with the favors and aid they will get from their rich brothers in America and from international charities; or whether, as proud and erect Jews, they will demand together with us a homeland and independence for the Jewish people and will storm the gates of Eretz Israel.⁷

At the end of the summer of 1944, following reports from the Istanbul delegation and from the first emissaries to enter Romania and Bulgaria after the liberation, the Yishuv leaders were skeptical about the survivors' Zionism and their willingness to take part in the struggle. Shaul Avigur, who had just returned from Istanbul, provided a country-by-country survey of the situation in the Balkans.

The first and most basic thing is an extraordinary weariness after all they have been through. These people are not ready for any effort, at this time there is no wish to leave, no desire at all for emigration. The new Communist fervor, which at this moment does not obligate them in any way, is just what they need at this time: to shout hurrah, throw flowers, and so forth. Jewish youngsters think they can get by, they will be "*commissarchiks*." The Communist Party is making no demands now, only to run after the cart.

The second point relates to something difficult for us to grasp; we cannot even imagine how great the dislocation is between them and us. If we do not fortify them with Zionism, if we do not reach them in sufficient numbers, I do not know what will be saved for us.⁸

Thus the Yishuv leadership perceived *She'erit Hapletah* in the war's waning days.

⁷ Speech of Ben-Gurion to the soldiers of the Brigade Third Battalion at Kiryat Motzkin, September 23, 1944, Central Zionist Archives (hereafter, CZA) S-25/6078.

⁸ Minutes of Mapai Central Committee meeting, September 24, 1944, LPA 24/44.

The soldiers were intensely aware of the uniquely Jewish aspect of their mission. The Brigade set out for Italy imbued with a sense of purpose and a Zionist-Jewish mission — feelings that were well reflected in the newspapers the soldiers put out and the letters they wrote. The veteran soldiers in Italy, those serving in units that had arrived after the invasion, looked forward eagerly to the Brigade's anticipated arrival in the hope that it would reinvigorate the entire mission. However, the Brigade's initial months in Italy were entirely taken up with training and combat; the Jewish mission was of necessity deferred.

Still, as early as the period during which they saw action on the Senio front, the ideologues and other activists among the soldiers reflected on the encounter that awaited them with the survivors once the fighting died down, and especially with their comrades-in-arms: the partisans and ghetto fighters.

Moshe Sharett, then head of the Jewish Agency's Political Department, met in April 1945 with Brigade activists in Italy, and, on May 4, after the Brigade had left the front and on the eve of the Nazis' surrender, the main points were summed up in a "company commanders' meeting." This was a wider forum, evidently incorporating the company committees. In any event, it was decided that the Brigade would make every effort to reach Central Europe in order to serve as a garrison and in particular to meet with and rally the survivors.⁹

While the Brigade was making plans to reach Germany, its future was being fiercely debated in the Yishuv. Once more the old issues of mobilization and leaving the country were raised, and the splits among the various camps resurfaced. It did not take long for the debate to move from the inner sanctums of the Yishuv institutions to the "street": soldiers' parents and wives organized petitions demanding the immediate return of their sons and husbands. Mothers wrote to Sharett (Shertok) accusing him of having sent their sons away from home and exposing them to unnecessary dangers. The following is one such letter, signed "A Jewish [*Ivriya*, lit. 'Hebrew'] Mother":

And you, sir, are already convening assemblies and making speeches in order to influence the Yishuv that it must be a conquering army. You would do better to go out and listen to the whisperings and conversations in the Yishuv, where you would hear the anger against you. I only hope you are not overwhelmed by the curses of the soldiers' mothers and wives. Read the

⁹ Summary, May 4, 1945, CZA S-25/6064.

threats against the Jewish soldiers by the Nazi Underground, whose cruelty we are well aware of, and you will understand the longing of so many men and women who are eagerly awaiting their sons' return home. Reverse yourself, Mr. Shertok, because the heart of the Yishuv is not with you.¹⁰

The debate within the Yishuv focused on whether the Brigade should serve as a garrison force in Germany. Opposition to the very idea of the Brigade's entering Germany was voiced not only on the Zionist Left, but in Mapai as well. One example was Joseph Sprinzak:

The Jews of Buchenwald are already gone. We must not act as occupiers in Germany because there will be no connection between this occupation and the Jewish interest. Secondly, I see our very participation in the occupation as calamitous. In Germany the Brigade will reach a state of absolute moral decline.¹¹

In fact, with the exception of Eliahu Golomb, no one backed Sharett at the outset of this debate. Sharett, who supported the soldiers' position as he had heard it from them during his visit to the front in April 1945, was impelled, among other reasons, by the desire to maintain the Brigade until it could be brought to Eretz Israel. It was only in June and July 1945 that the importance of the ties between the Brigade and *She'erit Hapletah* began to sink in. This was the result of the first letters from Italy to arrive in Eretz Israel, followed by the first soldiers on home leave, and the news of the soldiers' encounters with the young people who were flocking to the Brigade from Eastern Europe and the newly launched activity in the camps of southern Germany. At this point some, indeed, changed their mind about the future of the Brigade. Shaul Avigur, for example, who had opposed keeping the Brigade in Europe, now (July 1945) thought it best to leave the soldiers where they were — in Treviso — because they were engaged in the most important work of all.

Over 10,000 Palestinian soldiers were in Europe at this time. The majority were stationed in Italy, though individuals or small groups were serving in the Balkans — Greece and Yugoslavia — and a few in France. From there they would shortly spread into Belgium, Holland, Germany and Austria. Thus, while the parties in the Yishuv

¹⁰Letter to Shertok from "A Jewish Woman in the Homeland," May 8, 1945, CZA S-25/6064.

¹¹ Minutes of Mapai Central Committee meeting, May 15, 1945, LPA 24/45.

were quarrelling about the future of the Brigade — which in truth depended solely on the decision that would be taken by the British — the soldiers simply went about their job in Europe. Immediately after the fighting stopped, they began locating survivors in northern Italy and helping the refugees in southern Italy return to their homes in the north and reclaim their property. Actually this activity had been going on in Italy since 1943, based on the experience acquired in the two previous years. Only at the end of May 1945, when the Brigade was transferred to the northern Italian town of Treviso, located at the meeting point of the Austrian, Yugoslav and Italian borders, did the soldiers' activities take on a radically different scope and significance.

The first soldiers to meet up with Jews across the Italian border were those who, already in May and June 1945, had taken unauthorized leave from the Brigade and other Jewish units in order to search for relatives. Dozens of soldiers embarked on this quest; some of them made their way to France, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, even reaching Carpathoruss and Poland. Upon returning to their units, these "absentees" were able to provide important information about the location and situation of the survivors. Additional useful information was supplied by the dozens of Jewish soldiers in the "interpreters' pool" attached to the British military-government authorities in Germany and Austria or accompanying military delegations that were posted to the east in order to deal with the repatriation of prisoners of war.

At the end of May, after the Brigade had established itself in Treviso and after the crisis between the Western Allies and Tito over Trieste had been resolved, the Brigade Committee dispatched a delegation to Yugoslavia to ascertain the fate of the Jews there. This was followed by the dispatch of semi-official delegations to Hungary and Romania. At about the same time, the surviving Zionist youth in Eastern Europe were seeking ways to reach Eretz Israel. When they heard about the Jewish Brigade in Italy, they naturally turned there for assistance.

I would take issue with scholars who believe that the first encounter between the Brigade and the Jews on the *Brichah* trails took place in July 1945. In my view, this initial encounter occurred on May 29, 1945, at Klangfurt, when a group of soldiers met four young Jews who had been sent by the parachutist Yoel Palgi from Budapest to link up with the Brigade. It was on that same day that the first Brigade emissaries arrived in Bucharest. A few days later, on June 2 and 3, two emissaries arrived in Treviso from Romania via Yugoslavia, having been sent by Abba Kovner's "Hativat

Hasridim" to look for a route into Italy after hearing that the Brigade was stationed in that country.

In early June, Shlomo Netzer, one of the young people who had reached Italy from Poland via Hungary, left for Budapest in order to urge those who were wandering on the roads or residing in Poland to make their way to the Brigade. Besides the emissaries of the various movements, who arrived from Poland and Romania via Hungary and Yugoslavia, individual Jews also began turning up at Treviso, drawn by the rumors about the Brigade that had reached them in Eastern Europe.

The encounter with the remnant of Jewish youth from Eastern Europe thrilled the Brigade. As early as the beginning of June 1945, Brigade activists were imagining how

hundreds of thousands of Jews from *She'erit Hapletah* in Europe will find their way to the shores of the Mediterranean, where they will be organized in groups and sent on to Eretz Israel. This will be a war of the desperate for their future and their survival; this will be the powerful hammer that will shatter to bits the White Paper.¹²

The encounter also provided the soldiers who wanted to with a reason to remain in Europe, despite the fact that their parties of the Zionist left wing wished them to return home. In the wake of the reports about the situation in Eastern Europe, and the difficulties that had arisen toward the end of the war, when *aliyah* certificates were available but not enough candidates could be found for *aliyah*, it became apparent that new circumstances had arisen and that the traditional form of emissary work was no longer appropriate. As Mordechai Hadash explained in an internal discussion of Brigade activists:

There will also be eight, ten, twelve [civilian] emissaries in each country. After all, the problem now does not lie in organizing *aliyah* based on the desire of Jews and the possibilities available, or in extended education as in the past. The Jews are in no hurry to leave on *aliyah* and are cultivating considerable hopes for the renewal of their [former] lives. Now the question for Zionism and for the Jews is to beat people over

¹² *Diary of Haim Dan: From the Egyptian Desert to Munich* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, p 158, pp. 61-62.

the head, drag them by the hair, push them on to the boats and kidnap the youth and children for immediate *aliyah*. Here it is not enough to educate toward *aliyah*, here one has to get the hesitant Jews to demand: take us to Eretz Israel.¹³

These remarks, made at the end of May, just before the initial encounter with the pioneer youth from Poland, reflect the soldiers' image of *She'erit Hapletah*. Following the first meetings with the survivors who reached Treviso from Eastern Europe, Meir Grabovsky (Argov) wrote happily to Sharett:

We have reached the sources of the Jewish youth. Emissaries from four countries [Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania] have arrived here and they are flowing in via a narrow but safe channel. The youth in these countries wants just one thing — to get to the Brigade. We bring them [from Austria], tend to them, feed and clothe them, and provide them with *hakhsharah* — they are the best of the youth. We have reached Munich; we have every chance of reaching Dachau. People have discovered that we have the ability to do great things, there are some who think that this is the main thing and that it is even more important than our participation at the front.¹⁴

As for the debate that raged in the Yishuv about the future of the Brigade, Haim Ben-Asher wrote:

...Anyone who truly believes that we have completed our task in Europe does not see the global scope of Zionism's war or the place of Europe's Jews in its unique interaction with the fighting Jewish force.¹⁵

Ben-Asher wrote this in early June 1945. At about the same time, the first soldiers reached the concentration camps in southern Germany, now serving as DP camps. The first soldier to enter the camps was not from the Brigade, but a Royal Air Force man, Martin Hauser, who toured the camps in the Munich and Tyrol region,

¹³ Remarks of Mordechai Hadash at a meeting of the battalion committees on the future of the Brigade, late May 1945, CZA S-25/6076.

¹⁴ Grabovsky to Shertok, June 16, 1945, CZA S-25/6064.

¹⁵ Haim Ben-Asher to Nehemiah (Ginzburg) and Alik (Shomroni), June 14, 1945, CZA S-25/6064.

ostensibly on behalf of the Red Cross. Upon his return to Italy, he gave a detailed report to Merkaz la-Golah: which camps contained Jews, their numbers, their condition and their special problems. He reported on the refusal of the American military government authorities to separate Jews from Gentiles in the camps and about the resistance of the Jewish DPs to repatriation. Following Hauser, other soldiers visited the camps, and, after them, several organized delegations.

The Jews whom the soldiers encountered in the camps were different from the youths who had made their way to the Brigade from the east. The majority of the Jews in the camps wished to return to their former places of residence. In a poll conducted by the American authorities at Dachau in early May 1945, shortly after the liberation, the overwhelming majority of the 2,190 Jewish survivors stated that they wanted to return to their home countries; 236 opted to settle in Eretz Israel, while 491 chose immigration to the United States or elsewhere overseas.¹⁶ Manifestly, these responses reflected primarily a natural desire to return home and discover who and what had survived. The results of the Dachau poll reflect not a political or ideological outlook but a dominant psychological state. The soldiers, however, and particularly the young people born and raised in Eretz Israel, were disappointed with the predisposition of those in the camps to return to their countries of origin and not necessarily proceed to Eretz Israel. One young soldier wrote:

There were numerous Jews from Hungary in our zone, and many of them are now returning there. True, their pretext is that they are going to look for their families, but I am not inclined to believe them. If they will have the opportunity to resettle there, they will do so more willingly than go to Eretz Israel. Jews here live off the black market. All over Europe the Jews' livelihood is black in origin, so it's hardly remarkable that we are abhorred by the entire world.¹⁷

¹⁶ Results of the poll, conducted by the Jewish Information Office in Dachau, May 1945, CZA S-25/5233. Regarding a similar frame of mind at Buchenwald, see YIVO Archives, Joseph Schwartz Collection, Folder No. 1.

¹⁷ Letter from the soldier Yosef Bentwich to his family in Nahalal, June 24, 1945, published in the *Nahalal Memorial Book for Those Who Fell in the War of Independence* (Hebrew), B. Habas, ed., "Those For Whom We Mourn," pp. 180-181.

This was the Brigade soldiers' initial perception of the Diaspora Jews. But how did the survivors view the soldiers? In July 1945, one young woman, who reached Eretz Israel relatively early, wrote:

One morning in May a soldier wearing a badge on which was written the word "Palestine" appeared in our camp [Judenburg]. I assumed he was a British [soldier] who was living in Eretz Israel. Suddenly I heard him speaking Russian. Unable to believe my ears, I asked him: "Are you a Jew, do you speak Hebrew?" He replied, "Yes, I am from Eretz Israel." I was so excited that I collapsed in a faint. The Jewish soldier looked after me and told me about Eretz Israel, even about the Jewish Brigade. [He was apparently one of the interpreters or one of the soldiers who went AWOL to look for relatives.] A few days later a car with a Star of David on it showed up in the camp, and a few soldiers got out of it and introduced themselves as members of the Brigade. Our excitement was indescribable. We saw before us something we could never have imagined. The Brigade people arranged for us to be moved to new quarters, to a proper house where we met some other refugees from Hungary [apparently the *olim* house at Pontava, adjacent to Treviso]. After that, many Brigade personnel visited us, and brought us clothes, food, sweets. At first it was hard for us to get used to such plenty. We were transferred to Milan. There, too, Jewish units awaited us. We were given work on behalf of the units. At the beginning of July, we were taken by Brigade people from Milan via Rome to Naples, and we were escorted by the Jewish unit stationed there until we boarded the ship.¹⁸

This description gives the impression, which is certainly correct in part that there was a bit of Eretz Israel in Austria and Italy, from Judenburg to Naples, whose representatives were able to move people as they wished, from a DP camp to a ship bound for Eretz Israel.

On June 21, the first official Brigade delegation, headed by Aharon Hoter-Yishai and Rabbi Lifshitz (Gil), set out for the camps in Austria and southern Germany. Ostensibly, their mission was to conduct an official, organized search for relatives of soldiers and put a halt to the wave of absenteeism; actually, they wished to examine

¹⁸ Letter from the survivor Hanna H., published in "Letter to the Recruit," August 15, 1945, pp. 20-22.

the possibility of transferring those in the camps to the protection of the Brigade. However, because of the situation in the camps, most of their time was taken up with trying to persuade the American camp authorities to separate the Jews from the other camp inhabitants and house them in camps of their own.

From the Jewish chaplains in the U.S. army who were tending to the DPs, the delegation was able to acquire a good deal of information about the situation in the camps. Of special interest to them was the inhabitants' repatriation intentions, particularly in view of the widespread desire to search for relatives. After returning to Treviso to report their findings, the delegation made another tour, this time covering Austria, northern Bavaria and the American-held area of Czechoslovakia.

Its first order of business, the Brigade decided, was to fight the DPs' predilection for repatriation and to strengthen such Zionist leanings as there might be in the camps. They were uncertain, however, about whether they should leave the DPs in the camps or bring them to Italy. At first the Brigade wanted to bring the children and some of the public activists in the camps to Italy, but finally, after it became clear that the Brigade would be moving out of Treviso, it was decided to leave the survivors in the camps.

Within a month the net cast by the Brigade from Treviso in June 1945 covered almost all of Europe. Throughout this period the soldiers operated alone, together with a handful of American rabbis. The Yishuv, far from directing the soldiers' activities, knew next to nothing about it. The debate that raged in Eretz Israel was completely detached from the European reality. It was not until mid-July, when Ben-Zion Israeli (the "oldest" soldier) arrived in Eretz Israel, that the Yishuv learned about the Brigade's activity. Israeli simply related what he himself had seen: the Jews were seeking out the Brigade; the Brigade activists hoped to assemble 20,000 refugees; the British military authorities were aware of this activity but were not interfering for the present. "These 20,000 will be the core that will arouse the others," Israeli said.

If there are a million Jews in Europe, 100,000 have to be brought to Germany. There is no other way. This will represent over 10 percent of the survivors, and it will be the

core that will arouse and stir up the others and bring them to the realization that there is no other way but to Eretz Israel.¹⁹

The Brigade activists had formed this plan as early as the Senio period, even though at that time the chance for its realization seemed distant and unrealistic. However, the initial encounter with the survivors in late May and early June 1945 injected new momentum into the plan. After the refugees from Eastern Europe had sought out the Brigade at Treviso and contact had been made with the DP camps in Germany, the Brigade activists believed that what had appeared a remote prospect just a month or two earlier could be accomplished. When the activists heard about the controversy in the Yishuv concerning the future of the Brigade, their reaction was one of apprehension, lest the Zionist movement and the Yishuv were liable to miss a singular historic opportunity. The soldiers had based their plan on 20-30,000 refugees who (it was believed) would flow into Italy, 100,000 DPs in Germany, and the ongoing flight from Eastern Europe. The refugees would be housed in *aliyah* camps, where they would learn Hebrew and undergo training for life in Eretz Israel by the organized Zionists among the Brigade soldiers. At the same time the Yishuv would dispatch a large delegation of civilians or new Brigade recruits.

In the course of the discussions held by Mapai about this plan, Shaul Avigur maintained that responsibility for carrying out the bulk of the project would devolve on the Brigade itself, since "others do not have the opportunities that they have, and only with their help can things get done." Avigur spoke about the practical difficulties in getting emissaries illegally into Europe and about the inter-party squabbling over the selection of the emissaries, to which Lavon (Lubianiker) commented, "I don't know which is worse — the ruin that a large Histadrut delegation will wreak in these camps, or not sending it."²⁰

Mid-July 1945 marked the Brigade's first meeting with the political and ideological leadership of *She'erit Hapletah*, when the heads of the "Faction of East European Survivors" arrived at Treviso. The young people who had turned up at Treviso earlier

¹⁹ Report of Ben-Zion Israeli, July 18, 1945, Haganah Historical Archives, 14/81, and his report at Mapai Central Committee meeting, July 24, 1945, LPA 24/45.

²⁰ Minutes of Mapai Central Committee meeting, August 10, 1945, LPA 24/45, and minutes of Mapai Central Committee meeting, August 14, 1945, LPA 23/45.

were neither the leaders nor the ideologues of their groups and movements; indeed, they could not even explain exactly what the "Faction" was. But with the arrival in Treviso of Abba Kovner and his colleagues, the party-functionary soldiers believed that finally the survivors had a proper leadership and subsequently held discussions on the events of the war and about possible future cooperation.

But how did the Brigade soldiers view the "Faction of Survivors?" Judging by the letters to Eretz Israel written by persons who had heard Abba Kovner's famous speech at Treviso, or by soldiers who met with members of the Faction, it seems that the Brigade personnel did not grasp fully the phenomenon of the "Faction of Survivors." In the first place they found it difficult to define the Faction politically; they could comprehend neither its spirit of unity, which was grounded in the shared experience of the war, nor the behavior of the partisans. In their letters home the soldiers expressed the apprehension that these young people would join the dissident organizations in Eretz Israel, which — so it seemed to the soldiers — were using similar tactics against the British. In their view, the partisans had already received the necessary training to be terrorists; they were used to operating without authority; and if they settled in Eretz Israel, they would most certainly strengthen the Irgun or even Lehi.

The question of unity was a central issue in the ideological clarifications held after the war by both the soldiers and *She'erit Hapletah*. Among the survivors two paramount trends were discernible. One was the thrust for unity, which was espoused by the "Faction of Survivors" and by the first organizations established in the concentration camps after their transformation into DP camps. This trend, which was the result of the shared experiences during the war years and which overrode former political and ideological differences, could be understood by the soldiers, since they, too, were serving together with political and ideological rivals or politically apathetic persons. The other leading trend about *She'erit Hapletah* was movement-oriented, and its standard bearers were former movement members who had survived on the Aryan side in Poland or by fleeing to the Russian interior. Those who had lived in the Aryan section in Poland and had seen their movement disintegrate before their very eyes were now seized by a powerful sense of mission and a feeling of obligation to preserve the memory of the movement and fulfill its precepts. Similarly, those who had been in Russia and had survived largely as a result of a communal, kibbutz- and

movement-based way of life, continued to regard the movement as being of prime importance and were unwilling to forgo its separate existence in favor of a "general" framework. But the soldiers lacked the background that would have enabled them to empathize with this experience, and so they could not come to terms with these survivors' attitude, or find a common language with them.

The peak of activity among the survivors, of which the soldiers were the major initiators until the beginning of 1946, was the tour of the camps conducted by the Anglo-American Commission. During the commission's visit, numerous survivors gave expression to their political will by demanding to go to Eretz Israel — and nowhere else. And even though it is quite possible that many of the survivors did not sincerely want to settle in Eretz Israel but in America, the demand for Eretz Israel became the perceived political desire of *She'erit Hapletah*. The radical shift in the political orientation of the survivors in the eight months between the poll in Dachau and the commission's visit was in large measure brought about by the soldiers' work.

As the liberation process continued and the number of activist soldiers declined in the first half of 1946, the Brigade's mission gradually faded. They were followed by the relief units, but their members admitted that they found it difficult to step into the soldiers' shoes, as they had operated in the camps and among the refugees themselves, whereas the relief personnel appeared in UNRRA uniforms, lived separately from the refugees, and were awarded special status. As a result, a palpable distance prevailed between them and the survivors.

What made the soldiers' mission unique? In the first place, it was a mass undertaking, and this alone differentiated it from every other mission before or later. Even though not every soldier in Europe was engaged in working with *She'erit Hapletah*, the issue was first and foremost on the Brigade's agenda for several months. Many soldiers engaged in the work directly and many more indirectly: they helped out, covered for the activists, and assumed the routine duties in order to free those who devoted themselves to Jewish affairs. The encounter with *She'erit Hapletah* was the finest hour of those activists who had joined the army with a background in public and movement experience. But the fervor and vision of Ben-Zion Israeli, Haim Ben-Asher, Meir Argov, Yehuda Tubin and their colleagues in Merkaz Ia-Golah and in the Brigade Committee were nourished by the contributions made by hundreds of officers and soldiers who created the operational, organizational and logistical infrastructure

without which a project of this scope would have been inconceivable. It was thanks to this infrastructure that the network of civilian emissaries, and especially the "illegal" emissaries, could establish themselves and function in Europe. This paved the way for the post-demobilization period, when the Jewish soldiers would have already been recalled home from Europe.

Most of the emissaries who arrived in Europe in the summer and fall of 1945 were smuggled in by the soldiers in groups returning to France and Italy following home leave in the Middle East. It was the soldiers who set up the wireless communication system for the illegal emissaries, and many of the emissaries were ostensibly based in Europe to carry out military duties. The soldiers obtained the initial funds to underwrite the emissaries, and they also took part in organizing the *Brichah* movement.

Was the *Brichah* an organized movement? My opinion is that the *Brichah* developed through several stages. The turning-point, which transformed it from a formless flow of refugees into an organized movement, occurred in October 1945. The question is whether the organization had also existed earlier or whether the main movement took place in the initial post-war months, blending into the general population shifts then in progress across the continent. In any event, the movement's direction was determined in large part by the Brigade, and it was the soldiers who enabled the survivors to move between the occupied zones in Austria and in Germany. It was also they who brought the *ma'apilim* ("illegal immigrants") to the ships and outfitted the vessels with food, medicine, life-jackets, fuel and whatever else was required for the voyage. Until the demobilization, in mid-1946, the vast majority of the *ma'apilim* ships were organized by or with the help of the soldiers and set sail from countries where large numbers of soldiers were stationed — above all, Italy.

As we have pointed out, this was a mass mission, and this, too, set it apart from all other Yishuv missions to the Diaspora. True, most of the activists who dealt with Jewish affairs were members of parties and movements, but most of the people who did the actual work were unaffiliated politically. Theirs, they believed, was a national-state mission — at a time when the very concept was almost unknown, certainly in Eretz Israel-Diaspora relations. It was a spontaneous mission, not directed from above, carried out through the initiative and resourcefulness of individual officers and soldiers, in some cases widely scattered and isolated. For a long time neither the

national institutions nor the parties and movements whose members were serving in the army — indeed, not even the Haganah or the Mosad le-Aliyah — recognized the importance of this mission or its latent potential. The suspicions harbored by some in the Yishuv regarding the volunteers and their motives, the opposition to their leaving Eretz Israel, and especially the conservative approach to the role and methods of the emissaries, resulted in lost opportunities and perhaps even had an adverse effect on the entire project. The sole exceptions were Sharett and Ben-Gurion, who were able to appreciate the volunteers' mission within the overall context of the Zionist struggle in the post-war era.

Source: “The Meeting Between the Jewish Soldiers from Palestine Serving in the British Army and *She’erit Hapletah*”, Gutman Yisrael, Drechsler Adina (eds.), *She’erit Hapletah, 1944-1948 Rehabilitation and Struggle, Proceedings of the Sixth Yad Vashem International Historical Conference*, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 1990 pp.60-79.