

First steps in the Promised Land

Part One

By Robi Auscher

On ZIM's S.S. Israel on the way from Napoli to Haifa have picked up first impressions. Jewish sailors. Well-built and sun-tanned youngsters, engaged in manual jobs on the deck. French-speaking dusky Egyptian Jews, expelled from Egypt after the 1956 Suez war on their way to Israel like ourselves. Hungarian-speaking Israelis on their way back from business in Europe. The latter gave us first briefings on what's going on and what to expect.

The ship anchored in Haifa in late February 1957. The holy land under your feet viewed from the deck's height. People begin their noisy and flighty disembarking. Out of a sudden a loud repeated shriek: "Sheket, sheket"!! (Silence)" by some immigration clerk was the welcome sound.

I was asked by my kids sixty years later whether the aliya to Israel was a sole option or one of several. We couldn't think of any other option. My folks weren't only salon Zionists but active in the movement until 1948 when it was abolished by the communist authorities. My dad visited Palestine in 1939 with the intention to move over the family enterprise. We had tickets for a Turkish boat departing Constanța for Palestine in the early 1940s. Dad was asked to stay and help illegal immigration. We got a certificate of departure back in 1952. At that time father was in jail. We were ready to leave with my mother. Were not permitted. My dad was sentenced in the fifties for Zionist activity, especially for his share in Aliya Bet to 15 years in jail. Out of them, he served three, between 1952 and 1955. The idea and ideal were deeply enrooted in the three of us and as kid I heard often dreams about our future in Israel. Most immigrants who left the country a short while after aliya have done so mainly being enticed by family, well-established somewhere in Europe, the US, Canada or Australia. We didn't have any such relatives. We have not been hit by recession or been laid off. Although my folks reached the country at mature age, they fared well and were happy. At that time, the country just began veering away from its years of austerity and despite the prevailing modest conditions, it was a nice place to live, especially when compared to where we came from.

After a night spent in Haifa, a taxi took the three of us to Tel Aviv to a hotel next to the sea on Hayarkon St. I began roaming Tel Aviv's streets and got caught into a huge public meeting in front of the former Mugarbi cinema. Menachem Begin was talking, hypnotizing the audience with his theatrical gesticulation and dramatic speech. He called the audience to oppose the retreat from the Sinai Peninsula in the aftermath of the Suez campaign. Ben Gurion was about to give in to President Eisenhower's pressure. I couldn't follow the speech but was fascinated by the event and the very magic of an opposition.

In a few days had to reach the place of some relatives. From the central bus station had to take line 17 and get off at a given stop, but better ask the driver. So I asked him in English to tell me where to get off. To play it safe, sat down next to him in that old noisy Chausson, in the first single seat right at the entrance door. The bus was filling up slowly at each stop. An old frail, bearded guy climbs up wrestling the steps at one of the stops. Like everyone at that time he was clad in khaki shirt and shorts and wore some odd headware. His body seemed too heavy for his thin legs and long beard. As he finally got into the bus, he addressed me, being seated first. Couldn't understand him, and gentlemanly offered him my seat. The first rows in the bus began to laugh. He just went on mumbling in refusal. Took him by his shoulders to push him into my seat. By then, the whole bus was laughing hysterically. The old guy being the bus controller.

First mission, to get in touch with the Faculty of Agriculture in Rehovot to go on with my studies. My folks' friend knew Dr. Perlberger-Peleg who used to be the Director of the Plant Protection Service and acted now as the Director of the Volcani Research Institute. Paid Dr. Peleg a visit at his home by Dizengoff Square. Don't know why, the conversation took place in German. He invited me to his office in the Weizmann Institute's campus in Rehovot. He then picked up the phone to the Faculty's dean and I crossed the road to meet up with him. After a brief encounter in English, have been passed to the academic secretary. Got all the guidelines to present my translated and authorized credentials. Further, the next period to be passed in a kibbutz would be considered as the required practicum. Now I had a clearer vision of my future course of action and could get back to my main line of work, roaming purposeless Tel Aviv's streets.

Landed within a month in Gan Shmuel, a Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz founded by Polish immigrants in the 1920s. Although members of a leftist movement, they

used to employ Arab labor from the area. A Trade Union (Histadrut) activist from Tel Aviv came to deliver the usual pep talk. He stepped on an orange box to be seen by everyone gathered and delivered a lengthy and enthusiastic harangue in Hebrew. The kibbutz members were all newly arrived and spoke but Yiddish. They listened to him with patience and turned to one of the laborers: "*Mohammed, was sogt er?*"

We were supposed to work daily for four hours and study Hebrew for four hours. The Hebrew school's headmaster was Shlomo Ilan. The father of late Uri Ilan who committed suicide in Syrian captivity in 1954. His tragic story has a Timișoara-linked facet. A squad of five military infiltrated at night Syrian territory that year to change the batteries of a previously planted listening device. They were ambushed by the Syrians and put in jail. Uri Ilan, heavily tortured, was anxious not to reveal secrets and committed suicide. He put a tiny enrolled piece of paper between his toes with the writing: *I didn't betray*. It was found upon the body's return. And it became a canonic term. The squad's commander was Lieutenant Meir Mozes alias *Mózes Laci*, born in Timișoara. After weeks of abominable tortures, Mozes and one of the sergeants led their captors to the embedded device. This had a self-destructing mechanism and the two intended to blow it up together with themselves. Mozes warned in French a Canadian UN officer to keep away. Because of heavy moisture, the mechanism didn't go off. The four were kept in prison for 15 months, until 1956 and returned in exchange for Syrian prisoners. In captivity Mozes presented himself as private but was revealed as being an officer by a mysterious fair-haired person who used to see him at the Bat Galim swimming pool in Haifa. After being returned, both Lt. Mozes and the sergeant were court-marshaled and sentenced. An absolutely unfair procedure towards a combatant group captured in action due to the sloppiness of their dispatching commanders. Mozes was stripped of his rank. Nonetheless he served his reserve duty regularly as private. Had to change his last name to Maor just to blur traces from the heavily publicized event. He was fully rehabilitated only in 2005 being awarded a Lieutenant Colonel's rank.

Shlomo (Shlamek) Ilan liked me and invited me to his kibbutz house. It was an austere two-room flat. I raised my eyes to the pictures hanging in the living room. To my deepest shock there were four mustached men with beards cut at slanted lengths: Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. In that period of time the Mapam party was still worshipping the sacred cow, the Soviet Union and the virtues of Communism. My Hebrew was too thin to argue with him. Hopefully, my

pantomimed horror got through. His wife, Feiga Ilanit, was a Knesset member on behalf of Mapam.

The kibbutz hosted well-established families. One of them sired Udi Adiv. Who embraced Uri Ilan's opposite approach. He joined the extreme left and became involved in militant anti-Zionist activities and joined a Marxist–Leninist group called the "Revolutionary Communist Alliance - Red Front". He established contact with Syrian intelligence and was sent to Damascus. In Damascus, he met with Syrian intelligence agents, and gave them information about the Israeli society, military bases, and recruitment slogans among other things. He underwent sabotage training and was then sent back to Israel. Adiv, who had refused to express remorse for his actions, was sentenced to 17 years in prison and being released, acts nowadays as political scientist.



Rudi



Me as a student in 1960

I worked first in the orchards. We left early morning for the fields but had a breakfast break at 9 am and consumed it together with the kibbutz members in a stationary wagon. The table was set with eggs, sour cream, yoghurt, all sorts of vegetables, jams, cheeses, pastrami, butter, breads and rolls, coffee, tea and sodas. A fascinating field meal for someone who just escaped from the heaven of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. Later on have been selected as Rudi's assistant. Rudi was Sdom's commander in the War of Independence. He was one of the eleven Lieutenant Colonels of the Army at that time. He was born in Vienna, lived with his mother in the kibbutz. He was ascetic, worked without a top or blouse,

just in shorts or wearing some odd WWI military boots. He was always sun-burned, sporting thin straw-like hair. He had a rich past behind him beginning with WWI as Austrian officer, prisoner of war in Russia, fled back to Austria, aliya, agricultural laborer in various places in Palestine, missions to pre-war Europe, military and civic responsibilities during and after War of Independence. We were taken together by a cart to the young orange grove planted and kept up by Rudi and left there until noon time. We exchanged a few words in German. He wasn't talkative and never mentioned his fascinating past, achievements and the British decorations he refused to accept. From Rudi's (Amnon Zair) grove have been transferred to the field crops section. My main role was to dismantle heavy 3 inch alumina irrigation pipes in maize fields, move them vertically as an acrobat to the next irrigated plots and assemble them anew on the ground. The boosters and sprinklers were opened at night. Quite a demanding job in the hot wind-broken rows of tall and tight maize and their bruising leaves. I found out that am allergic to both cereals pollen and dust. Spent four hours daily in the midst of pollen mist and the dust falling off the raised pipes. My eyes were burning and my throat and lungs didn't like all this. I resisted for some time due to Efraim Reiner's support but had to bail out. Efraim was in charge of the forage crops and my boss. He was another Lieutenant Colonel. He filled out monthly my practicum's diaries which I sent to the Faculty of Agriculture's Secretariat. He was an economist who left later the kibbutz to serve as chairman of the country's largest bank, Bank Hapoalim. Several other dignitaries moved on the kibbutz paths - Izaak Grünbaum, Zionist leader of prewar Poland and Minister of Interior in Israel, his son Benjamin and other highly appreciated teachers, protagonists of various agricultural sectors of the country, the manager of a large seed company, the chairman of the Cotton Board, etc. I would touch base with them in a few years on behalf of the Extension Service.