

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.

The young participants of the study cum-work six-month course came from three different sources. The largest group were the Poles. Their families left Poland in 1956. The country began to steer a more independent course of "local, national socialism" instead of following the Soviet model. A wave of Jewish emigration (50,000) took place during this liberalization process of the Communist regime between 1957 and 1959. Jewish officials left their positions and moved to Israel. The second largest source of young participants were the Egyptians expelled by Nasser after the Suez campaign of 1956. They could be divided into two subgroups. The better educated tier who spoke French at home and the lower one who spoke Arabic as mother tongue. A small third group was that of Hungarians

who fled the country after the uprising of October 1956. I was the only representative of the Romanian aliya.

I made friends with the French-speaking Egyptians and even improved my colloquial French in parallel with the Hebrew courses. One of them spoke good English and could communicate best with him. Found the Poles arrogant and deprecating the “oriental” Egyptians although the latter were better educated and much more western. The Hungarians were in fact one youngster who remained in the kibbutz after a previous course and two sisters. One of them was quite keen on getting closer to me but I had a crush on an Egyptian petite.

Kibbutz bachelors made their perennial, clumsy and unsuccessful attempts to approach girls from the course. They took them on Jeep tours or to the fish ponds but left them unimpressed. My parents visited me once or twice. Shlamek took them aside trying to persuade them that my best future would be to join the kibbutz and become a member. Since had a clear plan to complete my studies, his plea was politely rejected.



Meir Mozes



Uri Ilan ל"ר



Udi Adiv

Religious holidays were celebrated in secular style in the kibbutz establishment with plenty of invited relatives and home-made programs. My first Pessach was emotional. For the first time in life, I had the visceral feeling of living in a free country, able to celebrate at large the Holiday of Freedom. I shared the feeling with my Egyptian friends. They couldn't fully grasp the event's meaning for

someone who spent his youth cooped-up hopelessly in a Communist country. I should have shared this sensation with my leftist hosts but my vocabulary didn't endorse at that point in time an adroit argument. It happened to me later as student to be exposed to communist colleagues who spread their naïve creed at meetings and I felt again too heavy-tongued to show their true colors in public. Had to make do with lower impact one-on-one discussions.

After riding high for six relaxed months in a "summer camp" had to undergo a snippy transition to a rigorous academic environment. It was clear for both my "girlfriend" and myself that we chose different paths and stopped remorseless seeing each other. Moved into the dormitory of the Faculty of Agriculture sharing a room with two additional colleagues. Began my studies in the 3rd year of a 4.5 years Master of Science curriculum. The human scenery of the colleagues was strikingly different from my previous studies abroad. I was riveted by the students, they were elder and more mature. Most of them completed military service followed by a few years in a kibbutz. Quite a number of them were married. Usually the wives pushed them out of the kibbutz and urged them to study. I found them gifted, well-prepared, focused and earnest, many of them working part-time to support their studies. I was younger, before military service, underprepared, single, penniless, with a huge handicap as far as language and background were concerned. Embodied all prospects to fail.

My prevailing symptom as newcomer to the target country was the strain to look, dress and speak like the indigenous, like my colleagues. To strip off previous habits and looks and melt yourself into a new mold. Rome wasn't built in a day. This process takes time. No one will tell you if you made it or flushed it. Not many are fully aware of your veiled ambitions. With time you catch hints that nonetheless your baggage does contain a few gems. Languages you master, books you read, experiences you've been through, views and tools that you picked up underway. I hated it when visiting relatives, they addressed me in Hebrew and I responded hesitantly, mindful of errors I could make. I hated it when at parties my colleagues were singing well-known Hebrew songs and I didn't know the words. I hated my old cloths until I was fully clad in drab khaki "ATA" shorts, blouses and Bible sandals. I hated it when my colleagues talked about their military service or combat experience and I couldn't share mine. I liked it when I could discuss English terms at eye-level with native English speakers in my class. I liked it when I was able to add details to a discussion on European politics, on music, arts, history. I gained esteem when I kept asking them pig-headedly for the

interpretation of Hebrew words. I gained esteem when I uttered with acumen first words of slang. It became an even give and take, awarding me down the road an entrance ticket to the gang.

My hand-carried documents certified the formal completion of study courses. This was the reason for my admission to the 3rd year. In fact many subject-matters that have studied didn't equip me with the required knowledge base. It became uncannily clear that topics such as Genetics and Plant Breeding followed the fake soviet school and didn't provide me with even the very basic terms of these disciplines. Topics such as Biochemistry, Plant Physiology were taught at Timișoara by professors who completed their PhDs in Germany in the 1930s. Long since they were detached of western literature, lagging 20 years behind current science. They didn't read English and had never spent sabbaticals abroad. I was criminally turned ignorant in the very basic terms of Genetics: genes, alleles, chromosomes, genotypes, phenotypes, homo-, heterozygous, etc. The same being true for basic terms of biochemistry: RNA, DNA, ATP, ribose, redox, etc.

Primary handicap, the language. Been lucky to take upfront the strategic decision of jotting down notes in Hebrew letters even if I missed words and terms and the pace of the lecture was quick. Came across a myriad of unknown words. Slowly a system evolved. Have tallied up the unknown words, usually misspelled by me, in the copybook's margin. Never at prima vista but only when the same word reappeared several times and have been able to recall it, still without understanding its meaning. In the breaks between the lectures my colleagues were glad to waste their pause, sitting down with me to interpret and explain my listed words. One colleague, the late Dr. Haim Zaban, was the first to set the trend. At the end of the first semester my vocabulary was enriched with general and technical terms and ready to cope with the imminent challenge of five or six scheduled tests. Getting ready for them was a hard nut to crack. Usually they were distanced at mere two or three days between them and my reading speed even of my own Hebrew notes was still slow. Had to borrow notes from others or rely on standard stenciled notes circulated among us. Still, had one edge. My English. It helped me out since we got many articles to read as part of the syllabus. My English was better than that of the average Israeli student. My colleagues were at high school in the early 1950s at the time the country still nurtured strong anti-British feelings. They were reluctant to learn English. And paid now the price. Our native English-speaking colleagues made quite good money translating papers or preparing abstracts upon demand.

Haim Zaban was an articulate natural leader who thinks big. One of the brilliant students in the class. He came from a religious Jerusalem family and married a known rabbi's daughter. He didn't wear a kipa stating that he doesn't put his party membership card on his head. However, his rich language was always interspersed with clever sayings and clever quotes from the sacred texts. He specialized in economics and began to work as student in a soil conservation project. He became Director of Soil Conservation in the Ministry of Agriculture and then of the Planning Authority. He moved to Volcani Research Center as Deputy Director for R&D and then to Tahal Consulting Engineers as Deputy Director before establishing his own consulting firm. I owe him much of my smooth integration and a big chunk of my Ivrit. He passed away at 82.

My first test was in Livestock Hygiene and I got a fiver out of five. My colleagues thought that a genius landed in the classroom. This wasn't the case since my next marks hovered lower. Although studied hard had bombed here and there. The first achievement was a matter of random luck but it earned esteem. At the end of the year I get a rough letter from academic secretariat. I was supposed to provide marks in two additional subject areas which were not included in my certificates submitted in the first place. I crammed a lot to grapple with 3rd year's curriculum and unable to come to terms with additional requirements. The letter was threatening, I wouldn't be allowed to continue my studies until I present final marks in the two respective areas. Had the fluke. My colleagues were enraged by the case and the letter's harsh style. A mission went to meet the academic secretary to contest the decision. They won. In the next year, the 4th, have gained more confidence and time. Could attend the two additional courses and cut the mustard.

Besides their help in the classroom, my colleagues forged an embracing relationship with the newcomer in many other ways. Have been steady to Friday eve dinners at several colleagues' houses, got to know their wives and families. I was unable to support myself during the studies. This requested extra time and only here and there could I earn a day's work. I was cash-strapped and embarrassed whenever invited to a meal couldn't afford to take along a bottle of wine. Got a fellowship from the Jewish Agency which had to be repaid in full when left the country for the first time and from some other sources. The students union provided me with occasional lunch coupons. Playing volley ball, my glasses

were broken. The other players were appalled and took immediate care that the students union cover the new frame.

Most students in the dorms were graduates of the various youth movements of workers' parties which led the country since its proclamation. The only one who adhered to right wing Herut was Amram Olmert, Ehud Olmert's brother. Ehud, a seasoned but corrupt politician, acted as prime minister between 2006 and 2009. We used to have breakfast and dinner in the dormitory's dining hall. Amram, who was later a colleague at the Extension Service was regularly teased at meals. They challenged him all the time on politics. He was proud of his beliefs and always alert for a fight. He could never enjoy a quiet meal.

In the 4th year had to move out of the dormitories and look for a rented room in town. The most brilliant student of our class offered to share a room. Avinoam Livne came from an ultraorthodox family. He disaffiliated himself from religion maintaining good ties with home. He was extremely smart and ambitious. He looked for the proximity knowing my interests in classical music and opera. I believe he was after contact to a world he wasn't familiar with ex domo. We used to go together to the opera, Avinoam and his girlfriend and future wife and me with my girlfriend and future wife. He worked on his M.Sc. in plant pathology under the guidance of Prof. Wahl. He was joined one evening by his girlfriend to the lab to help him in setting up an experiment. Wahl dropped by and acted creepy using disparaging remarks in his outburst of rudeness: "Where do you think you are, in a brothel?" They swallowed his epic fail, deeply shocked. It would be an absolutely inadmissible move nowadays. Thence, Avinoam didn't want to pursue his doctoral studies at the Faculty of Agriculture. He completed his PhD in Nebraska and joined the faculty of then recently established Ben Gurion University. Became full professor at a young age. He passed away in his early fifties succumbing to a brain tumor.

Next step, the thesis. My instructor just came back from a sabbatical spent in the US. After completing my lengthy field and lab work, being helped by two technicians, had lots of data to be organized and analyzed statistically. My instructor came back from the states craving for covariance analysis. There were no computers back in the late fifties and the covariance analyses, although no rocket science, but with a FACIT manual-electric calculator took me two months slopped with all possible errors.

Before enlisting in the armed forces, Haim Zaban put up a farewell party in my honor at his home. Many of the colleagues took part. Most of them got jobs in the public sector, in either research or extension. Just a few opted for private firms. I had to spend the next two and a half years with the military designated as instructor in a military agricultural school. Would catch up with my colleagues within two and a half years after discharge from service.

In October 1960 was supposed to report for recruitment. A few weeks earlier began to write up my thesis. It was race against time. To set the record straight was in bad need of an additional month. We're at name dropping of lieutenant colonels. A distant relative of my mother, Air Force Lt. Col. Eliezer Amir born as Ormos Lajkó in Timișoara got in touch with the commander of the training base that I was about to reach, more specifically with Lt. Col. Alexander Sharon born in Timișoara as Albala Sanyi. To no avail. The training command had no **authority over** recruitment dates. That looked very much like a bunch of sour grapes. Had to enroll as scheduled with an unbaked thesis. Have completed it only two and half years later when released from service. "There is no early or late in the Torah" used to say Haim Zaban. Spent the first two weeks after being drafted in the Tel Hashomer bootcamp cleaning and shining lavatories.



Serving in the military in 1961 at the same time with Yudit Almoslino, Yudit Auscher as of 1963.