

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

# Youth Aliyah

### INTRODUCTION

Following the Nazi party's election to power in Germany in 1933, the Eighteenth Zionist Congress, meeting in Prague (August 21–September 3) decided to establish a bureau for the settlement of Jews from Germany in what was then Mandatory Palestine. Arthur Ruppin, head of the newly established bureau, and Chaim Weizmann, president of the Zionist Organization, worked to carry out this decision. The project of bringing teenagers to Palestine, funded and run by the international Zionist Organization, was named Youth Aliya.

Youth Aliya was headed by Henrietta Szold; the latter was among the founders and then the first president of Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America. Youth Aliya's mandate was to bring Jewish teenagers to Palestine (youngsters whose families remained in Europe) and establish educational and social frameworks for the young people during their first years in their new homeland. For the most part, these were teenagers who had been forced to leave school in Germany because they were Jews; they were settled in educational frameworks in kibbutzim, moshavim, and youth villages. The guiding educational principles were studies, work, and encouraging the youngsters to take an interest in building a new Jewish society in Palestine.

By the outbreak of World War II, some five thousand teenagers had been brought to Palestine under the aegis of Youth Aliya—ninety percent from Central Europe and the rest from Eastern Europe. After September 1939, at a time when many Jews were trying to reach Palestine from

Europe and other parts of the world, youngsters from Yemen, Turkey, and Iraq joined the educational frameworks of Youth Aliya. From 1941 on, Jewish teenagers from poverty-stricken neighborhoods in Palestine joined Youth Aliya educational frameworks, mainly in kibbutzim.

During the war, young people who had been rescued from Europe and other places (e.g., the “children of Tehran” in 1943) were brought to Palestine and educated in Youth Aliya frameworks; for the first time they included children of primary-school age. By the end of the war in 1945, some ten thousand children and teenagers had settled in Palestine under the aegis of Youth Aliya. From 1946 until the establishment of the state in 1948, another fifteen thousand children who survived the Holocaust came to Palestine via Youth Aliya, most from Germany and Poland, some from Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Syria, and Lebanon.

Bar-Adon wrote much about Youth Aliya. After the war, when young people who had survived the worst horrors of the Holocaust arrived in Palestine/Israel, she interviewed many of them individually and brought their histories to public consciousness—and this at a time when the importance of documenting the genocide of Jewry on an individual level was not yet part of the national and international agenda.

## AND THEY LIVED AND STOOD UP UPON THEIR FEET...

Dorothy Kahn Bar-Adon

July 1945

Merhavia

An article from Bar-Adon's personal archive

*Bar-Adon interviewed refugees from Europe who arrived to Haifa in July 1945, among them 242 orphans who were released by American soldiers, as well as other legal immigrants. Most were Holocaust survivors from various death camps and concentration camps. Bar-Adon describes the first hours on the boat in the port of Haifa. She then accompanied the refugees to Atlit, their first stop in their new homeland. In this long article, Bar-Adon records testimonies of these refugees, focusing on the youngsters.*

(The boat Mataroa arrived in Haifa in July 1945 with 242 orphans released by American soldiers in April 1945. They came with visas and with 1,164 new immigrants.)

“This flesh is not mine—it’s American flesh,” declared sixteen-year-old Zvi, proudly exhibiting an arm and flexing his muscle. The arm bore the blue tattooed number—177633. “The tattooed numbers seemed to be scratched on bare bones when the Americans arrived in April,” says Zvi. “Then food began to arrive like magic—meat and chocolate and tinned food—we never dreamed that tanks could carry food instead of death.” Zvi’s weight increased from forty to sixty-nine kilos. Now he feels strong enough to undertake his share of work in the Palestinian agricultural settlement where he is being placed by Youth Aliyah to start life anew.

Hundreds of refugees who arrived at Haifa aboard the SS *Mataroa* boasted of their “American flesh.” Most of them had gained from twenty to thirty kilos. Their past and hopes for the future were summed up several days after their arrival at a get-together in the Atlit Detention Camp [detainee camp established by the British Mandatory authorities to prevent Jewish refugees from entering Palestine] by Aaron, a seventeen-year-old Polish youth who said, “We children of Buchenwald have experienced all the tragedies of the people of Israel. All the children here were dead. We were bones. When the Americans freed us, we were simply bones that muttered. Our skin was as yellow as wax, and we frightened people who saw us. I remember an old man, a man of truth, speaking to me, ‘Can these bones live? O, Lord God, Thou knowest...and I will lay sinews upon you and cover you with skin and put breathe in you and ye shall live. And they lived and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army.’ That old man, when already a candidate for the next world, predicted that these bones would live. I couldn’t believe him. And now you see these bones—these beaming faces.... Many are bereaved of parents, brothers and sisters. Many do not remember how their mothers and fathers looked. Many have not studied for six years. Many things are lacking in their youth—but we have kept our souls. In spite of tempting promises in France, we all wanted to go home, and we felt that only Zion could be home. And so we said with one voice, ‘Eretz Israel.’ Somehow, we have held on to that thread. We saw many people in Europe who lost their balance. This youth didn’t look at us. We will build, and we will be an example to the world—a lesson that they cannot destroy or break us. We will build the homeland. We hope that the Yishuv [the Jewish settlements in Palestine] will give these children an education and a chance to work. And then, in place of the sad Yiddish songs we sing now, we shall sing healthy, creative songs in Hebrew.”

The scenes witnessed and the stories heard at the Haifa Harbor, and subsequently in the Atlit Detention Camp are difficult to put on paper because so much of it was beyond the range of human emotions as we know them. Practically every one of the 1,204 had been saved by some miracle or series of miraculous circumstances. The stories were difficult to believe even when you heard them from the lips of the survivors. And yet, you knew they must be true because only the miraculous could account for their ultimate arrival in Eretz Israel.

The refugees represented practically every country in Europe, a majority of the hellhole camps, and Jews of many types and character. As for the children and youth—the children and youth is a misnomer. During the past eleven years, youth of every description have found haven in Eretz Israel, starting with the Jewish children from Germany, fresh from comfortable homes, down to the Transdnestrian orphans. But youth like this we had never seen. Lads of fourteen and fifteen years boasted of murdering SS guards after the liberation, in revenge for their families. Like ancient superstitious warriors, they still wore the silk shirts (swastika-decorated) of the Nazi officers they had slain. Until now, the youth would tell you that their parents “went up in smoke in the crematorium.” And if one of them used the phrase “unknown fate,” his companions would break into laughter and comment sarcastically, “What ‘unknown’? His mother went up the chimney, just like mine.” A lad of fourteen related, “My brother died on his twenty-fifth birthday. He wanted to eat especially well on that day, so he stole a beet. The guard got him....”

The youth vividly illustrated their stories by the marks on their bodies. One fourteen-year-old showed us the mark of a whip across his face—that’s a souvenir of the day when he couldn’t ladle out his soup quickly enough to suit the SS guard, the ladling being done by his fingers since spoons were not supplied. Moshe, aged fifteen, exhibits grooves in his hands, gotten when he worked as a slave laborer in the coal pits, two years ago. Moshe, a Hungarian, age seventeen, is proud of a singed ear that, he says, is a memorial to the last shot fired by a German in Bergen-Belsen. An SS guard tried to murder him just as the Germans were fleeing from the Americans—he only singed the ear. A lad of fifteen explains that he doesn’t want to go to a religious settlement because, “I was religious once. But I saw that the religious man was no better off at the crematorium.”

All of them spoke with wonder of the coming of the Americans. One said, “It was the first time my little brother had ever seen smiles and

real laughter.” Another said, “You don’t know what it meant to see good faces. In the camp, even families quarreled among themselves. None of us had good faces anymore. We didn’t know there could be good faces still in the world until we saw the Americans. Their food was wonderful. But it was the good faces—that was something wonderful to see.”

It was early morning when the SS *Mataroa*, which had docked the night before, began to unload. Formalities on board were brief. A tribute to Miss Szold and an explanation of Youth Aliyah were given by Mr. Hans Beyth, who greeted the leaders of the various youth groups from England, France, Italy, Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald. What types were milling on the dock! There were the Mizrachi youth, eager to be off to the Beit She’an agricultural settlements. There were the Aguddat Israel with sidecurls and skullcaps, their eyes in the direction of Jerusalem yeshivot. There was the Habonim group [Socialist-Zionist youth movement] trained in England, who asked questions about the Huleh swamp—for they will join the Anglo-Baltic settlement, Kfar Blum, in Upper Galilee. There were women in their early twenties who looked middle-aged, after the experience of raping or forced prostitution. There were two old men—one a Hungarian rabbi who, despite the harrowing hunger of Buchenwald, had steadfastly refused trefa [non-kosher] meat and had come through, “with the help of God.” There were the children who had been converted to Christianity, taken communion, and forgotten that they were Jews. There was the little waif, Beni, who did not remember his family and who was considered by the Bergen-Belsen inmates as their “good luck amulet.” There was the eighteen-year-old girl who had saved her skin by working as a gentile nurse. There were those who owed their lives to the Jewish Brigade [military unit formed in late 1944 under the aegis of the British Army; fought the Germans in Italy; at the end of the war some of them assisted Holocaust survivors in immigrating illegally to Israel]. There were—and there were.

We heard a hundred stories, and there were a thousand to be heard.

Since the public could not enter the port area, the tension of waiting was more keenly felt at the railroad crossing in Atlit—what hopes and fears among those who strained their eyes along the tracks. Parents who had not seen their children for six or seven years exhibited frayed photographs of tots on hobbyhorses with the remark, “I am afraid I won’t recognize him now.” A number had come, although they knew of their family’s death—perhaps, after all, some mistake. An eight-year-old child of Degania Bet had

come with a few members of the settlement to meet her father. He was trapped in Holland some years ago, while carrying out a mission for the Histadrut, and was confined in a German camp.

The train arrives. For a few moments, the air is filled with the cries of those who—having been separated from their loved ones for years—cannot bear the split second more until they alight from the train.

Two youths, ages fourteen and eighteen years, coming from Bergen-Belsen, are reunited with their father. Today is Michael's eighteenth birthday, and he receives a precious gift—his father. It is six years since they parted, and—after Michael alights from the train—there are several moments of shyness on both sides—then reunion begins in earnest. Amid the joy of reunion are the hungry eyes of those who, although they have no relatives in Palestine to their knowledge, scan the crowd. Perhaps—after all?

The procession treks from the railroad crossing to the Atlit Detention Camp. A few are still wearing the zebra stripes of the concentration camps—as a gesture rather than from necessity. The majority have acquired clothes on the way. Only the numbers, burned into their skins, cannot be erased. Most of them appear to be in fairly good health—for only the hardier could make the trip, a number having died soon after the liberation from overeating! Although their luggage was sent in a separate train, we are not spared that haunting sight of the Jew with his *peckel* [little bundle], for a number have special treasures that they will not let out of sight, such as family relics or their prayer shawls. But many walk upright, unencumbered, drinking in the distant mountains. An ambulance bypasses the procession, taking several youngsters with measles to the Atlit hospital—the ambulance is marked, “The Greater Boston Jewish Community in Memory of Edlar R. Markson.” The crowds are grateful to several British policemen who have entered into the spirit of the hour and lend helping hands to the old and the children.

The refugees are assigned to their barracks and settle down to the last few days of formalities that still stand between them and freedom. Some are glad to rest knowing that relatives are awaiting them. The youth eagerly seek scraps of information about the agricultural settlements to which they will be assigned. Some cannot rest because they do not know if a wife, mother or child is really in Palestine, and they chase after every wisp of possible information—a journalist, a nurse, a Youth Aliyah official; and—last but not least—they haunt the Information Bureau.

They inquire about old neighbors and friends. The search is complicated by the facts that many have adopted Hebrew names in Palestine. Someone looks for an old pal, Abraham, who “is expected to live in the country, but maybe he is living in town.”

A portion of camp life centers around the barrack that serves as a synagogue. There is an amusing scene the first day when the East European Jews meet with a group of Yemenites. So these handsome, dusky little fellows, with their nasal chant, are also Jews? In less than half an hour they are comparing *tefillin* [a set of small black leather boxes, containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah, that are worn by observant Jews during weekday morning prayers]. Sidecurls from Poland and sidecurls from Aden bend over books together, comparing notes and airing differences of opinion. A number of the concentration camp inmates have been without tefillin for a long time and to secure them is their prime desire. One old man anxiously inquires of a Palestinian if there is anyone in Palestine who could properly reblacken his tefillin and receives the answer, “If there were as many heads in Palestine to wear tefillin as there are hands to blacken them, we’d be all right.”

In a corner of the synagogue barrack, we hear the drone of a *cheder* [traditional elementary school, in which boys are taught the basics of Judaism and the Hebrew language]. Some twenty youngsters of various ages are gathered around the rabbi who is discussing the *Shulchan Aruch* [code of Jewish law]. Who is this black-bearded rabbi who can hold their attention on this festive day when other youngsters are playing ball and generally enjoying life in the camp courtyard? He has little time for curious journalists and says, “I can’t stop the lesson unless the matter is very urgent.” Convinced of the urgency, he reveals that, under the imposing black beard, he is twenty-two years old.... The son of a Worms rabbi, Aaron became the director of a yeshiva and children’s home at the age of nineteen. For two years, under unspeakable conditions, he held together his flock of sixty yeshiva *bahurim* [Talmud students]. He gave them Torah and bread when he could. And, with the world in fragments around him, Aaron’s yeshiva went on. Some of his students came with him to Palestine. Studies continued uninterrupted on the ship, new pupils attaching themselves to his class. And here, in Atlit, they had found a corner in the synagogue barrack where Aaron was preparing them for *Tisha B’Av* [annual fast day commemorating the destruction of both the First and Second Temple in Jerusalem].

Tisha B'Av in the camp synagogue was stirring. The pupils filed into the dim, candlelit barrack, in stocking feet. Sitting on the floor they chanted the Lamentations. And it was as though Jeremiah had described their own past. "Mine enemies chased me. Sore, like a bird—they have cut off my life in a dungeon—the tongue of the sucking child cleaveth to the roof of his mouth for thirst—they that were brought up in scarlet embrace dunghills—we are orphans and fatherless. Lest our skin was black like an oven because of the terrible famine." That evening, in the Atlit barrack synagogue, we heard the Lamentations chanted with their deepest and most terrible implications.

Next evening, there was a party—a party where grimness and joyful thanksgiving made strange bedfellows. There were few in the camp that did not turn up, packing the barrack, with the overflow peering through windows. We were to see a program presented by the Buchenwald Jewish Entertainment Troupe, a valiant little "stock company." They had done much to hold people together in their darkest camp hours, if only by translating their grief into words and music and their dreams into concrete sentences. After the liberation, this troupe performed for the American soldiers and later in France. At Atlit, they apologize for the fact that their talent has thinned out, some of the troupe members remaining in France.

The master of ceremonies was Tuvia, a Romanian youth of seventeen who worked in the coal mines of Germany with two thousand slave laborers before he was taken to Buchenwald. Before the performance, he told us how he, his father, mother, and fifteen-year-old brother had been stood up in a line of five hundred people while an SS man indicated with a jerk of his thumb, "left" or "right," according to his whim. "Left" meant cremation. His mother, father and brother were marched off to the left. Fate willed him to the right. Tuvia opened the party with a little Yiddish song of his own composition, plaintive despite the valiant effort at gaiety, "I know very well what is in your hearts. But tonight we will laugh. We were all prisoners...but we shall not think forbidden thoughts.... Bury everything in the earth—the main thing is that we are together—and we are all healthy. Listen to our program with patience, and laugh, for this is a rehearsal for better times." Tuvia's call to laughter was sincere enough. Poor Tuvia—perhaps he had spent too much time in the German coalmines to remember what laughter is. The most amusing number of the evening was a dialogue between two inmates of Buchenwald who have gone mad and, in their madness, speak horrible truths.

The first number was the *Buchenwald Song* in German, sung by the Buchenwald Choir, “Buchenwald, I cannot forget you. When day breaks and the sun laughs and the lines of workers are driven to their day’s toil. Amid the gray dawn and the black forest, the sky is red. And we go forward, our knapsacks on our backs; a piece of bread; and sorrow in our hearts.” Then, the refrain, “O Buchenwald, I will not forget you. You were my fate. Only those who have left you can know how precious is liberty. O Buchenwald, we neither wail nor weep. Whatever our future may be, we will say ‘yes’ to life, because the day will come when we will be free.” Second stanza, “The night is short and the day is long. But one song rings out—the song of the homeland. We will not lose our courage and faith. Strengthen your step, comrade. Guard your will to live.” The next stanza, “The blood is hot—the girl is far away. The wind sings softly and I long for her. The stones are hard and our steps are firm. On our backs, the packs—and in our hearts—love.”

The next was a Yiddish song written in Buchenwald, “Everyone calls me Zalmele. I had a little mamma. I haven’t her anymore. I had a little papa. He watched over me, too. Now I am a little rag, because I am a Jew. I had a little sister. She is no more. Ach, where are you little Esther, in my hour of need. Somewhere, near a little tree, somewhere near a fence, is my brother, little Shlomo, murdered by a German. I had a little home. Now, things are bad. I am like a little animal that the butcher slaughters. God, look down from the heavens, on the earth below, look and see how the little flower is torn up by the scoundrels.”

The next number on this “rehearsal for better times” was a charming duet between Abraham and Mottel. The singers were two sixteen-year-old orphans, Leib and Ephriam, of Poland, former internees of Oswiecim and Buchenwald. The words to the haunting melody were, in part:

Mottel: You will laugh, you will laugh, little Abraham, you will laugh!  
 I have a plan, something wonderful,  
 I will mew like a cat and bark like a dog,  
 And that will be your first laugh.

Abraham: The mother, who raised me, stands before my eyes  
 My brothers and sisters are scattered.  
 I am alone.  
 When I begin to remember sad things,  
 Tell me, how can I laugh?

Mottel: You will laugh, you will laugh, little Abraham, you will laugh!  
 What has been—don't give it a thought.  
 You will forget sorrow and suffering when happiness comes  
 Because to laugh today is the best thing, Abraham.

Abraham: When I remember my weak father,  
 My head begins to whirl,  
 Because I will never see him before my eyes, alive.  
 Now, tell me, how can I laugh?

Mottel: You will laugh, you will laugh, little Abraham, you will laugh!  
 You will laugh because the fates will it.  
 You will forget the suffering and sorrow in joy.  
 Because to laugh is more precious than gold.

Abraham: I will laugh, Mottel, I will laugh.  
 But this is not the time.  
 When the sun shines for us,  
 Then I will laugh and cry.

Mottel and Abraham together:  
 We will laugh, we will both laugh, we will laugh!  
 Because a new time is coming,  
 The sun already throws its rays.  
 Hark, the signal!  
 Come, and we will sing, full of joy.

These folk songs, most of which had been composed in the Buchenwald Camp, were Tuvia's "variety." And, at the conclusion of the performance, there was a pathetic attempt to sing the new Hebrew pioneer songs. A few knew the words, and the rest followed after like lame ducks. So that was the Buchenwald Party in Atlit.

"There are good times and bad times in Palestine—but it is home," said Ada Fishmann [feminist leader, founder of the Women Workers Movement, and its first secretary; served as head of the Histadrut's aliyah department], speaking the next day when the newcomers were welcomed on behalf of the Yishuv [Jewish settlements in Palestine] at a general meeting.

“We know that you are prepared to help us broaden our boundaries and welcome those refugees who may still come. When we came to Palestine thirty years ago, we came to bare rocks. There was no one here to greet us. Today, there are fertile fields and many Jews to greet you. Hitler did not send us, but we realized then that all this could happen and we yearned for soil under our feet. We have begun. Now it is up to you to carry on. There are many difficulties in Palestine. Now we and you must prepare for the remnants of Israel, yet to come. No people rise to life without land under its feet. We call upon you to turn to agriculture.”

“You have come on the last certificates [visas to immigrate to Palestine] left to us under the White Paper,” [policy paper issued by the British government in 1939 to limit Jewish immigration to Palestine] declared a representative of the Histadrut, welcoming the refugees in the name of 140,000 workers in trade, agriculture and industry. “We are engaged in a battle to open the gates. We must succeed, for there is no other road. During your trials, the Yishuv did not forget you. We call upon you now to remember your duty to the homeland.”

A Polish refugee, in answering, declared, “During all our suffering, Eretz Israel was the only ray of life. We know what the Yishuv did to help rescue the children. We heard of the Jewish parachutists behind the lines. We know what the Jewish Brigade has done and is still doing at this very hour for the remnants. We will render back this debt.” When he finished, there was a spontaneous singing of the *Hatikvah*.

While the general stories of Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen are now well known to all the world, each of the refugees had his own story to tell. While a few resented publicity and probing, the majority seemed to get things off their chest. From early morning until late at night, one could circulate among the new arrivals, filling notebooks with horrors, already known but piling up, like a top-heavy structure.

One of the outstanding personalities among the refugees is Edie, better known by his Hebrew name, Beni (my son), age four, who has spent more than half of his life in the Bergen-Belsen Camp. Incredible as it may sound, this child, who has known nothing but horrors, is like a ray of sunshine. With his independent air, happy smile and friendly disposition, he captivates everyone. An orphan, numerous people wanted to adopt him, including a group of American soldiers who wanted to send him back to the States.

Besides, Beni already has a fosterfather, Shmuel, age seventeen, from Host, Czechoslovakia. When we opened conversation with Beni, Shmuel appeared and asked with a proprietary air, "What do you want of him?" Since the Americans tried to lure Beni to the States, Shmuel is on the watch. And this was the story we heard.

Prior to the war, Shmuel studied in a Hebrew school in Czechoslovakia. Ultimately, his parents, together with five brothers and two sisters, were sent to the Oswiecim camp. No word has been received from them. He was studying weaving in Budapest when, in December 1944, he was interned in Bergen-Belsen, where he was sent to work as a woodcutter.

"One day I saw a little boy, three years old, lying on a cot, half dead. All day he lay there, gasping for breath, and his eyelids were fluttering like a little bird's." Shmuel imitated the fluttering eyelids. "Nobody knew anything about him except that he had no father in the camp and his mother had died a few months before. A woman was tending him but she had already abandoned hope. And really, there seemed nothing to do. I don't know why—but I decided to take him and made a vow, 'if I live, he will also live' and I promised myself that with God's help, I would get him to Palestine."

The next chapter was supplied by fellow refugees from Bergen-Belsen. Shmuel, who was then sixteen years old, "gave him all the care of a mother and father rolled into one." He gave him most of his portion of food and he even begged crumbs among the internees for his ward. He gave him most of his own few drops of drinking water. And somehow—nobody can quite explain it—Beni was kept reasonably clean when everyone else was crawling with lice. To keep Beni clean and his stomach fairly full became an obsession with Shmuel. How infectious this obsession was can be judged by the fact that even several SS guards were known to throw a crust of bread secretly to Shmuel, pointing to Beni.

When the child began to call him "father," Shmuel gave him his first Hebrew lesson: the little boy began calling Shmuel "Aba" and was given the name "Beni."

The entire camp was deeply touched by Shmuel's tireless devotion. Often, when nostrils were filled with the stench of human bodies burning in the crematorium, Shmuel could be seen in a corner, quietly telling Beni a bedtime story about Palestine, which he was sure they would both reach some day. And, because superstitions thrive when hopeless people are looking for a straw to cling to, it is no wonder that Beni became not only

a mascot but also a symbol. “We all felt that if anything happened to Beni, the fate of all of us would be sealed,” said a former Bergen-Belsen inmate. And during the terrible days, just before the Americans arrived, they took hope from the fact that the youngster was as cheerful and carefully tended as usual.

When the Americans did arrive to liberate them, Beni was among the first to greet them and to eat the first bar of chocolate and orange that he remembered in his life. But this did not mean the end of his troubles. When Shmuel and Beni arrived in France with the other children, there was danger of Beni returning to his status of orphan and being separated from Shmuel. The authorities refused to recognize Shmuel’s fosterfatherhood, an official charging that “you are only a child yourself.” This meant the danger of Beni being detained in France since Shmuel could not answer for him. Shmuel worked hard, teaching the child to say “Eretz Israel.” He was afraid to tax his memory with more than these two words. Whatever the authorities asked him, he must answer with these two words. Shmuel’s pride knew no bounds when the child under examination, expanded his two word lesson to two sentences, “I am a Jew. I want to go only to Eretz Israel.” And when they tried to bribe him with chocolates to remain in France, he staunchly repeated his theme, “I am a Jew. I only want to go to Eretz Israel.”

So, he was slated for Palestine. But one more adventure was in store for him. A seventeen-year-old youth from Bergen-Belsen decided to remain in France. Needing funds to settle himself, he kidnapped Beni and sold him for eight thousand francs to a Hungarian family in Paris. When he disappeared, Shmuel was distracted. Ads were placed in the lost and found columns of Parisian newspapers. To no avail. On the third day, thirty-five comrades of Shmuel went off on a “needle-in-the-haystack” search. They divided Paris into districts, promising each other not to give up until Beni was found. After a long search, one of the youth heard the word “Aba” being shouted from the fifth floor of a dwelling. Beni was found. “I shall never forget the meeting between Shmuel and the boy,” said a witness. After that, Shmuel watched his ward like a hawk until he had fulfilled his pledge to bring him safely to Palestine.

The story of the Jewish youth in Buchenwald is best told by David Landau, medical student, age twenty-six, who was their leader. After finishing high school in Lodz, David went to Lwow to study medicine. In 1941, his studies were stopped and he was placed in the ghetto. Then he worked

in a Jewish hospital in Kielce until he was sent to Treblinka, destined for the gas chamber. He was saved from death by a German officer whose wounded leg he tended. However, he was afraid to remain a privileged character, dependent on the good will of a single officer who might be transferred. So he asked to be put in an ammunition factory among the “necessary Jews” where life was hard but more certain. Here he worked from twelve to sixteen hours a day on rations of 180 grams of bread and a portion of watery soup.

With the advance of the Russians, the factory was moved and David was interned in Buchenwald in 1943. “I came at a fortunate time,” said David. Himmler had recently given an order to industrialize the camp. Therefore the better element, rather than the criminal element as formerly, were spokesmen for the prisoners. David gave a vivid picture of the 180,000 prisoners in the camp and its “suburbs” (smaller camps) all dressed in zebra stripes and wooden shoes. For a while he worked in the underground ammunition factory, “Dora,” in which 5,000 prisoners were employed. “Very few came out of that alive,” he said. “Every two weeks, about 1,500 new workers had to be sent to fill the places of the dead.”

David was chosen by the Political Committee of the prisoners (comprised of both Jews and gentiles) along with eleven others to be active in organizational work. In Buchenwald, the word “organization” had a variety of meanings—anything that was for the good of the prisoners. One of the organizational jobs was the stealing of parts of ammunition in the factory. When the parts were reconstructed, each national group of prisoners had about eighteen guns in their possession. David stressed the friendliness on the part of the gentiles, many of whom shared their cigarettes and gift packages with the Jews who were forbidden to receive them.

When the Russian offensive began in 1944, Jews were sent in from all directions, all half or more than half dead. “Almost a hundred operations were performed every day—just hacking off arms and legs.” Five thousand died in January and more in February. “As the bombings increased, there was less food, and hundreds of people died daily from starvation.” When more German camp personnel were moved to the front, David was finally posted as a doctor in the camp hospital, although it was against the rules for Jews to serve. “We had no equipment and no medicines. There was nothing to do but cut.... Compared to conditions outside, being in the hospital was a paradise—we had better food.”

A group of seventy youth were living in a small camp adjacent to Buchenwald. They speak with great affection of their leader, Mottel Stigler, formerly of the staff of the Warsaw *Der Moment* [one of the two most important Yiddish daily newspapers; published in Warsaw 1910–39], who maintained courses in literature and history during the darkest hours. He also wrote, and inspired them to write, many of the songs that came from the Buchenwald camp and that gave dignity and reason—were such a thing possible—to their sufferings. Stigler is still in France.

After a while, the number of youth in Buchenwald increased to a thousand, the larger group being inside the Buchenwald camp. Their leaders were Gustav Schiller, a Polish Jew, and Tony, a Czech non-Jewish political prisoner. When questioned about Tony, the youth in Atlit could speak only in superlatives and sounded like the disciples of a Hasid. In fact, were it not for their longing to come to Palestine, many declared that they would have followed him to Czechoslovakia, only to remain at his side. The youth claim that many of them owe their lives to Tony. “He was the soul of understanding, kindness and courage,” said one youth. Another declared that he was “both father and mother to us. No one can reckon how many times he risked his life for us.” When typhus, dysentery and tuberculosis were rampant in the camp, most of the one thousand youth under Tony’s care were unaffected because of his diligence in maintaining some pretense of sanitation and his skill at securing extra scraps of food. He made forged papers for all of them. And none of them will forget the dramatic moment of the day, just before the coming of the Americans, when the Jews were summoned to the crematorium. SS guards came to the barracks and asked Tony, “Have you any Jewish children here?” Tony replied, “No, I have only children,” and steadfastly defended his contention. From what we gleaned from the children, Tony emerged from the darkness of Buchenwald a great soul who, wherever he may be now, will always live in the memory of these Jewish youth for whom he risked his life on so many occasions with such grace.

Early in 1945, the guards were relaxed and the prisoners’ internal organization strengthened. David pointed out that the prisoners maintained a radio to Moscow and to General Patton. On the morning of April 6, 1945, all Jews were ordered to come to the “sports ground,” from where they were taken to the crematorium. A wild panic ensued. The gentile prisoners hid as many Jews as possible. Only two thousand Jews were taken that day. Then, for a few days, five thousand were taken daily.

The news of redemption came at three o'clock on April 11, when they were told that the Americans were approaching. Determined to seize the camp themselves, the prisoners put into action their carefully laid plans. Things went like clockwork. Armed prisoners put the electricity out of order. Yugoslavian and Spanish partisans cut the barbed wire. There was no opposition from the SS who began to flee. The prisoners murdered three hundred SS men before the American order to turn them over alive became known. At seven o'clock, came the stirring announcement over the loudspeaker, "Comrades, we are free!" The Americans were at Weimar, six kilometers away.

After the Americans arrived at eleven o'clock, the prisoners knew what a narrow escape they had had. There was a strange telephone call from Director Schmidt, who doubtless was a bit behind the times. Speaking to a Jew, he asked if orders had been carried out and "the work finished." It developed in the course of conversation that the "work" that he had ordered was the gas bombing of every Buchenwald inmate prior to the arrival of the Americans.

"I don't know where the flags came from—but every national group came to meet the Americans with their own flag," says David. Asked to surrender their weapons two days later, the prisoners coupled the ceremony with a memorial service for President Roosevelt.

After liberation and before leaving for France, the youth had ten days "holiday" when they visited Weimar and, we were told, settled some debts with former German persecutors. A group of a hundred was given a nearby farmstead by the Americans for agricultural training.

Sidelights on the Bergen-Belsen camp were given by two Hungarian lads, Isaiah, age nineteen, and Jacob, age ten. After the death of Jacob's mother, Isaiah had taken the younger child under his wing on the journey to Palestine. Jacob's father was deported to the Ukraine in 1941. He was sent to a camp in Austria with his mother. In December 1944, they were transferred to Bergen-Belsen. "I didn't work," says little Jacob, "I only hungered." Soon, he was down with typhus and confined to hospital. His mother sat by his bed night and day. Few people came out of that hospital alive, and it was only due to his mother's tender care that Jacob survived. While Jacob was still in the hospital, news came that the Americans were approaching. At the same time, the Germans ordered part of the camp inmates to Magdeburg. This order set loose a wave of rumors. Some said that those going to Magdeburg would

be killed. Others said that it was fortunate to leave the camp, as the Germans intended to blow it up. The first building to be blown, rumor had it, was the hospital. Therefore, Jacob's mother stole from the hospital with the child, stills suffering from typhus, and joined the train going to Magdeburg.

The German guards had not taken their prisoners very far when they discovered that they were trapped. The English were behind them and the Americans had already reached Magdeburg. The prisoners spent one terrible night, literally at the front. In the excitement, the SS men began to flee for their lives. However, a dozen SS men volunteered to remain behind in order to finish off the prisoners. The plan was to mow them down with machine guns and throw the bodies into the Elbe.

The prisoners were lined up. The SS guards shot into the air, in order that the remainder of the prisoners would alight from the train quickly. The machine guns were ready to be manned by the dozen German butchers. At that very moment, the guns of the Americans were heard in the distance and the first tanks approached. The twelve SS guards surrendered.

The released prisoners will never forget the thrill of the moment when the first American stepped from his tank and said, "I am a Jew, Abraham Cohen." This was at four o'clock on Friday, April 13. "We fell on the ground and wept," says Isaiah. "We didn't have the strength to talk. We didn't look like people."

The Americans took them to a nearby village, installed them comfortably in German homes and began to distribute food. "Some people couldn't stand the shock of eating and died from the food." Here, too, in a German house, the mother of Jacob died, a few hours after release. This meant that the ten-year-old child was left alone. Isaiah took care of him for the rest of the journey.

One of those closest to the Bergen-Belsen children was a Polish woman, Hilda Hupart, who was in the camp since April 1943. She was in charge of twenty-six children from four to sixteen years old and was in close touch with the other sixty-three youths from sixteen to twenty years old. "Birthday parties in camp were great events," says Hilda. Friends of the child would save crumbs and crusts of bread for several weeks before the occasion. Then, on the birthday, the child could eat his fill of bread. She recalls a mother asking her child if he was hungry and receiving the reply, "Never ask if I am hungry. I might say 'yes'. Then you would give me your portions. Then soon I wouldn't have a mother."

One Bergen-Belsen child had a happy reunion with her brother under strange circumstances. The name of the brother, who was in Buchenwald, was omitted from the list of Buchenwald prisoners circulated in Bergen-Belsen after the liberation. However, someone brought the news that he had seen a child in Buchenwald who resembled her. The girl was determined to trace the possibility. She linked up with a family who had permission to travel to Buchenwald, taking the place of one of their children who had died. She was rewarded for her arduous journey by finding her long-lost brother. The reunion was delayed for several hours, the brother being in Weimar “on business” when she arrived. This “business,” as described to us by the fifteen-year-old brother, was as follows. One day he had passed through Weimar with a work gang. He was terribly hungry. Smelling fresh bread, he couldn’t resist creeping into the bakery—at great risk if he were discovered by the guard—and begging for a crust. The German baker threw him out and reported him to the guard who thrashed him soundly. For months the child dreamed only of this baker—some day he would have revenge. The day came. He went to Weimar, found the baker, and killed him. This was the “business” in which the boy was engaged when his sister arrived.

Another family from the Bergen-Belsen camp consists of eight children, ranging in age from ten to twenty-three years, of whom Youth Aliyah will receive six. The eldest sister, Miriam, an attractive blonde of eighteen years, tells the story. The family consisted of fifteen children (from several mothers). The father had a bakery in a small Hungarian town. After being placed in the ghetto for a month, they were deported to several destinations. One daughter, with her four small children, was gassed at Oswiecim. The mother and three other children were sent to Germany. Miriam, together with her father and seven children, was sent in a cattle car to Austria. In 1944, they were interned in the Strasshof camp. They were then selected as workers in a cement factory. Here the father died. At the end of November 1944, the eight orphans were sent to Bergen-Belsen where they joined the group of a thousand children.

Shulamith is one of the youngest refugees in camp. She was born six months ago in Switzerland. Her mother, Hanna Lobert, is a highly intelligent Polish woman, who showed great fortitude as a member of the Maquis [rural guerrilla bands of French Resistance fighters during the occupation of France in World War II]. Although she is a hunchback and badly crippled, one forgets these deformities when, in a restrained

manner, she relates her story. In France, she received degrees in Greek and Latin. Soon afterwards, she married a German Jew, Shimon. Faced with the danger of being sent to a concentration camp, the couple joined the Maquis. Her husband was soon given the rank of lieutenant, and together they worked from the Toulouse headquarters. She carried on with the men, smuggling ammunition, forging passports, helping Jews to escape. In June 1944, the couple was arrested near a railroad station. Her husband was killed before her eyes, together with thirty other members of the Maquis; she has a photograph of this mass murder. She was pregnant. After being imprisoned for some months, she was freed and went to Switzerland where the baby was born.

Another Polish woman, active in the Underground Movement, is Ethel Reichmann. Age twenty, she acted as fostermother to twenty-two orphans, bringing them from France to Palestine. Ethel came to France from Poland before the war and managed to remain in hiding until 1942 when she joined the partisans. Still in her teens she joined in the hazardous activities now well known—traffic in arms, passport forging and sending children to Palestine. Ethel had a hand in arranging the transport of children who came to Palestine last year from France via the Pyrenees. Although she might have come to Palestine sooner, she bravely remained on duty in France until after the liberation. When she finally came, she brought twenty-two orphans from children homes. She says that a number of her flock were converted to Christianity. On their first evening with her, they knelt to say grace before the meal. Even on the journey to Palestine, she had difficulty in convincing some of the younger ones, raised in convents, that they are Jews.

On the one hand, the refugees in Atlit had a desire to talk—to get things off their chests—to enjoy their new freedom in the light of reminiscences. On the other hand, there seemed to be a feeling that everything had been said and nothing could be added. Some answered in “case history” language. For instance:

Jacob Zvi, age sixteen

“I came from Lodz. My father had a *tricot* [a type of fabric] factory. My mother, sister—aged seventeen years, and brother—aged twelve, were burned to death in Oswiecim. My father died of starvation in Dachau. I am the only one left.”

Menahem, age seventeen

“We were in Mauthausen from January 1944. My mother, father and brother—aged fourteen—were hung. My brother, Asher, aged twenty-one, was shot. I was left alone and came here.”

Miriam, age twenty, was in Lwow until 1942. Her mother and father, both doctors, were murdered. Then, posing as a gentile, she came to Warsaw and obtained employment as an anti-Soviet, Russian nurse. She is tall, good-looking and has a head of closely cropped blonde ringlets. Then in her teens, she endured a perilous period serving in enemy hospitals in Austria and Italy. When the English took Udine on April 25, 1945, she fled from the hospital in order to avoid surrendering to them together with the enemy. After clearing up her position, she was allowed to proceed to Milan and to enter a Hachsharah [pioneer training] center to prepare for Palestine.

Rachel and Lotta, both age nineteen, are the remnants of the fifty children who were brought from Berlin to Holland after the pogroms. The children were trained in a Hachsharah center of the Youth Aliyah until they were forced underground. The fate of twenty-five is unknown. Fifteen came to Palestine in 1943 and 1944 via Spain. After the liberation, eight were left in Holland. Lotta has a brother in the Jewish Brigade. Rachel has a sister, alive in Holland, the remainder of her family having been deported.

The two girls will be sent to a new settlement in the Mount Ephraim district, not far from Ein-Hashofet. They both asked eager questions about their future home (still unnamed) and were delighted to learn that it is only a few months old, that rocks are still being removed to make the soil cultivable, and that they are facing a real pioneering job.

Erna Gottlieber proudly shows her most prized possession—a certificate from the Maquis to the effect that her husband, who was killed with eighty other men, died the death of a hero. After his death, she carried on in his place with the Maquis for three years. She came to Palestine with their three children, Sabina, Abraham and Claude, ages five, ten and fifteen.

In Italy, 149 boarded the vessel including twelve orphans and thirteen youth, up to the age of sixteen, who were accompanied by their parents. They had come originally from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania and Italy. One of the youth told us that a group of about thirty pioneer youth who had been in Hachsharah centers in Bari accompanied them to the ship

but couldn't embark. "Their grief at not being allowed to enter Palestine cannot be imagined," he added.

Germans, Austrians, Czechs and Poles were among the group of sixty-five Haborim who had been engaged in recent years in war industry and agriculture in England. Some of these will join the Anglo-Baltic settlement of Kfar Blum in the Huleh, and the rest will be dispersed in various settlements. Approximately thirty-five chalutzim (from twenty to twenty-five years old), trained by the Bahad (Brith Chalutzim Datim), will go to the Mizrahi settlement of Tirat Zvi in Beit She'an.

A "Certificato Patrioto" signed by Field Marshal Alexander is prized by a Polish technician, Herman, who under the name of "Henrique" had an exciting career. Posing as a gentile, he was sent from Warsaw to Berlin in 1943 by a business firm. Having finished his commission, he succeeded in getting a job with Todt (government suppliers). When, in November 1943, Berlin was heavily bombed, "Henrique" was placed in charge of the gangs cleaning up the warehouses. Among the debris, he found two blank travel documents. Taking a friend from Vilna with him, he escaped to Italy. Here, on the strength of his past experience with Todt, he was placed in charge of a gang of 1,040 Italians engaged in building fortifications. The first few weeks were difficult, but he quickly picked up a working knowledge of Italian.

Later, hearing that the English had reached Corsica, ninety sea miles away, he decided to reach them by motorboat. However, before he could embark, he was arrested by the gestapo. The gestapo disarmed him, relieving him of a gun. However, they overlooked two other guns on his person. This later enabled him to hold up a guard, take his keys, and make a break. He was in hiding for some time, after which he joined the partisans to whom he was useful because of his fund of inside information. In May 1944, he was appointed leader of a group of 1,600 partisans by the Italian Liberation Committee. When he heard in January that the Jewish Brigade was in Genoa, he went to see them. Stirred by what he saw, he decided to come to Palestine and was fortunate in obtaining a certificate at Rome.

Moses Wolf claims to be fifteen years old, but he looks several years younger. His underdevelopment is due to a long period of work with the slave laborers in German coalmines. Moses came from a small Romanian village. His parents and seven brothers and sisters were deported and, he is almost sure, cremated. He was sent to the coalmines. There he worked from twelve to fourteen hours a day, two hundred meters underground.

His job was filling the coal wagons. The daily ration was two hundred grams of bread and a liter of watery soup. "Most people died in the mines," says Moses. "I worked there nine months, and I don't understand why I live. Those who even coughed were sent to the crematorium. The Jews were sent to the most dangerous places, as there were often collapses of land in the mine." Moses lived through several such collapses and he still bears the signs on his hands of the shovel with which he filled the wagons with coal. At the end of nine months, he was sent to the Buchenwald camp. Moses sang us this song; the song of the Jews in the coal mine:

The day dies out; night comes.  
On the city roofs, the sun rolls like a red wheel.  
Over the gates of the camp, evening is red and gray  
And the night watch stands ready.  
Here, the eight o'clock chime—tram-tra-ta....

Hour after hour, the night fades.  
Over tired and aching hands,  
Over backs and over machines,  
The shadows dance on the wall,  
The shadows caress me  
And whisper a secret in my ear.  
"Outside shine the rays of summer."  
Our days pass in suffering...tram-tra-ta....

I work the machines more quickly,  
The wheels go round, grinding teeth.  
More quickly, cursed Jews,  
And break ribs and bones.  
Among the red wheels, hangs your life—smoke and ashes.  
Toil day—toil night.  
And they have taken our freedom...tram-tra-ta....

Carefully, come up to the air.  
Woe to him who pulls the rope.  
The dream of freedom leaps on the wall.  
And, in front, the outspread hands of the prisoners.  
Tram-tra-ta....

From Dachau—from Majdanek—from Treblinka—from large camps and from small ones. All the stench of Nazi Europe seemed to come up in waves as these refugees told their tales. The pith of the expressible part of their past was contained in these songs. The future lay beyond the gates of Atlit to which eyes and hearts were now turned—the hills of Ephraim—the Valley of Beit She'an—the Huleh swampland. And yet, even this hour of fulfillment was darkly clouded. For who could forget those left behind? Would the gates to Palestine be opened? A song, sung to us by a child of eight and composed by a youth who has since died in a concentration camp in Germany, is still as poignantly actual as when he composed it:

When will come the Day of Judgment?  
 Who hears our grief?  
 Will it not be too late?  
 Who hears our cries?

## DOWN BURMA ROAD TO GILBOA: ORIENTAL NACHSHONIM

Dorothy Bar-Adon

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Merhavia

An article from Bar-Adon's personal archive

*In this article Bar-Adon describes the history of the first Youth Aliya group from Muslim countries; the group called itself "Nachshonim." (According to tradition, Nachshon was the first of the Israelites to cross the Red Sea after the exodus from Egypt.) The group took part in constructing the "Burma Road" to Jerusalem during the War of Independence and then lived in the Beit Alpha kibbutz.*

After the first truce in the month of May, the Burma Road [a makeshift bypass road between the general vicinity of Kibbutz Hulda and Jerusalem, built during the 1948 siege of Jerusalem] was being built. It was an anonymous wartime job. Few knew—nor did it matter much at the time—who exactly was participating in the perilous feat. Now it can be told that, for a few days, there was a group of Youth Aliyah among the black laborers. It was a way of working their way down from Jerusalem, still besieged at

that time, and up to the Emek where they were scheduled to begin their two-year training course. It meant risking their necks, and they were probably among the youngest Burma Road workers. But they got where they were bound for.

They are all Orientals. They call themselves “Nachshon” because they are pioneers in crossing the Red Sea of poverty, prejudice and the general underprivilege that engulfs a large part of the Oriental population. They come from the poorer, overcrowded quarters of Jerusalem. Most of them have contributed to the family budget from an early age. Some never got further than the fifth grade in school. A few were active in terrorist organizations. Most participated in the battle for Jerusalem.

You can easily pick them out when they wait on tables in the dining hall of Beit Alpha, at the foot of Gilboa where they are now in training, or when they work in the vegetable garden, barn, sheep pen, etc. They are distinguished by their dusky skins and bright black eyes—except for a few blondes and a redhead known as “Gingy.” They are thirty-five in number of which eleven are girls. They are different from most other Youth Aliyah groups because they have a double program. Not only do they plan to eventually establish their own settlement—but prior to that, they intend to go back to Jerusalem and other centers of Oriental settlement to act as *schlihim* [emissaries] for their underprivileged Oriental brothers and sisters. So, although these Nachshonim are the usual Youth Aliyah age, they seem gravely mature when discussing their past and future. This is not the same tragic gravity of the youth who have come through the European hells bereft of everything. But it is the gravity of amazingly wise youth who are fully aware of the problems of the Oriental Jew even after he reaches Palestine, who are extremely “community conscious”—that is, conscious of being Orientals and proud of it, who realize that the Oriental juveniles who now form a majority of Israel juveniles are ill-equipped to face the responsibilities awaiting them, and who correctly evaluate the great potentialities of this hitherto neglected youth.

I made the acquaintance of the Nachshonim during the New Year holiday period when they presented an evening’s entertainment in Beit Alpha. In addition to several talks by the youth summing up their half year in agriculture and reiterating their aims, there were songs, dances, skits and parodies, all of which were composed and staged by the youth. Afterward the Beit Alpha members purred like doting parents—for it had been a lively and satisfying evening, showing that their young charges are in stride.

Then, for several days, I picked up informal talks with the Nachshonim. On one moonlight night, I sat for three hours on the lawn with Schiffra and Abraham who, during the entertainment had revealed themselves as leading spirits, Schiffra delivering the address of the evening and Abraham having written most of the skits and words for the music. "Were any of your members in the terrorist groups?" I inquired. "I was in Etzel," [National Military Organization, a Zionist paramilitary group that operated in Mandate Palestine between 1931 and 1948] replied Abraham. "And before that I was in Betar [Revisionist Zionist youth movement]. It was then that I was arrested for blowing the shofar at the Wailing Wall."

These conversations could go on for hours because this wasn't merely the history and adjustment problems of another Youth Aliyah group. It involved the past and future of a large portion of Israel's population, a portion that will soon be considerably increased by Middle East immigration. And it was seen through the young eyes of those who believe that they see the way into the future more clearly than their parents. "We are Sabras," they tell you with pride [Israeli Jews born in the region]. "Most of us were born here. Our parents came from Syria or Yemen or Iraq. They came straight from the courtyards of Baghdad or Damascus to the courtyards of Jerusalem. They have been unable to help themselves adjust to the new life in Palestine, and too little effort has been made to help them. The Oriental will soon form the majority in Israel. We have much to give to the State. But we must pull ourselves out of the *butz* (mud). We are good workers, you know, and many of us are talented. We are poor, and we have large families. But we have as much to give as anyone else."

The importance of this straightforward, determined talk of Abraham can only be evaluated against the general Oriental background—and that is too long a story for an article. Still, the picture follows the general lines of underprivileged people. Most of the youth suffer from an inferiority complex that is often expressed in aggressiveness. In younger kibbutzim you will see them in large numbers and making good. In older kibbutzim you will see them in ones or twos, known as "our Yemenite," and usually outstanding as workers, singers and artists. The inferiority complex expresses itself in devious ways. For instance, Arabic teachers are at a premium. But it is usually difficult to find an Oriental in a kibbutz who will teach his mother tongue—he doesn't want to reemphasize his background. A kibbutz metapelet told me this little story. The mother was a beautiful, dusky, Yemenite—the father, a German—the baby, an attractive mixture.

Often when she put baby Ada with the rest of the group to sun, she would be surprised to find her moved by the mother into the Baby House. The reason? The Yemenite mother wanted her offspring to be “white”—not “sunburned.”

Therefore it was good to hear Schiffra, Abraham and other Nachshonim speak with community pride and plan their all-Oriental kibbutz of the future where babies will flaunt their lovely, dark complexions and nobody will want them to look like “Ashkenazim,” where there won’t be inhibitions about knowing Arabic and where “We’ll have spicy, Oriental food and not that Polish fish cooked with sugar!”

Abraham is a handsome Yemenite. His father, a rabbi, is a *melamed* [teacher] in a Talmud Torah [Jewish public primary school for boys of modest backgrounds]. Abraham has crammed much into his youth. Aside from his activities with the Betar, he studied handicrafts at Bezalel [Israel’s national school of art, founded in 1906] and then entered the Brandeis School. But both attempts at self-education had to be abandoned owing to the lack of funds. These two dead ends were doubtless partly responsible for driving him into the lap of the terrorist group. But not wholly. Although he is now a loyal Hashomer Hatzair member, he reviews his past with a cool, analytic approach. He believes that much of what was done by the terrorists had to be done, and he is not ashamed of his part in it. The need having passed, he now wishes to devote himself to saving the susceptible Oriental youth from falling prey to other revolutionary winds that may blow.

Schiffra is of Syrian extraction—short and inclined to be roly-poly, with a quiet manner and much self-assurance. She is a member of the Mizrachi family. Now this particular Mizrachi family may not mean anything to you or me. But among Orientals, it’s a name. The pioneer Mizrachis came twenty-five years ago and they’ve been coming ever since, Schiffra’s family being among the latecomers. They now number three hundred souls, of which some two hundred occupy a single courtyard in a Jerusalem quarter. Her father was a porter. While conveying ammunition into the hills around Jerusalem, his horse was killed and his wagon splintered. With the compensation money, he opened a grocery shop. “Our Mizrachi courtyard lives almost like a kibbutz,” explained Schiffra. “There isn’t a common purse, but no one wants for anything as long as another Mizrachi can help. During the siege we all shared our bread—when we had it.” There are eleven of these Mizrachis among Beit Alpha’s Nachshonim.

The history of the group goes back several years to a Hadassah club where, under the influence of a leader highly respected and beloved by them, they became welded into a group that has found a common path and has stuck together through thick and thin. After deciding upon hachsharah, they went to work for several months in the Galilee Kibbutz of Dan. They did well, and now their minds were made up. They returned to Jerusalem to await their chance for training. Their group life during that period was dramatic, and they speak of the formation of Nachshon with the zeal of visionaries.

They continued to meet, in the face of stubborn family opposition—the necessity to contribute to the family budget and, later, the battle for Jerusalem. They secured an abandoned barn as a meeting place. They lived in scattered quarters, a few in Sheikh Jarrah [neighborhood in East Jerusalem on the road to Mount Scopus]. All were absorbed into defense work. Most came to the barn under fire. But they came. Those were dark days when the large Oriental families especially suffered from the lack of food and water. They lost brothers and fathers in action. And their private “war” at home was bitter, especially for the girls. Most of the parents resented being “robbed” of their children who had reached a useful age. And practically all of them consider “kibbutz” as synonymous with “witchcraft.” A few of the younger parents understood and have even come to Beit Alpha to bask in their children’s achievements.

Eventually, they made their Burma Road trip [a very difficult trip] to the Emek, working in Mizra [kibbutz in the Jezreel Valley] for a few months before settling for their course in Beit Alpha [kibbutz in the Jezreel Valley]. As for their adjustment—they do well in all branches during their four hours of physical work. For instance, Abraham is a shepherd and Schiffra is in the children’s house. “Work is easy,” they affirm. “We have all worked before—and longer hours.” They are still living in tents and eagerly awaiting a barrack of some kind that they can fix up as a club. They suffered a period of depression when their group leader returned to Jerusalem and was replaced by a member of Beit Alpha. “We feel that only an Oriental can really understand us.” But they are becoming reconciled and glad that their former leader will continue the work in Jerusalem.

The young Nachshonim can look back with pride on their Jerusalem chapter. The Beit Alpha chapter is just beginning. Whatever may come of it,

this group of teenagers have grasped the essence of a problem that Israel will soon be called upon to face more squarely than in the past. In the words of Abraham, "We Orientals have great potentialities, you know."

## INTERVIEW WITH ISRAEL MEIR LAU

Probably written in July 1945 when she visited Atlit and interviewed  
the refugees there

An article from Bar-Adon's personal archive

*In this article Bar-Adon interviews eight-year-old Israel Meir Lau who was the youngest prisoner to survive Buchenwald concentration camp. Lau was saved by his brother Naphtali who is also interviewed in this article. Both brothers came to Palestine with other orphans and refugees; Bar-Adon interviewed him in the Atlit detainee camp. Israel Meir Lau served as the Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1993 to 2003.*

Israel Lau, age eight, son of the former Chief Rabbi of Petrikov, Poland, had the distinction of being the youngest inmate of Buchenwald, where he was cared for by Russian officers. Chucked full of personality, Israel was a center of attraction in Atlit. He speaks Polish, Yiddish, German, and Russian, and had picked up "Shalom. L'hitriot." He was never seen without the toy gun that he received in France. However, he is proud of the memorable hour when, after the liberation, American soldiers gave him a real gun, and allowed him to stand with the Jewish guards in charge of the S.S. prisoners. Little Israel owes his life to the fortitude of his brother Naphtali, age 17, and to an almost incredible series of lucky breaks. He has an older brother in the Mizrahi kibbutz of Kfar Etzion (near Hebron) whom he has never seen.

Here is the story, as told by Naphtali. The ghetto in Petrikov [Czechoslovakia] was formed in the winter of 1939 when the Jews received yellow badges and were deprived of their rights. Until October 1942, there were pogroms, starvation and epidemics. However, in view of the concentration camp horrors that followed, the ghettos are now considered a "Gan Eden." "The ghetto was nothing," said Naphtali.

In 1941, the father, age 51 was taken to prison as a hostage, together with doctors, lawyers and other professional men of the town. Forty were deported to Auschwitz and three were ransomed at a cost, including the chief rabbi, their father, who returned home.

In April 1942, large-scale killings and deportation began. Two youths, friends of the family, were employed in a nearby forest burying the victims of gas. Knowing that their turn to be killed would come after they had finished the job, they fled and took refuge in the chief rabbi's house. However, the rabbi had managed to obtain false passports and sent them on their way to join the partisans just several hours before the search was made.

"That was on Sukkoth, 1942," said Naphtali. "The youths were not in our house. But the gestapo were sure of their facts and furious at not finding them. So they took my father and deported him to Treblinka." No more has been heard of him, but it seems certain that he was cremated, as his cloths were identified.

By this time, only two thousand out of the twenty-two thousand Jewish population were left. These two thousand were employed in camp labor and factories. What were they to do with Israel, then age five? All children who couldn't work were deported. They had a rare stroke of fortune. A townsman, now a highly placed Nazi, who remembered the father kindly, placed Israel and his mother in the work camp. "There were only two other children in the camp, ages 11 and 12 years. But they worked." Israel was the only "unemployed." Until November 26, 1944, they remained in the camp. "We were beaten. We were hungry. But that's not worth writing about."

When the Russians began to approach, they were sent forward. His mother was sent to a women's labor camp near Berlin, and the two children were sent to a men's camp, Czestochowa in Poland. Here they remained until January 16, 1945. On that day, they missed liberation by twelve hours. "We were sent from Czestochowa to Buchenwald at noon. The Russians arrived at midnight."

It was a terrible crisis for the two children when the cattle cars came to take them to Buchenwald. Children were not allowed—and those left behind were instantly killed in order not to clutter up the place. Frantic with fear, Naphtali "packed" his little brother in his knapsack. "Oh-ho—how we fixed him," commented a pal of Naphtali who helped him. They covered him over with blankets, leaving air holes as best they could. "We had to cover him very well because the SS had a habit of cracking our knapsacks with cudgels as we marched along."

During the four day trip to Buchenwald, Israel "lived" in the knapsack, almost without food and water. He carried out the instructions not to whimper.

“We arrived at Buchenwald on a Shabbat, January 20, 1945,” says Naphtali.

Now they were faced with another problem—how to smuggle him into the camp. Naphtali considered sending him with the women going to Bergen-Belsen. But he preferred keeping him with him if there was any chance. And again, fortune smiled. Having nothing to lose, as they were already at the gates, Naphtali frankly told his plight to a Polish, non-Jewish guard. Won over by Israel, the guard recorded him as being thirteen years of age, and he was smuggled in. “I gave that Polish guard my last possession—my father’s gold watch—he really saved Israel.”

Now, they were inside the camp. What to do next? The child could not be at large. Naphtali smuggled his knapsack to a barrack where, he had heard, there were kindly Russian officers. His instinct proved good. The officers cared for him tenderly for four months. “He was like a toy to them,” says Naphtali. “They all cared for him, fed him and taught him to speak Russian.” During that period, Naphtali was working and almost didn’t see the child. “It was too dangerous to see him and the Russians told me, ‘Everything is on us—he is our responsibility.’”

Then came a dark day. The allies were approaching. The Germans were making haste to do away with the prisoners. Russians as well as Jews were summoned for deportation. What to do with Israel? The Russians turned him over to a German social democrat who vowed to care for him. On April 6, Naphtali was taken from the camp with a procession of several thousand Jews to the crematorium.

“It was terrible leaving Israel behind, alone. When we passed a forest, I suddenly decided that I had nothing to lose by trying to escape. To go forward meant certain death.” So he broke the line, hid in the forest, and awaited the liberators. Five days later—on April 11—they came. Naphtali returned to Buchenwald and found Israel, who had meanwhile become close friends with the social democrat and greatly improved his German.

After liberation, the children learned that their mother had been murdered in Bergen-Belsen.

Israel soon became the pet of the Americans, not a few of whom wanted to take him back to the States. He recalls the train ride from Buchenwald to France when the youth were allowed to stop the train on several occasions to “settle matters” with former Buchenwald guards whom they passed on the way.

Israel warms up to strangers very quickly, and when Naphtali had finished his story, the child asked if “you would like to hear me sing.” After singing several Russian songs learned from the officers, he sang the following Yiddish song that he still remembers from the ghetto days.

And at night, and when the storm raged,  
Tired and broken, I left my house.  
And the ghetto was surrounded by guards  
Of the barbarian regime.  
All that was is uprooted and will not return  
I cannot build another nest, under the blue sky  
No, no one can give me what was taken from our lives  
Because to me, come the cries  
Of the murdered millions.

Little Israel sings several verses of this ghetto folk song, with a pathos strange in an eight-year-old. But already he is keenly interested in the world outside the gates of Atlit, where he has been told there are no concentration camps. And meantime, he circulates around the camp, the toy gun over his shoulder.