

Episode 22 – Romanian Jews parachuted back into Romania

Hello, I am Adrian Iosifescu, your host of the History of Romanian Jews podcast and this is episode 22, the story of Romanian Jews who were parachuted back into Romania during the Second World War. No matter how much you know about the history of Romanian Jews or about the Second World War in general, you are probably unaware, just like I was, about these hero fighters. Their wartime activities have been celebrated in Israel but only recently, with the opening of the files of Securitate, the former Romanian Communist Security apparatus, many new details came to light so I thought I should share their story with you.

By-the-way, you just listened to the Yiddish song "Zog nit keyn mol" or "Never Say" also called the "Partisan Song", one of the chief anthems of Holocaust survivors and fighters. A link to the song is provided in the Notes.

The outbreak of Second World War opened up new horizons for relations between the Jewish Agency and the British secret services, later known as the Special Operations Executive (SOE). Plans were devised for sabotage operations in Romania, intelligence actions in Palestine and Vichy-controlled Syria, and subversive activity in Italy. The parachutists' mission or, for that matter, any military/intelligence contacts between the Yishuv, the Jewish community in pre-state Israel, and the British authorities — cannot be understood without taking into account the military history of World War II.

In the spring of 1941, the Axis powers launched an unrestrained attack against the Balkans and the Middle East. As a result, the covert collaboration between the Haganah and the British increased. When the center of SOE activity moved to the Middle East, members of the network operating from Palestine were assigned to several operations that had little to do with European Jewry. These included: the sabotage mission involving twenty-three Palmach boatmen sent to Lebanon in 1941, resulting in their deaths and that of their British commander; propaganda broadcasts from transmission stations in Palestine; and the preparation of an intelligence and communications network in case the area would fall into enemy hands.

In 1942, the Jewish Agency for Palestine asked the British for assistance in sending Jewish volunteers to Europe, who as emissaries of the Yishuv would help to organize local resistance and rescue operations among the Jewish communities. In the winter of 1941/42, the SOE even decided to include the Palmach in its plan for an emergency underground network of agents in Palestine.

Although the parachutists' mission was carried out under general British auspices, various British agencies, both military and civilian alike, were involved in it at different times. These included two of the three major British organizations involved in covert anti-Nazi activity in Europe during World War II, namely, the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), the MI9, and the afore-mentioned Special Operations Executive (SOE). The first of these, which was the least involved in the parachutists' mission, was the SIS, which operated under the auspices of the Foreign Office and was charged with gathering intelligence information. The MI9 was the only

agency that functioned under direct military auspices. However, as of July 1940 most of the covert British efforts in Europe (propaganda, secret agents, encouraging local underground movements, etc.) were concentrated in a new entity, the SOE, which included intelligence divisions that had previously belonged to other military and civilian agencies.

In the summer of 1943, after the British Colonial Secretary, Lord Cranborne, ordered the British ambassador to Turkey to issue visas to Jews already in Turkey, Mossad, which dealt with clandestine Jewish emigration, sent a team to Istanbul, consisting of agents Yehud Avriel, Levi Schwartz, Moshe Bar-Gilad, and Teddy Kollek. They were tasked with organizing the emigration to Palestine of Jews from Poland, Romania, and Hungary, and were instructors for the Jewish agents parachuted into Romania. Mossad agents established contacts with the British secret services in Istanbul, which declared themselves willing to train a number of agents in the field of espionage and parachute drops.

The mission of these agents was to organize the emigration of Jews from the above-mentioned countries and to ensure their transport by ships on the Black Sea. They were also to organize the escape of Allied airmen shot down on Romanian territory and taken prisoner.

The British were unwilling to send the hundreds of volunteers envisioned by the Jewish Agency, but ultimately agreed to train a few units of Jewish parachutists who were recent immigrants from certain targeted countries that they wanted to infiltrate. The British Special Operation Executive (SOE) intended to deploy the volunteers as wireless operators and instructors on their liaison missions to the partisans, while the British Military Intelligence branch (MI9) planned to use them to locate and rescue Allied POWs and escapees. Both branches consented to the volunteers' dual role as British agents and Jewish emissaries.

The candidates were selected from the ranks of the Palmach (the strike force of the Jewish military underground), Zionist youth movement activists, and Jews living in the British Mandate of Palestine who were already serving in the British army. Of the 240 men and women who volunteered, 110 underwent the training program that commenced in Cairo in March 1943. Because of certain operational difficulties, only 32 of the trained volunteers (including three women) were sent on missions to Europe.

The first joint operation was conceived in January 1943 when Jewish Agency representatives in Istanbul reached an agreement with the MI9 regarding an operation in the Balkans.

In May 1943, during the pre-invasion Allied bombings of Sicily and Sardinia, **Peretz Rosenberg** of Beit She'arim was dropped into Yugoslavia as a radio operator for a British unit. One year later he was joined by two other radio instructors from Palestine, **Rechavam Zablodovsky (Amir)** of Haifa and **Ya'akov Shapira** of Ma'oz Haim.

Between 1943 and 1945 thirty-two paratroopers were eventually parachuted into Europe and five infiltrated the target countries by other routes. Most of those selected for training were emigres from Europe, with intimate knowledge of the countries to which they would be sent. Three of the parachutists infiltrated Hungary, five participated in the Slovak National Uprising in October 1944, and six operated in northern Italy. Ten parachutists served with British liaison missions to the Yugoslav partisans. Two others entered Bulgaria, and one each operated

in France and Austria. Nine parachutists operated in Romania, the most of any country, a reflection of the large number of Romanian Jews among the volunteers.

The Germans captured 12 and executed 7 of the 37 parachutists sent into occupied Europe. Three of those executed were captured in Slovakia. Two were captured in Hungary and one in northern Italy. After 7 missions the parachutist who entered France was captured and killed.

After the war, remains of three of the seven parachutists killed in the war were interred on the National Military and Police cemetery in Mount Herzl cemetery in Jerusalem:

- Sergeant Haviva Reik, died on 20 November 1944, age 30. AKA Ada Robinson and Martha Marinovic.
- Sergeant Stephan Rafael Reisz died 20 November 1944, age 30. AKA S. Rice.
- Aircraftwoman Hannah Szenes died on 7 November 1944, age 23.

Memorials for the other four who perished in the Holocaust death camps are also at Mount Herzl Cemetery.

Let's now look specifically to the operations in Romania and the nine Romanian Jews who participated in these events.

Shaike Trachtenberg Dan was born as Yeshayahu (Isaiah) Trachtenberg in the town of Lipcani in Bessarabia in 1909, to Chaim and Rebecca Trachtenberg. He was the third child out of 4 brothers and sisters. He was a soccer fan and played in Lipcani Jewish soccer team. As a teenager, he got interested in Zionism, and joined the Maccabi movement. Over time he became an activist and organizer in the movement. In 1935 he immigrated to Palestine. He wanted to start a kibbutz with his friends from Maccabi, but for a time he returned to Romania, and later went to Czechoslovakia, and took part in the Maccabi Youth organization. After a short time, he returned to Israel, and settled in kibbutz Nir Haim. In 1944, Shaike Dan was parachuted together with Yitzhak Ben-Efraim into enemy territory, in Romania, to help rescue British pilots whose aircraft had been shot down and to rescue Jews from there and organize their immigration to Israel. Before departing for his parachute jumps, he would take a handful of earth from the kibbutz to keep in his pocket. Shaike Dan survived the war and eventually becoming an adviser to Israeli prime ministers and a critical Secret Service operative in Eastern Europe. Dan was involved in the Jewish rescue operation until late 1970s; more than 100,000 Jews moved from Romania to Israel through "the channel of Dan and Nativ", out of nearly 300,000 Jews who emigrated from Romania between 1946 to 1989.

Yitzhak Ben-Ephraim (Menu Moscovici) was born in 1914 in Hangu, a commune in the Neamț County of Western Moldova, son of Leon (Froim) Efraim Moscovici and Perla Paulina Moscovici. He immigrated to Palestine in 1935 and, after the war, became an engineering professor. Moscovici Meno, alias lawyer Eliezer Nidermayer, nicknamed "Eliezer the Parachutist", was an instructor of the Haşomer Hatair organization. After August 23, 1944, he worked in Alyah Beth Mossad together with Ricu Lupescu.

Dov Harari Berger was born in 1917 in the town of Bairamtscha in Bessarabia, son of Meir and Tzipora. His father was a merchant and a Hebrew teacher at the Jewish Community Gymnasium, and an avid Zionist and prominent delegate to the regional conventions of the World Zionist Organization. In 1932, at the age of 15, Dov immigrated to Palestine with his mother and sister. In 1934 he joined the Haganah. In May 1944, he underwent a special training in Cairo after which he was sent with other paratroopers to be parachuted in Europe that year. He also worked on a special mission in Romania; when the paratroopers were returned to their homes at the war's end, he was allowed to remain in Romania as an interpreter and as an officer in the British Command. In June 1946 he returned home to his friends and movement. He was killed in an accident in 1954.

Yona Rosenfeld-Rozen was born in 1919 in Cluj. He survived the war and died in 2004 in Israel.

Arieh Lupesko was captured in Romania, released, and allowed to return to Palestine.

Ricu Lupu Lupescu was another Romanian-born Palestinian Jew who parachuted into Romania to help the resistance. He was originally from Ploiești and, in 1937, he emigrated to Palestine where he was active in the Zionist movement. In 1944, he had the rank of lieutenant in the British army.

Baruch Kamin (Boria Kamin, Baruch Kaminski or Kaminker) was born in 1914 in Cetatea Albă, Bessarabia and was one of the leaders of the Gordonia Zionist Youth Movement in Romania, immigrating to Palestine in 1939. After the execution of the 1944 mission, between 1945-1946 he was a delegate for the "Escape Movement" in Romania. After the founding of the State of Israel, Kamin was sent as an emissary to Czechoslovakia and Austria in 1948 then to the USA in 1964. He was also a deputy in the Knesset in 1953-4.

Abba Berdichev, son of Suzy and Mordechai was born in 1920, in Galati, Romania, a descendant of a Hasidic family. In 1940 he immigrated to Eretz Palestine with some of his friends, but they were captured by the British army and interned for a year and a half in the Atlit camp near Acre. After liberation from the Atlit camp he moved to Kibbutz Geva in the Jezreel Valley. In November 1943 he volunteered for parachuting missions abroad. He parachuted in Czech enclave of Banska-Bystrica in special operation called "Operation Duas" with the goal to reach Romania. On the way from Banska-Bystrica to the Hungarian border, he was captured in a German ambush and sent to the Mauthausen camp where he killed in January 1945.

Surica Bravermann (Sara Spachner), the only Romanian woman among the volunteers, was born in Botosani in 1919, was active in the local organization of Hasomer Hazair, immigrated to Palestine in 1938 and received her education at the agricultural school for girls in Ayanot. She enlisted in Palmah where she learned that candidates for parachutists were being sought behind the Romanian front. Surica was sent for training in Egypt and then parachuted into Yugoslav territory, among the partisans, from where she was to enter Romania. When Romania turned its weapons against the Axis she recalled back to base. In 1945 she took over the

responsibility of military training for women in the Hagana. In 1948 she was among those who laid the foundation for the Israeli Women's Army

Now, that we got familiar with the nine Romanian Jews parachuted in Romania, let's look at the actual events.

First Drop on the Romanian territory happened on the night of October 1, 1943 (Rosh Hashanah 5704) when the first two volunteers, Leova Luke Gukowsky (Ahsar) of Kibbutz Yagur and Arye Leiba Fichman (Arani) of Kibbutz Beit Oren, were parachuted into Romania. It was a cold and moonless night. The operation had been planned down to the last detail and, at least on paper, the chances of success seemed high. Jewish Agency personnel in Istanbul had notified Zionist activists in Bucharest of the two parachutists' arrival, and a sum of money had already been sent to someone in the local Zionist underground to be passed along to them. The operation that had begun well ended in disaster. Due to a navigational error the two landed at Lipova, close to Arad, far from the appointed landing site, falling straight into enemy hands. They were identified, arrested and interned in the camp at Timișul de Jos. Fichman was eventually sent to Germany for interrogation, whereas Gukowsky, who broke his leg during the jump, was first transferred to a military hospital under heavy guard and later to a prison camp. With the help of a nurse in the hospital he made contact with local Jews but was unable to engage in any real activity. News of their capture reached Palestine, where Jewish Agency leaders attempted to monitor the Romanian press in order to discover the circumstances of their arrest.

In view of the difficulties involved in the first drop into Romania, an alternate plan was devised, namely, parachute drops into Yugoslavia and overland infiltration of other countries with the help of local partisans. In November 1943 an MI9 officer arrived in Jerusalem, and was presented with several candidates for various missions. In the end it was decided to dispatch four Romanian-born kibbutz members, Itzhak Ben-Efraim of Shamir, Abba Berdichev of Nitzanim, Dov Berger of Beit Oren, and Shaik Trachtenberg Dan of Nir Am as parachutists to their native Romania.

As 1944 dawned, weary citizens exchanged the hope that it would be the last year of the war. The Allies continued to make progress on all fronts: in the Baltic Sea the British bombed the port city of Stettin incessantly; in the east the Red Army routed the Germans in the Battle of Kiev and entered Poland; in Greece it was announced that 10 percent of the population had been killed in the war.

Second drop on the Romanian territory happened on May 25, 1944, just when 127 children from Transnistria arrived in Palestine. An other pair of agents, consisting of Ricu Lupu Lupescu and Itzhak Macarescu (alias Joseph Marcu), were parachuted near Craiova in Operation "Gulaș" but they captured immediately by the Romanian police.

Third drop on the Romanian territory happened on June 3, 1944 when Shaik Trachtenberg Dan and Menu Moscovici (Itzhak Ben-Efraim) were parachuted in Arad County in Operation "Schnitzel". This was the first successful drop of agents in Romania. With the help of local Zionist organization, they were able to find their way to Bucharest.

Forth drop on the Romanian territory happened on August 3 when Dov Berger and Baruch Kaminer were also parachuted near Bucharest, in Operation "Ravioli". This drop was also successful and they managed to get in touch with the Zionist movement and with the other Jews who were parachuted before.

According to the instructions received from the Zionist center in Istanbul, Scarlat Iancu, In Romania, contacted the parachute agents Leova Luke Gurkovski and Arie Leiba Fischman from the first drop, and started the organization of the information activity. He collected military information regarding the effects of the aerial bombings and the state of mind of the Romanian and German troops. According to a Securitate file, the information was transmitted to Istanbul through diplomatic couriers of the trade representations or press correspondents, to the address of Vera Pomeraniuc, Sarka Manderblatt and Victoria Sokak. Again, according to a Securitate file, In addition to Scarlat Iancu, the network included Abasei Herscu, Moshe Moscovici, Bruno Ianculovici, Polatchek, and others.

Four of the eight parachutists who had landed in Romania were immediately integrated in the Romanian Zionist activities to facilitate the move of Jewish people to Palestine by Abraham Leib Zissu, president of the Romanian Zionist organization and representative of the Jewish Agency. The four parachutists were Saïke Dan (Trachtenberg), Itzhak Ben Efraim (Menu Moskovici), Baruch Kaminker (Kamin) and Dov Berger (Iarari).

Let me say a few words about Abraham Leib Zissu, an interesting personage of Romanian Jewry. Abraham Leib Zissu is considered the "traditional symbol of the Zionist movement in Romania", and according to Dr. W. Filderman, the leader of the Romanian-Jewish community between 1919 and 1947, Zissu was the "sole representative of the Jewish Agency in Romania". A complex personality in Romanian interwar cultural life, A. L. Zissu was a writer, journalist, owner and editor of the national Jewish daily "Mântuirea", industrialist, owner of the "Omega" oil factories in Bucharest and the Sugar Factory in Ripiceni, administrator and financial advisor within the Romanian Petroleum Company. During the interwar period Zissu was the founder and honorary president of the Jewish Party of Romania. From 1941 he was the president of the Palestinian Emigration Office, and from 1944 the president of the Zionist Executive of Romania and of the Jewish Agency, Romania section.

In 1943-4, when the parachutists reached Romania, Zissu was fighting with the agents of the German Embassy, especially with Gustav Richter, an aide to Adolf Eichmann, an adviser on Jewish affairs who was doing his utmost to sabotage the exit of the ships that were carrying the Jewish emigrants, refugees who had escaped from the Hungarian, Polish, Bessarabian and Bukovinian labor camps. Between February 24, 1944 and May 15, 1944 five ships carrying 1,200 emigrants left Romania. On June 9, Zissu got authorization for another four ships to leave the country. His agreement with Mihai Antonescu, the Romanian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, saved some 12,000 refugees, mainly from Hungary.

The arrival of the Jewish parachutists from Palestine was a tremendous event in Romania. As Zissu said "During the war we felt lonely, isolated, deserted. All of a sudden comrades appeared who had good heartedly left the free world to be parachuted into the Nazi occupied countries, to joint us who were threatened by the "Damocles sword" of the "final solution" that was hanging above our heads. What could be more touching than this attitude of heroic solidarity and comradeship?"

Saïke Dan describes Zissu in his book "The Blind Jump": "I knew that he was a proud man, self-confident and did not accept any kind of authoritative behavior. His pride made people think that he did not recognize any authority, not even the authority of the Romanian or the German government. He was the authority! What was I supposed to do to make him understand that I was representing the authority of Eretz Israel in the operation of rescuing the Jews?"

Due to Zissu's relations, the parachutists got hold of the complete list of the English and American pilots imprisoned in camps in Romania. Also, through Zissu, Saïke warned the Antonescu government that no Allied prisoner was to be touched or transferred elsewhere. Zissu's greatest moral satisfaction was felt one day before the overthrow of the Romanian government when he was urgently summoned to Mihai Antonescu's office. Antonescu besought Zissu to make use of his international connections and convince the Allies to accept an armistice, otherwise Romania would be forced to negotiate it with the Russians only.

After the war, the British honored Zissu with a special reward signed by General Alexander Harold for his public activity during the war and for the collaboration with the parachutists. Zissu refused to accept it and sent it back to the British Embassy in Bucharest and he wrote: "I cannot accept any reward from the oppressors of the Jewish people, from those who refused permission from the Holocaust survivors to go back to Eretz Israel".

Also, for their activity during the war, Jewish paratroopers, including the Romanians Scarlat Iancu and Abasei Herscu, were decorated by the British Military Mission in Romania.

After the war Zissu was arrested in 1951 by the Communist regime and after 3 years of detention was sentenced to life imprisonment for "the crime of high treason". He was pardoned in 1956 and was allowed to emigrate to Israel, where he died shortly after.

Apart from their successful or unsuccessful military activities, the parachutists contributed considerably to encouraging, emboldening, inspiring, and raising the morale of the local Jews if only by means of the rumors about their presence that circulated. Enzo Sereni, who was captured immediately after landing in Italy and subsequently perished in Dachau, is a case in point. The rumor about the presence of a Jewish parachutist in the Dachau camp spread like wildfire. According to Israeli journalist Ruth Bondy, "in the eyes of the Jews, many of them Zionists, a Jew from the land of Israel and a British officer appeared like an angel who descended from another world"

This concludes the episode; until next podcast episode, be well.