

Homeward!

Four Years on the Way to Zion

The Journeys of One Immigrants' Ship

By Yehoshua Halevy

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יהושע הלי

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S.O.S.



First edition, 1951

ירושע הלוי

הביתה! ארבע שנים בדרכ לוציא



Second Edition, 1999

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Foreword

The book “Homeward!” was written in 1951; it was based on my personal journey diaries and my fresh trip memories. Since then, more books about the illegal immigration to Palestine were published, as well as about the history of our ship that has turned, for us, into a symbol of the life-rescuing immigration. A two-part movie was filmed, too (by the Hungarian Television, of all nations), and two or three short reports were also broadcast by Israeli television.

This second edition comes not to correct or reconstruct events. Every word written or that shall be written here is based on facts, not always positive ones, but facts that cannot be altered. I must apologize that this time I am going to re-tell our story in first person singular, for the Pentcho story is also my personal story, the central event of my younger years. Despite the reasonable historical perspective – roughly sixty years since our departure – we shall not change anything in the construct of the first book, but rather will add several remarks, revelations and small details that escaped our eyes then, during the very first years of our state’s existence.

Many books, articles and studies have been published on the topic of illegal immigration. This chapter of the new Hebrew history, saturated with heroism and tragedy alike, has two parts: the one before the annihilation of European Jews and the escape from Hitler’s vicious lackeys, and the part after the holocaust which became an important factor in the struggle against the British Empire. Let us call the first part “The Rescue Immigration”, which Jabotinsky initially nicknamed “the national sport” (namely “The ‘In Spite Of’ Immigration”, “Immigration B”); as the post-holocaust immigration during the days of struggle for free/open immigration and a Hebrew state was considered a “National State Immigration”.

This chronicle contains no argumentative motives. I wrote this humble book at the behest of my brothers in suffering and journey, to immortalize the record of this Aliyah and the fate of its passengers – numbering 514 – at the tenth anniversary of our casting-off. [“Aliyah” is Hebrew for immigration to Israel, plural is “Aliyot”].

The task that the ship Pentcho took upon itself – carrying hundreds of Jews to safe shores through treacherous paths – was plagued with many difficulties. Though the journey in and of itself was not considered a pioneering feat in those days, not one of the passengers deluded him/herself about the chances of smooth sailing. Hardships, adventures and even deadly prospects were all taken into account. The petite ship, worn out by old age to begin with, bobbed and skimmed its way down the Danube for a few months and spent weeks scuffling the large waves of three seas (the Black Sea, Sea of Marmara and the Aegean Sea), in order to complete its mission. The will of its

passengers, who suffered intensely in its dark bowels, was to reach the Promised Land. Destiny, that steers ships' courses, had decided otherwise.

The ship did not manage to reach the fourth sea – the Mediterranean, nor its eastern coast where that yearned-for land lay waiting. The Lord of the Seas claimed her to his depths. The little ship indeed sank, but all its passengers were saved and reached their homeland, and freedom, four years later. Thus, this Aliyah had taken longer than any other and survived the drama of its sinking at sea without a single casualty!

When our group began organizing itself for the immigration, the fictitious independence of Slovakia was already operating at full steam (under the controlling eye of the Germans). The extermination of Jews had begun according to the Nazi framework: Slovakia was the only state among the malignant German protectorates that paid for every Jew expelled to Poland. Jews were subjected to total economic boycott, businesses were confiscated, windows were smashed, skulls were crushed and so forth. The National Jewish youth, immediately aware of an evil hand pulling the strings and directing these precursors of extermination, drew the correct conclusion without hesitation: anyone who wishes to survive cannot stand idly by. The elders found it more difficult to make a decision. They demonstrated despair and lack of motivation. They awaited their grim fate which was none too late to arrive: the holocaust hit the Jewry of Slovakia in the hardest way; extermination began there as early as 1942, with the deportation of the first victims to execution, old and young, women and boys, men and babies.

Most young people set their sights on Israel; but the gates, the Land of Israel's gates, were locked to them. The Hebrew youths' will to survive was stronger than that. These youths did not wield the power to blow the locks off the gates, and therefore contemplated ways around or under the fence.

A fair amount of toil and bother was a requisite of the daring agents until the scheme materialized and was implemented. Each of these illegal Aliyot had its own idiosyncrasies and side issues. Also, occasional internal quarrels put a significant strain on this life-saving enterprise. These quarrels poisoned the atmosphere during a period of time when the entire world's atmosphere was already poisoned. We had to summon up much energy which had been squandered during the delays; so many petty and unnecessary arguments pestered us along our way! Today, of course, we realize that all this quarrelling had no real cause, but it took a long time to learn that lesson. We ultimately managed to uproot these unfortunate phenomena, at least from within the Pentcho passengers. Today we constitute a more unified family.

No one is contesting now the premiership in organizing these Aliyot in Slovakia. The unrefuted fact is that the initiative, implementation and responsibility were the Betar

Movement's. There is neither more resentment nor lambasting; they have made room for praise: blessed be all whose hands took part in this arduous work of salvation! It was an incredible life or death struggle. The history of illegal immigrations was already written in shining letters in the story of Israel's revival. The Pentcho cavalcade will forever be remembered favourably.

The organization of this Aliyah – the preparations, the postponements – requires its own dedicated book. In this document we shall restrict ourselves to the description of the journey and the immortalization of one of the most interesting and perhaps most dramatic chapters in the history of these Aliyot. The circumstances were what made this Aliyah special. Four whole years of living together, at first aboard a ship and later in camps, developed in us – despite differences and disagreements – a feeling of national unity and even collective friendship, as if we all agreed that "when the troubles are over hearts will be closer".

We were the last to leave our old "homeland". Behind us, the way was almost blocked for further Aliyot. We were the first to arrive in the Land of Israel from a liberated part of Europe. Our trip lasted – thanks to modern mechanics – four years only, one tenth the length of the Children of Israel's wandering through the deserts. Behind us remained those millions – our families, our people whom the greatest of hateful enemies of the twentieth century and of all times exterminated. As we were being thrown around a disintegrating ship far out at sea, the anxiety and fears were already alive in our hearts: what will happen to those left behind?

"Do not trust miracles", say the realists. But in reality, actual miracles happened to the people of Pentcho. Verily, we did not cross the Red Sea on dry ground, but we did pass through the mined Aegean Sea and remained intact. We did not feed on Manna from heaven, but snail soup and bran soup – we ate. Of course, there were those who longed for that Egyptian pot of meat, but the great majority of us faithfully believed, even during the darkest days of despair, that we would celebrate the tenth anniversary of our sailing in our free country, the State of Israel! And in honour of this special day the first edition of our book was published.

When we convened on the tenth anniversary of our departure towards our country, together we celebrated the triumph of Jewish hope and undefeated optimism. The bitterness of the past had disappeared, for even our tribulations, long since passed, are remembered with a smile. The rust bucket named Pentcho, whose skeleton lies in eternal rest on the seabed, became a glue unifying brothers in hardship into one family. Sometimes distress, peril, and shared suffering bring people closer together even more than blood relation.

Before we commence our story in its chronological order, let us bless each other, brothers and sisters, with the homecoming blessing. We also bless our new era that was raised through the super-human suffering of tens of thousands and the precious blood of thousands of young people. Let us recite the “She’hecheyanu” blessing – “Who has given us life, sustained us and has brought us to these times”, with which we shall erase one of the grave disgraces of the twentieth century: the “Illegal” immigration. Today we are a people of equal rights amongst all other nations, including those who denied us our right of return to our homeland. It is clear to us that this is not enough and that the salvation of our people is not yet complete. However, everything that was a dream during our encampments – came true; just as a more modest dream we had in the Rhodes camp came true: to buy bread without restriction, to sleep in a clean bed, and to live as free citizens in our own country. In those days it was only a dream of the tired and hungry – our willpower and our faith in the future made the dream come true. Pentcho family members – in any circumstance, joy and sorrow – never ever forget this!

A few words of thanks to a number of friends who volunteered and helped make this small enterprise – immortalizing the travels of the cursed, ridiculous, beloved and eternal Pentcho - a success:

- Willy Klopfer, who drew the cover for the original book;
- Alfred Brauner, who illustrated the original book;
- Zolly Klein – this Aliyah’s photographer all along the way;
- Two friends without whom this project could not have been fulfilled: Arieh-Leibek Zeinwell, man of print and Haim (Karchi) Farkash, man of action;
- Dr. Eliyahu Yeshurun who translated the original book from Hungarian.

Yehoshua Halevy

During the 1920-1948 British Mandate for Palestine, many European Jews tried to free themselves from the severe persecutions they suffered and, following the Zionist ideas, immigrated to Palestine, the Land of Israel. In 1934 the British severely limited the Jewish immigrants' abilities to enter Palestine and, for those already there, to purchase plots of land. Immigrating to the Land of Israel is regarded as an upwards movement, and the term “immigrate” is named “ascension”, or “Aliyah”. From 1934, most of the immigration attempts were unofficial, named “Illegal Aliyah” or “Aliyah B”. Aliyah in plural is Aliyot. Immigrants to Israel are named Olim (Oleh in singular). We shall use these words in the following text in order to differentiate the ships carrying immigrants to Israel from other passenger ships.

About other publications:

I have here the rare opportunity to respond to two additional books published about the Pentcho trip and it is hard to keep calm and restrained:

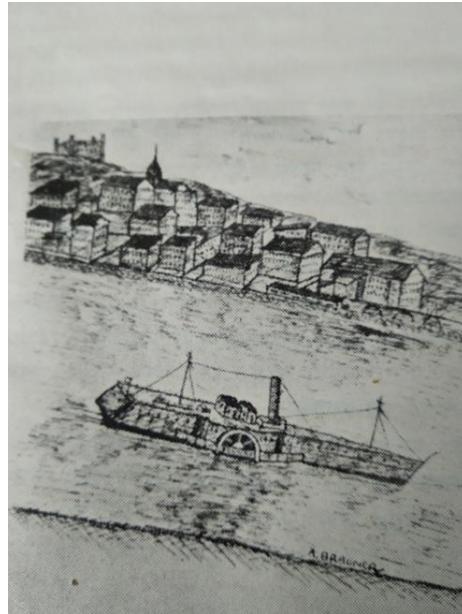
One rich young man (Heinz Visla) figured out a way, with his relatives' help, to escape Rhodes (in 1941!) and also reached our land. He did not attempt to help those left behind, but once in this country he did publish a booklet in German in which he managed, despite extremely limited circulation, to besmirch his rescuers, to fabricate, to falsify and to publish several "facts" that even the staunchest opposers of the Aliyot organizers rejected with contempt. His bogus name in Palestine was Ben-Zvi Kalisher. He, of course, quickly abandoned the nation and vanished without a trace.

I do not wish to waste any time commenting on the movie "The Pentcho Family", produced by the Hungarian National Television (a shorter version was filmed in Israel too at the initiative of our friend Haim Farkash). It has been seen by many. The Hungarians' measure of objectivity – this was during the last days of the Communist regime – requires no clarifications. Many are the notes on this movie, but here is not the place to detail them.

In 1984, a book by John Bierman, "Odyssey", was published by Simon and Shuster of New York (it was printed in German as well, published by Ullstein). The book is written and edited by a professional, but, being a storyteller and a script writer, he turned history into a story. It contains many inaccuracies which can be forgiven if we consider the book "Odyssey" a television film script, focusing on a few put-on elements of made-up drama and of artificially created exaggerated suspense.

And with this clarification we shall end the polemic and set out on our way!

Bratislava



Pentcho in Bratislava (drawn by Alfred Brauner)

This city on the banks of the Danube was once a “Great Israeli town”. Generations of rabbis, Zionists and traders; Tens of thousands of our people lived here, the city of Hattam Soffer, even on the eve of the holocaust. And in this city on the Danube shore the Pentcho cavalcade saga began – before we had ever heard this name. On a mid-March morning in 1939, the Slovaks woke up to be informed they had just been granted an “independent” state. Never did a nation win independence so cheaply, with almost no sacrifice nor casualties, as did the Slovaks. It is no wonder, therefore, that this independence was short-lived. History too has its own rules: Independence does not fall off the back of a truck. It is bought with agony, blood and anguish. Those awarded it without sacrifice are unable to appreciate it properly, and are certainly unable to maintain it.

This tragic error of history (the creation of the “Slovak State”) holds our interest solely because it was during those days that our Aliyah began to take form. Before then, the Aliyot headquarters was in Prague and it was there that they allocated rooms on each transport to immigrants in a carefully considered way, in accordance with the objective possibilities offered in Israel. Thenceforth, the responsibility of “independence” applied to us as well.

Passenger fees had also been sent to Prague up to that point (and some of those funds could no longer be returned to us). Now it was up to us to organize an independent convoy and to bear all the hard work and troubles it entailed. Only upon leaving its parents’ home will the child come to realize just how arduous self-sufficiency is. But

what worried us the most was the question of time. In such a volatile political situation, it was not clear how long it would take us to organize an Aliyah of our own; and overall: how much longer would the Slovaks, the Germans' minions, allow us to depart from the country?

The plan was, to our eyes, clear and set: the New Zionist Organization (specifically its youth movement, Betar) was in fact the only body organizing groups of illegal immigrants in Bratislava and the surrounding region. As was agreed with the international directorate, we were authorized to organize a 300-strong group and we were to select the people, collect the travel fees and transfer the sum of 4800 pounds sterling (16 pounds per person) to a specified English bank. Furthermore, we were to obtain visas and exit permits from the authorities. The departure date would be determined at the top, and the responsibility, until we reached Israel, lay with world headquarters.

The Registration

Planning is one thing – implementation is another. More difficulties arose; we had to deliberate and coordinate with our higher-ups abroad. Of course, there was no shortage of internal disputes, with candidates as well as with those not yet accepted. And we were pressed for time. We ended up losing - squandering - sacrificing about fifteen months to the preparations, amendments and quarrels that devoured us hungrily.

It's safe to state that during this time Betar's Aliyah office was the focus of Slovak Jews' attention. The will to emigrate was growing. Those who severed their links with Judaism, or had accepted the sentence of life in the shadow of death under a nationalistic anti-Semitic terrorism, or had grown tired of hoping and despaired of their condition – were those who did not think about making Aliyah. The 300 places allotted to us were demanded by hundreds more from all over the country and it was tough to decide who should go and who should stay. There were hard and painful deliberations: many did not have means to cover the expenses – and we did not have resources and supporters to fund them.

We did not see then, nor do we see today, any reason why the members of Betar, who organized the Aliyah, should not be first to be granted passage. After them came the neediest. This principle was adopted by all political parties in the various Aliyot programs. We had to take care of those with little means who could not raise even a fraction of the required amount. And again we stress: we received no support whatsoever; none from the Jewish community and certainly none from the Zionist

organizations, nor from The Joint (the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee), and we ourselves had no internal resources.

The Aliyah was based on pure idealism, but we had to adapt to the commercial aspect inherent in organizing such a trip. We told the well-off candidates that they would have to pay double or more, so that we could take with us poor, young people. Many more were being forced to leave Slovakia due to its and Czechia's mutual border changes. How do we obtain exit permits for them when their nationality is unclear? The authorities eventually granted exit permits after we explained to them that those registered for the "transport" would be leaving the country in any event, never to return.

And all this was taking place at the beginning of 1939! The demand for Aliyah – the growth in the numbers of candidates – was measured by the situation on the streets. Every time Nazi-Gárdist thugs/hooligans beat up Jews, smashed shop windows, and threw Jews out of Cafés, the following day our offices would be filled with the noise of commotion of the crowd rushing to register for Aliyah. [The thugs were named "Hlinkova Garda", followers of the anti-Semitic priest Andrej Hlinka]. In other instances panic stricken people would register in a hurry, pay the fee and, after a few weeks of relative calm, reappear asking for their money back, claiming that "the Aliyah is taking too long..." (When in fact they had been quick to forget the beatings, until the next riot).

Twice we were forced to shut the office doors: the first time, after a gang of Germans broke in, destroyed and stole everything they could lay their hands on, and set fire to paper documents. The second time came six months later, as war broke out between Germany and Poland and with it the shuttering of all Jewish establishments in the country. The anti-Semitic demonstrations, encouraged by the authorities, multiplied and going out onto the streets was life threatening.

The Transfer

The Transfer, meaning the purchase of goods from the state, exporting them and using the revenue to finance our journey to Israel, was a seemingly simple transaction approved by the authorities. In reality, the carrying out of this transfer was accompanied by occasional resentment, a toxic atmosphere and the fear that the entire Aliyah program would be cancelled. All this – because of the foul air emanating from each complex, practically clandestine transaction, but without which we wouldn't have had any chance of departing Bratislava. We had already heard of the existence of a potential seafaring vessel, but its Greek owners were not inclined to transport Jews to the Land of Israel out of sheer altruism.

For Jews, obtaining foreign currency from the Slovak government was impossible. There was only one method we had left by which to withdraw the travel funds: transfer; meaning – trading and shifting in goods. Anyone engaged in this form of commerce was subject to scathing criticism by people who had no actual clue as to what was being done. In truth, I was unable – due in no small part to a lack of familiarity – to attend to this facet of assuring the Aliyah, but even with hindsight I can only congratulate and thank those who successfully handled this transfer. The Slovakian government issued us a license to purchase a certain amount of wood panels, valued and traded in Slovak Koruna. The stock was shipped on the Danube to the port of Haifa to a business which had made the commitment to relay the shipment's revenue to a London bank immediately. That is how our 4800 pounds sterling reached Aliyah headquarters in London.

So how did the detractors besmirch this arrangement? They claimed that we had received a license to ship a greater number of panels than was necessary to cover the fares. Perhaps a few individuals did take advantage of this opportunity to rescue some of their possessions; good for them. We suffered no financial damage whatsoever.

The transfer and its execution, and its built-in troubles, never ceased casting their dark shadows upon us. The acting director, based in London, promised me over the telephone that he would give the cast-off signal as soon as the pay for the first cargo ship was received. The assumption was that if a panel-bearing ship departed Bratislava once a week, then the full sum would be at his disposal by the time we landed on the shores of Israel. (Meaning four ships in four weeks – and even the most optimistic among us did not dream it possible to reach Israel sooner than that).

This promise was not fulfilled. The new world center supervisor (who assumed office following the untimely passing of two great men) could not keep the promise. The international situation had become so complicated, that new conditions were imposed on us, much harder than the previous ones, chiefly: no departing prior to the full sum's arrival at its destination, London.

Even if we assume that the heads of the London office understood the gravity of the physical and emotional suffering delaying the Aliyah was causing hundreds of wonderful young people, who never ceased believing in that directorate, and the miserable and distressing position into which it had forced those responsible in Bratislava – it is doubtful that they possessed a solution of how to ease our condition and realize departure. What we did know was that every convoy, every ship that set sail had reached its goal safely.

And Still we are Going Nowhere

At times it seemed to us that the important goal wasn't the ultimate destination, but rather only to get out of here! One could not keep inventing excuses for the standbys and delays. Objectively, nobody could doubt headquarters' desire to get the convoy moving. But, as far as I was concerned, the main problem was a chronic lack of means! (Dozens of years later, in lectures to high school pupils about the illegal immigration, I frequently concluded with the following statement: had every Jew in the USA contributed one dollar (one!), we could have gotten out many more thousands of Jews!).

At last, a ship had arrived at a port in Romania, but in the meantime the political skies had darkened and international insurance companies refused to insure haulage on the Danube. Furthermore, fulfilling the term of transferring the lion's share of fee to its designation did not get us out of trouble. Nevertheless, a community wheeler-dealer's private transport departed Bratislava, and that ship got detained on the Danube. The sum we paid apparently saved them from this desperate ordeal and the Irgun (aka "The National Military Organization in the Land of Israel - "Etzel") enabled them to proceed – and to arrive! The explanation being: A stalled Aliyah ship on the Danube did not serve our purpose. They had to be helped – and we are told to continue waiting...

Further clarifications: headquarters had purchased a French ship named Saint Brieux that anchored in Marseille. According to the plan, the ship was to sail to the Danube port of Susek, Yugoslavia, where we were to board it along with a small group of our brothers in destiny from Yugoslavia and Switzerland. The time of departure from Bratislava terminals had also been set: 9th of September, 1939. The passenger visas were ready; no detail, however small, escaped our eyes. This trip was to have been made by train, and we knew which drinks we would be treating our gendarmes chaperones to... only one single fact was not duly considered: that the 1st of September, the day the Second World War would break out, would precede the 9th of September, the day we were to set out on our way.

One incident followed another and each one to our detriment. This time the ship, in which we invested £2000 of our funds, was seized by the French government. We were thus left in the midst of those chaotic days, a hopeless, dismayed, and famished group. We had to do something. In the depths of our despair, we began seeking a way to untangle the net. We felt that a change of approach was required, and this requirement brought on a turn of events. We, the obedient ones, decided to become disobedient. We saw the transport under the command of Naftali Faltin of Prague sail down the Danube on the ship Saturnos with almost 2400 Jews, 600 of them boarded in Bratislava, and continue unhindered on its course. [They were in fact stuck in Romania for half a year, but finally managed to find the Turkish ship Sakaria and sailed on it from the port of Sulina in Romania, in February 1940, and reached Haifa. They remained in Israel

despite the sanctions the British imposed on them]. We realized that we too had to sail along the Danube, out to Romania, as Naftali Faltin had done and succeeded. If we were already en route, then our superiors, the world directorate of immigrations of the New Zionist Organization (the Revisionist Movement), would be obliged to guarantee the trip's completion (a convoy already en route was never turned around to its port of departure). This is what our people demanded, and this is what we did.

We therefore got in touch with a big Danube sailing company – a German company which was, under these circumstances, the safest bet – and reached an agreement with them. We got as far as preparing the passenger invitation telegrams (not for the first time...) when once again nature intervened against us. Only two hours before the telegrams were to be dropped off at the post office, the German company informed us that as the lower Danube was already frozen, the company could not put a ship at our disposal during the winter months.

Troubles from Within and from Without

Our bad luck stalked us on all fronts. Although a relative calm existed in the ongoing European war, it did not exist among our passengers. They regarded themselves cheated. We had to employ other tactics towards world headquarters which had uprooted from London to Bucharest.

The situation was like this: people had terminated their businesses, abandoned their homes and their work places. Many more had shipped their personal belongings in crates to the land of Israel. Energetic and idealistic young people, who aspired with every fiber of their being to reach the Land of Israel, suffered abuse on the streets of Slovakia. Who could possibly sit arms crossed in the Aliyah office corridors and maintain peace of mind? Their travel rations had already been consumed, even their clothes had been worn out. Their last valuables had been sold. They had to find a scapegoat, someone responsible for the failures. With the Danube frozen, the war far away, who's nearest? The Transport management!

The accusations and suspicions grew. "An investigation" was demanded, oversight of management (by those with the loudest voices of course); Where is our money? Even though Slovakia was – officially – at war with Britain, we managed to indirectly (via Hungary) receive a telegram from the secretary of the New Zionist movement in London, unambiguously confirming that our money had reached its destination in full. But what difference could this make with the Danube frozen, the money over in London and us stuck in Bratislava with no chances of immediate departure?

January 1940 saw initial shifts being made in all directions. I mentioned my personal appeal to Jabotinsky; this was at a time when the atmosphere might have damaged even the unified and disciplined ranks of Betar. I therefore wrote a detailed memorandum to our most admired Head of Betar in which I detailed the sorry state of the youths and adults many having arrived at personal despair. My young shoulders could no longer bear the defamations unless I received practical backup from my superiors. I sent the memo via the Betar commission in Budapest.

The answer was very quick to arrive; Jabotinsky's secretary, Mordechai Katz, wrote (in Yiddish – the original is archived in the Jabotinsky Institute): "your appeal-memorandum was read to the Head of Betar. I am not allowed to describe to you what a strong impression it made on him. He dispatched Mr. Ben-Horin to Bucharest with the specific instruction – Move your matter forward!" I could therefore resign from managing Aliyah affairs and dedicate myself to Betar. The Aliyah offices moved to Pochova Street and were managed by Mr. Janovits until the carrying out of Jabotinsky's instruction.

The center in Bucharest was vivacious and our group made it "on the map". We sent Zoltan Schalk to Bucharest and he returned with the impression that this time we would successfully leave this area. The Bucharest office claimed that in order to transport our 300 passengers they had no more than 1200 Pounds at their disposal, roughly a quarter of the required amount. The solution: They managed – In collaboration with private benefactors – to purchase an older ship and it would be up to us to increase the number of passengers by at least 100 people in order to obtain the means for materializing the plan. Zoltan Schalk even "committed" to take on 280(!) additional passengers. The chance to end this saga was worth making any promise.

Thus the enrolment of new candidates began at a quickened rate. Even today it is hard to fathom that in the spring of 1940, with Poland already occupied by the Nazis and The West being inferior when faced with the greatest enemy of humanity, we still had to seek out and persuade Jews to make Aliyah to the land of Israel! Alas, in truth, the extended delays and serial disappointments of the past, including refuted rumours, all contributed to the community's dissipation of faith in these Aliyot, but at the same time no other movement had been successful in carrying them out. A near-tragic event occurred to an Aliyah organized by "Maccabi". Their ship was docked at Bratislava port for no less than four weeks and they ended up being forced to disembark all passengers and the Aliyah program was cancelled.

But our Aliyah was not like all other Aliyot. The hardships endured and time wasted, seemingly for nothing, had strengthened us and forged a unified group dead-set on believing in the cause under any conditions. This round's additional enrolment was particularly tactile: we had to pay the added Olim's fare in hard currency. This market "commodity" was unavailable, to be found on the black market only and purchasing it

bit-by-bit was perilous and distressing. We learned just how difficult it was to legally organize illegal immigration. The human composition of the group changed too: the well-to-do persistently cancelled their passes whilst those without possessions were the most devoted, brave and persistent.

Spring 1940 was hopeless for humanity – but held new hopes for us.

Pentcho Arrives In Bratislava

A number of attempts were made by businessmen to organize illegal Aliyot on a commercial basis. It is doubtful whether such a business could compete with Aliyot organized by the Zionist movements. The only ones who, perhaps, turned a profit from these attempts were the owners of the rickety boats, most of whom Greek, who sold their rustbuckets at full price. The Fact that our center managed to, despite all, promote this Aliya whose difficulties were caused by most objective reasons, proved that intent and duty were paramount.

Jabotinsky's envoy, Mr. Ben Horin, carried out his mission's purpose. Headquarters had already succeeded in purchasing a small tugboat named "Stefano" intended for our group. But during the winter it had served as shelter and board for Faltin's Prague convoy while the Danube was closed to traffic. The Italian ship's new owners had to re-register it in Bulgaria and so it was that its name was changed to "Pentcho" (this was the nickname of Mr. Reuven Franko, former Betar commissioner in Bulgaria, who was working at the Aliyah center in Bucharest). The owner with the controlling interest was a stubborn Greek-Levantine man by the name of Antera. He was interested in nothing but the profits he could squeeze out of the Jews' predicament.

Our first impression of Pentcho was a positive one: Brand new paintwork, still-unspoiled new halls. But the faces of the experts revealed a jeering smile regarding this strange [ark](#). They told us that Romanian seamen had nicknamed our ship "a caricature of a submarine"... and it was on this ark that we were about to sail through rivers and across seas. We believed that when the potential inquirers actually saw the ship in the flesh, we would quickly complement the number required for setting sail. Once again – It stands to be reminded: May 1940, Europe still found favour with the Jews and they were in no hurry to "risk their lives" on this adventurous journey. Nor did they find the fact that Italy had already joined the war alongside Germany particularly troubling. The final passengers did not yet total more than 350. Nevertheless, we vigorously set about making the final preparations, which included crucial ship repairs, made in order to facilitate the then planned occupancy of 400 men and women. We had also bought food

enough to last 50 days, which goes to prove that the organizers couldn't be accused of being overly optimistic regarding the duration of our journey.

The rumour of this modern day Noah's Ark having arrived at the winter port of Bratislava quickly spread among the "illegals" population. The "villager" harbingers promptly appeared in town, dressed in leather coats, most already feeling the ground burning beneath their feet. They toured the port in order to catch a glimpse of their heart's desire, docked and shrouded in mystery far from prying eyes.

The general mood improved, with only the Levantine Antera despondent and vexed. We figured it was time to send out the final instructions to the passengers which we did with some degree of hesitance, after the multiple delays made a mockery of us to a certain group. One comrade (Dr. David Wolstein) independently published a satirical newspaper in Slovak – "The Olim Post" – which he edited with great skill and managed to make people laugh.

The telegrams actually got sent out this time and immediately "scouts" from peripheral towns began showing up. They did not believe the telegrams anymore and wanted to inspect the area prior to bringing their worldly possessions. On the other hand – those frightened by the impending reality, were overcome with vacillation and cancelled their Aliyah last-minute! I had good personal relations with some of them and thus attempted to persuade them, lest they remain here in Slovak hell. I never saw them again. They gave preference to the life of humiliation in the ghettos and the camps over the troubled journey which lay ahead and the hardships to be expected on the road to freedom. The choice they made was tragic.

Along the Danube

At long last, this day which we had yearned for arrived, even though it had dawdled and we had nearly given up on it. The ship was in port, the buses awaited the passengers by the terminal building. Taxis loaded with parcels rushed towards the port, where customs officers were already awaiting their "victims". The Aliyah office was teeming with record commotion and urgent telephone calls. Heading down to the ship. *Really? Going down? No! Going Up! ('Making Aliyah!').*

All went smoothly from the train down to the port; not so once inside the port. The impression there was rather gloomy, and Bialik's quote of "all beginnings are difficult" gave us no comfort. It was a Thursday, the 16th of May. Cool early spring weather. Thin raindrops drizzled down upon us. All this did not positively contribute to our mood.

Opposite the ship we sat, with no reply at all. Rumours casting doubt over boarding began circulating. The level of anxiety increased.

Lunch time – we dine. The best dishes were prepared at home for our first day. In the afternoon hours the anxiety increased. Antera was pacing up and down like a caged lion, claiming Schalk had deceived him: instead of 580 passengers there were currently no more than 360. Although we were in the midst of negotiations with a group of German Jews and there was a glimmer of hope on the horizon, Antera had no choice, he had to make good on what was promised. Boarding began at 4 o'clock pm.

The customs inspection was relatively quick and easy. Someone had already taken care to "grease the wheels". The customs officers were particularly interested in specific items: gold, small-coin currency, cameras, wine and chocolate. Owners of such precious items did their best to conceal their valuables from the customs officers' eyes and many succeeded. Once on the boarding ramp to the ship, each person was assigned his or her "cabin" and "bed" number. The sight of the crowded ship in the pouring rain was none too appealing. Many turning their eyes in the darkness towards Bratislava and the "continent", recalled the previous night in their home, in their beds, or the cigarette smoke-drenched café house where they held their going away party. No electricity, because the machines were not yet operational. No storage room for crates. The lack of appliances was looked past, but the most crucial shortage was difficult to ignore: room, space.

Boarding continued until 9pm. 360 Jews assembled under the Bulgarian flag. Had we remained this number, we just might have been able to make it. The first night watch shift began its patrol, but exhaustion overcame the rest of the passengers. Under cover of darkness we managed to sneak a few more "illegal" lads onto our illegal boat, young men of ours with neither the documents nor the money with which to pay. The morrow, which was already Sabbath Eve, we began boarding the "Patrónkas" bunch (a small group from the Patrónka area of Bratislava that joined our Aliyah) as had been arranged with our office. They were the cause of some extra headache, as they arrived expecting a cruise and not the rough and tumble of illegal immigration.

On the very first Sabbath Eve aboard the wooden deck, it was raining outside and also within the eyes of many. In the women's cabins, Sabbath candles were lit, their thoughts returning "home" and they cried for paradise lost. The separation wounds were still raw and excruciating. How great was the number of Jewish families remaining in this country! Over there on the "continent", mothers, brothers and sisters were staring teary-eyed at the seats that were orphaned of their occupants. We are a sentimental people, and our parting was final. Surely we could not foresee the journey's pattern, but we felt that last night's goodbye was forever. The heart prophesied calamity.

At last we set out on our way. It was on Saturday, the 18th of May 1940. We numbered 400. We crammed together upon the planks that rocked us and hoped in our hearts that the end to our sufferings would come soon and that we would reach our destination before long. But straight away our onset prophesied dire events: early morning mid-sail, the engine lever synchronizing the valves broke. We tried our luck again several hours later but the jump-start failed this time too. A plank-bearing cargo ship was set to tow us, but claimed that our boat's additional passive motion was perilous to them. We ended up exiting Solvakia's territorial waters unassisted.

The passengers burst out into singing the hymn of the Zionist Youths. And then, as if to anger the gentiles, rose up the singing of "Hatikva" ('The Hope', later to become Israel's national anthem) and truly gave voice to our hope in this foreign, hostile environment in which we were singing, glad to be rid of our step-homeland and certain that the period era of humiliation and fear had passed, never to return. We left behind us bitter exile, long and dark, the years of our youth, years' worth of memories, thousands of friends, tens of thousands of Jews, unfortunate relatives and filled-up Jewish cemeteries. Onward! Never mind – we will sprawl upon these hard floorboards, be thrown about the waves of the seas, will go wanting, will starve – but will never more be without a homeland, expelled from place to place! "Shoulder to shoulder, comrades, hand in hand we shall advance towards our goal – and we will win it!"

I wrote the following words on the 18th of May 1940 in my personal journal. I shall only quote a few sentences:

"We shall leave behind all that evokes bad memories in us. We will sail ahead upon the silently hostile river, through wonderful surroundings which, in all opinions, did not add to the fact that the people of one of the nations deserving to have equal rights were forced to carry wandering sticks with a cloak made of lead on their shoulders!..."

We had to arrange "roaming" around the ship in such a way that pedestrians were to progress on the right hand side only. In order to maintain cleanliness we assembled a special volunteer company, "cleaning services". Its duty was to rinse the corridors after the passengers had retired to sleep on their bunks, to clean the toilets and the wash ducts and they were on duty all day long...".

The Ship

"It is not the dead who praise the Lord, those who go down to the place of silence" (Psalms 115); our tradition is – praise the dead or be quiet. It is difficult for us to be objective about the Pentcho. That strange little ship grew on us in the end, and as her hull's final resting place is on the sea bed, we shall remember her favourably.

Long before she permeated our lives, Pentcho already had a long history. She was born in England about forty five years before our voyage; a coastal tow-ship whose measurements had not changed since her construction. Her capacity was 279 tonnes, her length – bow to taffrail – 55 meters. Her maximum width at her shapely waistline was seven and a half meters, and her height was five and a half meters. We learned to recognize her additional excellent characteristics during our lengthy journey. In her early youth, still bearing the name "Stefano", she served as a tow ship along the Russian-Romanian coastline and was no lesser externally than any other similarly tasked ships. But once she was promoted and headquarters, together with Antera, converted her into a passenger ship, her face grew serious and took on a more intelligent expression, manifested by the additional floor on her deck. This floor was erected in order to add as much passenger space as we could, and gave the ship a new shape.

What follows is a description of that "caricature of a submarine": the engine room was, of course, the bottom part of the ship. It was barely seen. The two storage rooms below the waterline served as living quarters for 150 young people. These two sections, where Betar youth were housed, were given nicknames reminding us of two famous jail houses: the section below the bow soon bore the name "Acco" and the second, where older people dwelled, was nicknamed "Ilava" – Slovakia's great prison.

The floor erected above deck was a very strange beast. It narrowed towards its two ends and took on the shape of a twin wedge dividing into two separate halls. These two were in turn divided lengthwise with wooden baffles and this segment housed the women, children, elderly and the distinguished, such as Transport management and a few ship police. Passage through these halls was set to be along the ship's side panels. Those passing through had to overcome stacks of packages hanging off the ship's sidewall, creaking ominously above whoever dared pass below. Should you make it past these said packages – you bumped into, and likely stumbled over, feet dangling off the short wooden beds.

It is only through considerable politeness that we can call these sleeping areas "beds". They in fact had a more popular nickname: "Pritch". We did not lie on the naked planks. We each had blankets and also inflatable rubber mattresses. Truth be told, one can get used to the planks too, although that takes time, whereas we only spent five and a half months aboard our Pentcho. The main problem was not the planks, but rather the other

issues: sleeping spaces took up three decks. The width allocated to each person was 35-40 centimeters and the rubber mattresses did not fit in such narrow a space. This led to disputes among neighbours. If you wished to turn over to your other side, you couldn't achieve this maneuver without generous assistance from your neighbours. Lifting your head required special caution lest you received a knock from the boards on the level above you. The complicated motion of getting off one's bunk was achieved by clever usage of a certain fleshy part of the anatomy. Should you desire an afternoon nap, to recharge some energy on a long sit-and-do-nothing day, you might very well be hit with a couple of drops of soup trickling from above...

As on any ship, ours too featured a deck. However, on ordinary ships the deck serves as a relaxing area for passengers to stroll, whereas we were forbidden to set foot on it for well-established reasons. The ship's center of gravity used to be on the main deck which had become, as part of the modifications, the first floor's roof. This new floor had been constructed of a heavy material that put the ship's balance in perpetual danger. Any additional load, such as passengers, on the deck, could have spelled disaster for us all. We had to very quickly learn a brief statement in Russian, emanating from the skipper's alcohol odorous mouth: "Na Druguyu Storonu!" ("To the other side!"). Later on in the journey, when out on the open sea, we assembled a special unit of passengers whose job was standing at center of the deck and quickly shifted to the elevated side of the ship when it tilted over...

We found room for a kitchen as well, where 500 people were cooked for in a space smaller than an average kitchen of a two-room apartment. They cooked there – as long as there was food to cook. Our cook, Mama Kreilisheim, found it difficult to squeeze herself into this cubicle, until her weight lessened and she felt relief. Sani Goldberger, the chief cook, complained bitterly about the low ceiling his head kept bumping on while cooking.

The ship's paddlewheels, being something of its trademark, are worth mentioning as well. As with most riverfaring vessels, Pentcho was propelled by two huge wheels paddling the gentle waters of the Danube. Up close, their dimensions appeared enormous. During the long periods of delay along the way, these wheels served as ideal springboards for the swimmers, a Riviera for the sunbathers and, during night-time, many found uses or a hiding place in this locality. But we had our creeping doubts: would these wheels be able to withstand the large sea waves as well?

Our ship was small. Nevertheless, it had room onboard for us all when we had planned on it delivering us to our destination. She was crowded and uncomfortable, yet we bore our collective hardship with understanding. The galley was cramped, the lower deck was moldy and dark, and so we take pride in the fact that nobody contracted any serious illness during our long journey. In the end, this little ship endeared itself to us for

she alone served as a temporary “homeland” within the vast domain of European countries through which we passed.

We hence exited Slovakia’s territory and sailed the waters of the Hungarian Danube, in a ship built by English, bought by Italians, flying a Bulgarian flag, its Captain Russian and the sailors Romanian and Greek, crossing the Yugoslav border, issued with a Paraguayan visa, paddling towards the Turkish shores in the hopes of reaching the land of the Jews – into which the entrance for Jews was forbidden!

The First Stopovers

The Jews, as a nation that has frequently changed its places of residence, are rather quick at adapting to new conditions. Onboard the Pentcho, too, life began settling into its normal path. Starting on the journey’s very first day, women were fighting over the narrow corridors of the upper lever rooms, over clothes-washing space. The whole ship had only one tub... Others were occupied with trying to turn their allotted cot into a cute little nest, a “private home”, and of course encountered quite a few problems. There was no space! Despite this, housewives, dismissed from their usual occupation, began sewing curtains and draping them on over the narrow holes pierced through the ship’s wall, which were dubbed “windows”. The others gazed through those slits at the pretty Hungarian river banks and happiness crept into their hearts – we are sailing forward!

We reached the town of Baja (Hungary) and already met with another mishap: our ship had run a sand shoal and only after some swift maneuvers escaped trouble. The passengers never even noticed it. The rain hassled us too, because it forced the passengers to cram together in the narrow corridors. Despite all this, spirits were quite high, befitting people perpetually expecting something better. Lunch too was tasty to all; as those more clairvoyant stated – too good! “You mustn’t spoil the passengers so early on...”, said one of the newcomers, who following the long wait (for departure) feared our voyage would not run without mishaps.

When we sailed under the wonderful bridges of the Capital, Budapest, it was on a Sunday morning. The multitudes streamed towards their houses of worship – to plead for their Jewish God’s help in destroying the Jews... In this nation’s anthem you will find the touching line: “this nation has already been punished for past and future sins...” And if so – Indeed we bore the sins of all nations and were punished for all of humanity’s historical faults throughout its existence!

We reached Hungary's southernmost Danube port – Mohács. As we anchored there day after day, the "clandestine transmissions" began relaying various rumours. From passenger chit-chats the ship management too learned the true state of affairs... We were delayed at this small town three days and in the meantime delighted its inhabitants strolling along the river bank with Hebrew songs. There was also a positive aspect to our being anchored in Mohács: Two more friends joined us, who did not seek any part in our adventures to come, but accepted them nevertheless. The first one – Dr. Heller – requested his own private cabin and the boys did not make him wait long: they grabbed him with his ornate luggage and pulled him into the "Ilava". His associate had the more modest request of a bed long enough to reach his ankles – otherwise his legs might dangle from his knees on down. This young man, Master Pruntyi-Lörinc, was as tall as a ship's mast whose only disappointment was that even this modest request of his was not granted.

It was in accordance with the new tradition, on The Sabbath, 25th of May, when, without prior notice, we received a shipment of firewood and a clear instruction for the ship to weigh anchor and sail from the port. A Hungarian Police motor boat served as honorary escort until the southern border. "Simple Deportation", said the know-all. The Hungarians were fed up with our presence in the middle of their town. But the optimists persisted: Never mind! If every nation treated us like the Hungarians, we will reach our homeland within a few short weeks.

We reached the third country on our way: Yugoslavia. The Hungarian escort boat waved its flag goodbye and one of our passengers, whom these Hungarians tossed around from prison to prison and from one concentration camp to another could not, despite his severe illness, control himself at the site of such chivalry. The slavery instinct sense impressed into his blood overwhelmed the natural hatred felt towards the loathsome servants of regent Horthy for robbing him of his fortune and his health, and in a voice choked with tears called onto them: "Long Live Hungary!". And this was in May of 1940, on an Aliyah ship... Only two years before this, Czech Jews feared for their "homeland's" destiny and were ready to protect it come what may. And in 1932 our brothers in Germany were ready for any sacrifice for the sake of their "Vaterland".

Here we were in Yugoslavia, the only democratic country in those days. There we felt freer. We dropped anchor near the port of Bezdan, by a small forest planted in marsh lands – and waited. And once again the rumours began circulating: what are we doing hanging around here? Some claimed we were waiting for more friends. Others thought we were waiting for a tug boat to haul us along the Danube. It turned out that neither of these thoughts was unfounded this time.

Seeing as we were already standing still, we must make use of the time to upgrade internal arrangements. We imposed a corridor traffic system, in which one could walk in

one direction only due to the narrowness. We assigned on-deck visitations and respite order according to room numbers. The stifling in the bowels of the ship burdened us so that we were obliged to “ration” the fresh air. There were “illegal air breathers” too. Chasing them caused our policemen many a headache. Occasionally we even gave up on achieving the fair distribution of this vital commodity named “fresh air”.

When the rumours of taking on an additional group grew, we began arranging space for them. These preparations were met with fierce opposition not only from the previous inhabitants of the plank beds, but even from the “illegals” who found arrangements and had managed to get sorted out exclusively due to the kindness and generosity of their friends – their neighbours.

Allow me here to praise our “work corps” comprised of volunteer young people. It is doubtful any other Ma’apilim (“illegal immigrants”) ship could boast such a vivacious and efficient service like on Pentcho. Thanks to them, the ship was saved from diseases, rats, lice and unwanted side effects so frequent on Aliyot such as this. We can truly claim without bias that our young fellers (led by “old man” Hans Goldberger) worked real wonders. During the daytime they’d wash the sleeping rooms floors and bed planks with chlorinated water and at nighttime, with the rest of the passengers asleep, came the deck’s, the corridors’ and toilets’ turn.

We also formed “health services” headed by the four doctors aboard the voyage. On duty roster were also medical students whose studies were interrupted (among them myself, ship’s commander). Medical check-ups were performed every morning, although they were not often needed. We issued some other “directives” for hygiene’s sake. Women were required to cut their long hair shorter, and when we feared that certain living creatures did not discriminate against the shortened hair either, the remains of their coiffures were forced to endure hair wash – only this time with kerosene...

Practical professionals also began appearing on the scene. The barber began cutting hair, the cobbler striking his hammer; amateur carpenters made tables, chairs and cabinets. Where did they get the materials from? We didn’t ask – the Jew will always find his ways. The cultural work developed too, especially during the days-weeks of standstill. We knew the danger in idleness and we fought the boredom. As early as Bezdan we opened Hebrew courses for all passengers, no exceptions.

If all was going so well, why were we standing still at our docking stations for so long? It was because the continuation of the journey was this time dependent on receiving the precious liquid – Păcură.

Păcură

To each one his dreams: the prisoner dreams of freedom, the ill of good health, the poor of wealth and the Pentcho passengers dreamed of Păcură. I believe the word to be Romanian, but we learned it prior to reaching Romania. This is the name for the all-important fluid that is in fact kerosene (oil) or fuel oil (Mazut) which powers the ship's engines. Păcură was the magic word following us nearly the entire duration of our long way.

Every day we looked forward to receiving the precious fluid, but instead emerged only the ship's owner – Antera. He appeared alongside the Pentcho on the deck of a lavish passengers' ship, yelled to us, stomped his foot and threatened to forbid the group that, according to reports, had left Bratislava and was on its way to us, to board our ship. His threats were not idle. He possessed the supply of Păcură fluid without which we could not move.

The fuel issue exacerbated the bleak relationship among the three original members of ship management (reminder: Citron [myself], Schalk, Gescheidt). The second of the three was the “foreign minister”, who did not surprise us with his insistent silence regarding anything taking place beyond the purview of Pentcho. He did not particularly trust people; no more than people trusted him. Compared to him, the third did speak excessively and this too was displeasing to the comrades' ears. And the first, who dealt only with the internal management, passengers' placement and cultural work, had faults too: he was too young when he took this task of great importance and responsibility upon himself. Harmony, therefore, was not present among management fellows.

The Slovak ship Orol (previously named Sokol, or S-1) arrived with a group of immigrants whose number was not yet known to us. At first there was talk of thirty, then of fifty and even seventy people, and in the end it became clear that this was no guessing game; the number of joining passengers totaled one hundred and one. But Antera stuck to his guns: he “would not allow them to board the Pentcho until...” meaning: until he received his money. Travel fare payment but mere rumours as well: the necessary sum had already been transferred to a Swiss bank to the order of Mr. Antera, but was held up due to unknown reasons. We had also heard that the man in Switzerland, one Mr. Silberstein, would not pay until after these people boarded our ship (in fact, his expression was “the seafaring vessel”).

The Orol dropped anchor alongside the Pentcho with its passengers waiting still for the big shots' decision. Only this time Antera received decisive and resolute answer from us: we would transfer our brothers in hardship over to us despite his opposition and if he was to insist – we would transfer them by force. I began assembling the group of “haulers” that would handle this operation when all of a sudden we were no longer

bothered with lack of space and overcrowding, for we found out the nature of our neighbouring transport. Most of them were survivors of Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps whom the Germans released on the grounds of documents indicating they were to relocate overseas (and all this happened in the month of May 1940!).

The Yugoslav authorities had the final, unchallenged word of this argument: Either you transfer the Orol's passengers onto your ship, or they will be returned to Bratislava at once! We also heard from these passengers that the Jews of Slovakia had begun to envy us, despite rumours about a typhoid epidemic that supposedly erupted on the ship... (Nobody contracted typhoid during the journey's entire four years). We therefore made use of The Sabbath, being rainy this time yet again, and transferred the new group to The Kingdom of Pentcho. Although we had prepared space for housing the company, thirty passengers were required to stay above deck for the time being, a decision they gladly accepted: this promised them unrestricted access to the fresh air, sans queueing.

The composition of the newcomers differed in several ways from the human make-up present onboard until then. Later it became clear that this variance did not contribute to the good atmosphere between us. Many of them were elderly, weak and sick. The initial medical checkup indicated those suffering from tuberculosis, heart diseases and asthma among them. It was clearly not ideal human material for an illegal immigration. But they were brothers in our peril too and had to be rescued along with us. The first treatment they received was a kerosene hair wash. At long last our Pentcho received its dose of Păcură and we could set off on our way full steam ahead. We were at this point convinced that we would not have to stop until open sea. What we failed to take into account, and which cost us a lot of lost time, were the Romanians who controlled the passage – the “Iron Gate”.

In No Man's Land

This time we set off on Sunday, the 9th of June (because we were occupied on Saturday with transferring the “German” group onto our ship). The mood was elated: we had enough fuel to cross Yugoslavia and even Romania. A short stretch of land, between Yugoslavia and the first Romanian ports on the Danube, however, became a journey of torment. We were forced to traverse this segment several times over. The gorge known as “The Iron Gate” became our Rubicon, and we could not “pierce the mountain”. The bribe seeking Romanian authorities repelled us five times! The first Romanian station was Moldova Veche. The port commander became the personification of our troubles

and our short – yet ever elongating – route. When he again checked and rechecked our papers, it was made clear he wasn't seeking Dollar bribes only; he was in actuality conspiring against our voyage!

We were sent committee after committee whose people inspected our ship, its engines and investigated whether Pentcho was structurally strong enough to negotiate the rapids of the lower Danube. With the arrival of each such committee, the passengers were restricted to their placements and the “balancing unit” of eight young people was placed at the lower deck passage. All these kept the boat balanced. The result: the committee's chairman – a sort of captain – found the ship to be “nearly alright”. The engines too were found to be satisfactory, yet permission to move on was not given! We sailed on to the following port – Drencova – but for nothing. All we encountered there was a second passports inspection...

We were forced to return to Veliko Gradište in Yugoslavia, where they were already certain they had gotten rid of us. We possessed no visas, nor visiting permits; therefore they expelled us from there as well. So, what do Jews who've managed to depart one country but are unwanted by the second do? They idle in the no man's land in between the two and ponder bitter thoughts out of a burning sense of insult. We were thus held up in the Danube Badlands. We were stuck in a desolate place, unseen to the world and far from any saviour.

It was on the eve of our beautiful holiday, Shavu'ot (Pentecost); five hundred rejected Jews, detached from the world, crowded together tightly between foreign borders. Another cruel rumour reached us: Paris had surrendered to the Nazis... Those tragic rumours, coupled with the uncomfortable situation, did nothing to crush our spirits. Despite the situation, and in honour of the holiday, we led a holiday celebration on deck, sang Hebrew songs and said: In spite of all we will continue our journey, no matter what! We will reach our hearts' desired destination and be free – free in our homeland! Corrupt foreign port managers will not stop us; the depressing reports from the front will not deny us our way forward – homeward!

Practically speaking, the No Man's Land does not exist. Everything belongs to one of the surrounding countries, which is why we did not hesitate to return to Yugoslav territory the following day, where we received a four-day visitation permit. We made use of this time to plan another attempt at conquering the Iron Gate, but our onslaught was again pushed back by the Romanians. This time we spotted Antera in the port, sporting ‘the cat that got the cream’ grin. We weighed the situation: The food supplies were running short and we had to push forward on our way at all cost under any circumstances. We must not become stagnant. We mounted yet another attempt: Exited Moldova Veche and approached Drencova, but the Devil of Moldova Veche, the port manager, chased us on a motorcycle down the road parallel to the river. He caught up

and ordered us to stop. He had noticed an alteration to our exit permit: the number 21 was changed to the 26th of June... which is why they arrested our Captain and Antera's representative, Mr. Fein, but this did not stifle our joy. They were released within a few hours and we were sent back to Yugoslavia. Worry gnawed at us that this time our stay here would be longer.

We had learned of our boat's Romanian crew members' plan. They had not received their pay for quite some time and were planning to sail Pentcho to the port of Drobeta-Turnu Severin and ask the authorities there to confiscate the ship. They hoped to make their pay by selling the Pentcho. This scheme was of course thwarted: the Romanians did not allow them to disembark at any port; the crew received an advance on their pay and remained aboard the ship (much to the discontentment of both sides).

During the lengthy stay in Yugoslavia, our links with the country's Jewish community grew tighter. This was the only free Jewish community in Central Europe. Among the passengers of Pentcho were some with ties in Yugoslavia. One of them, Fritz Brenner, used his to our benefit and so it was that a Jewish owned shipping company obtained an empty cargo ship (a 'Schlepper') for us that positioned alongside Pentcho and solved the overcrowding problem. These were the scorching days of high summer and many of our youngsters found a spacious place in which to "dwell". The bread then ran out, and not for the first time. We also had to drink our coffee with no sugar. The journey's prolonged delay brought us a new problem: empty stomachs. In such situations people shed their humanity and some of them become savage beasts. (The disciplined youth suffered in silence, knowing that the situation was out of our control. Others, especially from the last, most recent group, complained bitterly and yelled, but nothing helped us further the matter).

The Pentcho Trip on the Danube



Pentcho in all its glory, port of Dobra, Yugoslavia, summer 1940



A formation for the “Gallows Day” on the vessel alongside Pentcho in Yugoslavia,
1st of Tamuz, 5700 (July 7th, 1940)



The Romanian sailors of Pentcho on the Danube



“Social Life” on the deck during the first days after departure



**The Yugoslavs allowed us to remain on the riverbank for a while,
having been lingering there for a long time**



“Morning Order” inside the adjacent tow-ship in Yugoslavia



**Passing through the “Iron Gate” with the help of two towboats
that were clinging to our sides, and one towboat that was towing us**

Onwards or Backwards?

On the Yugoslav riverbank of the Danube, opposite the Romanian riverbank, lay a small village named Dobra. We did not see the village itself, just the Serbian Gendarmes and the shepherds. We were held up in this place for fifty days (26th of June through 16th of August) and objectively our condition was fair. The Jewish community in Belgrade provided for the passengers. The authorities permitted us to spend the days on the beach, getting suntanned, stage sporting activities and even conduct lectures and courses. Missions from Belgrade visited us, but the main objective was to move onwards and this was not happening. So what do hundreds of unemployed Jews, living together crowdedly, without hardly any connection to the world? Out of sheer boredom – they make plans and ignore reality.

Although I was up to my neck in the argument raging between the two factions of the passengers, and admittedly represented one of these sides in the dispute (the majority, not all), I will attempt to describe the situation objectively and discern the other passengers' side too. As mentioned above, the material situation in Dobra was good: the kitchen supplied the three daily meals; Schultz's tow boat eased the crowding. Some of the seasoned passengers began forgetting the ideal and the goal for which they were in such a situation. The recent joiners, the natural "opposition", took special interest in the topic most important to them: The food and the kitchen.

Not so were our lively youths whom the unexpected circumstances tethered to this far-flung place. They did not want charity bread nor to live being fed by a soup kitchen. For among those visitors from Belgrade were those who let us feel that we in fact existed and were alive thanks to their good selves. During the delay people – particularly those older and some of those for whom it was not Zionism that brought them aboard the transport – began pondering the pot of meat. There were in fact those who truly preferred to return to Slovakia, their family and shuttered businesses, and the other type of immigrants who tended to be satisfied with waiting out the storm in democratic Yugoslavia.

One must realize that there was a detention camp (to be distinguished from a concentration camp) in Kladovo, Yugoslavia. There, several hundred foreign resident Jews were kept, waiting for the continuation of their Aliyah to be legally approved by the British. Their general state there was good; they were rationed a daily loaf of bread (500 grammes) as they hoped to receive immigration permits. Our non-Zionist minority was keen to immediately join this "cheerful" group. And so, Pentcho's passengers split into two camps: the organizers of the Aliyah and their loyal followers on one side, who said we had to push forward come what may, and the second group, mostly comprised of the 101 who arrived from German concentration camps, who preferred to wait in a Yugoslav detention camp for whatever comes.

The so called rebels collected signatures under the slogan: "Return to Bratislava or relocate to Kladovo!" The Belgrade community management received information according to which the ship's majority favoured "returning". Some were planning to get in touch about it with the Slovak consulate in Belgrade! This was August 1940 – after the fall of France!

It was imperative that a unified decision be made and we (the young Zionists) had no doubt as to which one. The discords were too acute and once again the assertion that the ship would not be able to withstand a journey upon open sea was brought up, along with some more unusual claims. We convened, therefore, for a wide general assembly where the sides voiced their opinions. The most radical supporter of the return to Slovakia was this doctor who yelled hysterical interjections during my speech: "Don't let

him speak, he is hypnotizing the youth!...". This doctor kept true to his word: he did not make Aliyah; during our time in the camp in Italy he learned of the death of his father, he got up from his "shiva" (the post-death ritual mourning week), converted to Christianity and with the war's end returned to his beloved Slovakia, to die there.

As the commander of the ship I said [to](#) the general convention of Pentcho passengers, whose attendants stood on the tow ship "Livento", and I, the speaker, was standing on Pentcho: You talk of a return to Slovakia after France has already fallen?! Do you want to stay in Yugoslavia, still not conquered yet? Was this the purpose of your boarding this tiny ship that would bring you to the Land of Israel? Well – there is no way back! We will endure, go hungry and continue onward – eastward!

Few survived the Kladovo camp after we departed this pleasant and sympathetic country, Yugoslavia. In addition to Kladovo there was a detention camp in a more remote village (about 350 kilometers from there), named Šabac. The two camps together housed about 1200 people, and the Zionist movement managed to achieve immigration permits to the Land of Israel. A month later, Yugoslavia joined the Axis Countries (Germany-Italy-Japan), together with Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria. Due to the anti-German mutiny that erupted in Yugoslavia, Germany invaded it and conquered it in April 1941, and enslaved it. Only six boys managed to escape from the detention camps Kladovo-Šabac and were saved, but the destiny of all the rest of its Jews was the same as their destiny all over Europe – they were taken to [concentration](#) camps and were murdered there.

Following these bitter arguments, it was genuinely hard to believe that the devastating news of Jabotinsky's sudden death in the United States was what united all the Ma'apilim (immigrants to Israel) for a spell. His hundreds of disciples and protégés naturally mourned from the depths of their hearts, the loss of their mentor and leader who also instilled the Ha'apala (immigration) doctrine in the Hebrew youth. On that very evening (The information was late getting to us; Schalk already knew, but was hesitant to deliver the news to me) a symbolic tombstone was erected inside the hull of the tow-ship and all passengers, old, young, men, women and children kept a vigil as honorary guards during the entire seven days of mourning. Representatives of other parties participated in this ceremony as well. A moving gesture was made by a delegation of "HaShomer HaTza'ir" ("The Young Guard", a Socialist-Zionist secular Jewish youth movement) members, who, despite their very few numbers on the ship, requested permission to participate in the vigil. The impression was that never before had a Zionist leader been eulogized with such sincere sentiment, shock, and mourning as had been expressed by the obscure and forgotten passengers of Pentcho.

During those few days there were no differences of opinion and no political conflicts among us. Tears of grief glistened in all our eyes. It is a pity that deep grief alone has the power to unite the hearts of those aspiring for a joint cause.

Right at the end of the “Shiva” (the seven days of mourning), the Pentcho set off to continue its journey.

Our summer camp in Dobra apparently lasted longer than was expected. The expenses involved in providing for 500 souls grew larger and larger. In the end, the good Yugoslavs, who were troubled with existential war problems, lost their patience. They seemed to have been thinking: “Ye have dwelt long enough on this Danube”. We were getting used to “ordinary” living and even issued a newspaper, “Pentcho Press”, edited by Erwin Guen, which was printed on toilet paper squares (by Shoshana, my secretary). We set up a canteen kiosk that consolidated all our shopping needs and where those with wealth could thus enhance their foods. In the evening before our departure, this “canteen” turned into a delivery room in which our only Pentcho born baby, Chaviva Blumenfeld, was delivered. (When they woke the father during the night, to give him the news, he rubbed his eyes and asked, still half asleep: “And?...” and sank back into a deep snore).

The “Onwards or Backward” issue was quickly resolved as well: the Slovak authorities announced that they were unwilling to welcome back those longing for their “homeland”. There was no need for the youths’ interference, who had resolved to use any and all means to prevent these penitent guys from backtracking (they even removed parts of the machinery to prevent someone wanting to sail in the opposite direction). It was on Tish'a b'Av fasting day: with the assistance of a Jewish businessman, a Yugoslav tow ship named “Serbia” turned up, accompanied by two additional tow ships. All the passengers returned to Pentcho and the impression was that the Yugoslavs had decided to get rid of us in a delicate and positive way. Schalk's hands were hypothesized to have been involved in this act, and if so – bless him! The “Serbia” was ahead of us, with Pentcho tethered to it, and the two additional tow ships on either side of us. Neat trick. No one could impede our passing through the Iron Gate any longer! We were disappointed that they hadn't taken this measure at least a few weeks earlier. The Serbian Gendarmes fared us well waving handkerchiefs heartily, affectionately and cordially and returned to their homes from Chaviva's birthplace. She herself never saw it and it is doubtful she ever will.

We passed peacefully by Moldova Veche, without so much as a glance at the river bank lest it met our enemy's face, the port commander who did not leave Pentcho empty handed last time. In his hands he was holding young Onki Spiegel's leather jacket. With great relief and a certain degree of self-confidence we took in the beautiful scenery of the lower Danube and the “Iron Gate” gorge. Once again, a single aspiration filled our

hearts: May the journey continue like this all the way to sea... Late at night we reached the triple border, where three countries meet: Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Romania. But disappointment accompanied us as always: our chaperones left us to our fate and we had to drop anchor near the border and the desolate river bank.

The following morning we set off independently. On our left we saw the Romanian port of Calafat. The Romanians did not even let us anywhere near the port. They screamed with open mouths, threatening us, shaking their fists in the air and waving their weapons shooing us away as though we were lepers. Our spirits dropped, but the echo of optimism arose once again: No matter! There's certainly no turning back (it is "difficult" for us to break through the Iron Gate...). The Danube will not be spinning around and reverse its flow. We will therefore charge our destiny to the flow of the Danube's currents. What other choice did we have?

A Pirates' Ship with no Flag

The fuel, as anticipated, ran out. The food supplies dwindled. No bread left. Pentcho, oil tanks depleted, swayed as if drunk. We glided downstream. Our plan was simple: make any port, the nearest possible, from where we could get in touch with our Center.

So, we reached Vidin, the Bulgarian border post. The port commander boarded the ship and spoke to us with restraint and brevity. He wrote down the ship's details and promised to return in about an hour with the ministry's reply. He was slightly hesitant, fearing that he might make some sort of error and his prudence could also be felt in his reply upon his return: Vidin is but a small station. We had to inch our way to the town of Lom. The authorities there possessed far wider sovereignty.

Before setting off we ate heartily, lest – following the expected reception – we might not find the food palatable. We surrendered our ship to the flow of the river and were carried away in the direction of Lom. We were already expected there – a motor boat welcomed us. "A sign of the worst", remarked the pessimist. This time he was wrong.

The authorities' representatives boarded the ship and dismantled several items, so that we could not escape. And we? Surely our entire plan was to buy more time. But our contentment quickly turned into bitter disappointment. Yet again some committee – the third or fourth one – appeared, confiscated our documents and with a festive ceremony they took the Bulgarian flag down from its post. They told us that our licence expired two months earlier. We were about to sail flying no flag.

We were ordered to leave port within one hour, but the Romanian sailors refused to obey this instruction: We will not sail without a flag! Again we were given an ultimatum – but to no avail. When the Bulgarians saw that we were still rebelling, even after a final warning – they towed us away by force... Hoorah! This was the day we were hoping for! The Pentcho, one way or another, was not able to propel herself using her own power alone. Before leaving, we managed to buy a little bit of food, many watermelons and lots of Bulgarian cigarettes (kilograms thereof).

Conditions were decidedly better than with the Romanians – they expelled us backwards whereas the Bulgarians pulled us forwards, towards our destination. However, the next stop was again on the Romanian side: Bechet. We employed a new trick: In order to give the ship a more important appearance, it was decided that passengers would not be seen on deck. Another item: we no longer awaited the local commander's visit with us. We went to greet him first thing – at his port office. Our captain, who just happened to not be drunk (the alcohol supply had dwindled as well), went down to port along with Mr. Fein, our "mystery Jew" who possessed a "Romanian" nature and English mannerisms. Fein indeed succeeded in sending a telegram and we even received the reply the following day. We could not afford to wait on site for the arrival of Ben-Haim (the Etzel delegate). The port commander, in the meantime, had received information about us and asked us, politely, to get out of there!

Our heading: Oryahovo, on the Bulgarian side. Throngs congregated at the port as if by a secret signal. As Pentcho approached the shore, many thousands streamed down from the hills and the streets to watch the world's ninth wonder. Permission to buy bread was denied us. A cattle transport would certainly be provided with animal feed, But Bread? For Jews?...

Having worked out the timetables and realizing that the emissary would not reach us before the next day, we dropped anchor [near](#) to a small island, so that we would not arrive at Corabia, on the Romanian side of the Danube, ahead of Ben-Haim. The wait was worth it: we received bread, vegetables and two barrels of Păcură that were like two shot glasses for Pentcho. After the load-in we were ordered to carry on and go over to the port of Giurgiu. A Romanian motor boat escorted us, with which we somehow managed to collide [along](#) the way. The boat overturned from the sheer impact of Pentcho's ramming. The bright side: A good seafaring omen – that boat's capsizing was a testament to our ship's strength...

The game of flag ping-pong commenced. The Romanians at Giurgiu port would not receive us until the flag matter was straightened out in the opposite Bulgarian port of Ruse. The Bulgarians sent us back to the Romanian side saying that we did not merit a Bulgarian flag, after all even our crew was Romanian. We had become an international problem. So what did we do? Choose the "golden path". We stopped dead in the middle

of the Danube, completely cut off from the world. Once again in No Man's Land, between two large ports of two countries fighting over ownership of the Dobrudja region – with us as the scapegoat.

Jews Flying the Red Cross Flag

We had to spend three weeks in situ, in the most active area of the Danube, between two large ports. These weeks taught us to know better what hunger was. With this distress came a rise in the internal conflict as well. Political instability was prevalent then in this part of Europe too. The Romanian authorities sort-of boycotted us for two days, then claimed they would deal with the issue "tomorrow", Mâine. We learned that in Romanian there was a different meaning to the word "tomorrow" which did not specify a certain length of time. Possibly the most difficult days of our journey occurred when our "opposition" members once again demanded to be returned to Yugoslavia, where they wished to spend the winter. They also asserted (again) that Pentcho was incapable of a maritime voyage and claimed that they were not prepared to sail towards certain death.

But none of us had the ability to take action of any kind, because we were forbidden to get off the ship; even buying food was not permitted. Therefore, Pentcho's food supply, which was never remarkably abundant, emptied. Here was the first time since our departure that the kitchen was unable to serve food at all. Although the Captain managed to disembark once and bring bread, it was such a minuscule amount that could not suffice. There was therefore a vital need to draw the world's attention to our situation, which already was beyond despair. We needed to think of something exceptional, "revolutionary". We took a large bedsheets, painted the symbol of Red Cross on it and hoisted this flag on the main post. We became a big sensation for the ships passing us by. A ship flying no flag but brandishing a huge sign of the Red Cross, bedsheets with the writings in huge letters: "HUNGER", crammed with people, swaying to and fro, and only little Chaviva's diapers fluttering in the wind.

Undoubtedly, a weird sight. Jews, heading for the Holy Land, donned the cross of Jesus the Jew in order to rouse the world's attention, a world of gentiles who so many times raised that banner against us. Would this flag be of any use? No way to tell. But one sunny day we spotted much excitement on the Bulgarian riverbank. They were loading a small boat – with what? Well, the Jewish community in Ruse, supported by the mayor and by the local bishop, held a fundraising collection in our aid and sent a large amount of food for us. The invidious Romanians would not let them near us and forbade them from loading the food onto the ship. In the end they agreed to a "compromise": the food would first be handed over to a Romanian boat and they would present us the gift... But

with the Bulgarians closely watching the Romanians' every move and they, what could they do? They were obliged to deliver us the shipment in full!

The food shipment should have sufficed for three days, and with our experience we could stretch that to provide the passengers with food for five days. The mood is dependent on bread, is it not? We soon learned that our Bucharest Aliyah bureau had also transferred a considerable sum of money to a Jewish trader in Giurgiu tasked with supplying food to Pentcho during our time here. But, either – it would seem – the cursed Romanian atmosphere seeped into all sectors, or maybe the blame lay with someone else, but either way, all that reached us from this supplier were mere crumbs.

In times of hunger and insecurity people's outlook turns dark, uniquely so when hard rain pours on their backs. The rain also ruined the bedsheets hung over the boat's sides with the word "hunger" on them in many languages. How to chronicle such a situation: everything above deck was completely wet. The neighbour to your left breathed the smell of garlic up your nose, which he had stored for just such days of hunger. On your right all your organs sensed that the neighbour had decided to rise. What could a good Jew do at the depths of his despair? Erupt with a curse! "Damned be those who have brought me this far!" But whether or not there is bread, at least let me get some sleep! This matter was settled again at the expense of the young volunteers. They and the night watchmen slept intermittently to make room for the elderly.

The only ones who did not go hungry at all on Pentcho – on the contrary, grew fatter and multiplied greatly – were the bedbugs. These insects' golden age aboard Pentcho began in Giurgiu and they did not budge until her final moments.

Our Meeting with the Passengers of "Patria"

We witnessed a historic mix of joy and grief: The church bells were ringing in the Bulgarian town of Ruse, but in Romanian Giurgiu the flags were lowered half-mast. The reasons for this were known to us: the Bulgarian army had entered Dobrudja, the Hungarians entered Transylvania, and the Jews procured double the troubles: one side battered them out of joy and the other – out of anguish...

The sailors too grew courageous and wanted to fish in the dirty waters of our prolonged point of anchorage on the Danube. First they told Romanian command that mutiny had broken out on the ship! But in that they were unsuccessful in inciting conflict between the Romanians and us. When our youths began a swimming contest towards the Bulgarian riverbank, the sailors once again announced an "immigranți" revolution. But

the Romanians seemed indifferent and wouldn't care even if we were all to swim towards Bulgaria. The Transport directorate too planned to launch a delegation to the Bulgarian shore by boat, but here too they were preceded by quicker souls. The first and only defector was one Janci Guttmann, who floated to Ruse atop rubber mattresses and never returned to us. His "daring" act was an inspiration for other thrill seeking youngsters until one Romanian soldier, who could not understand what was happening before his eyes, fired his gun in the air. Panic erupted on board and it did not calm until the three adventurers, half naked, were seen being brought to the police building accompanied by thousands of curious onlookers.

It was at this hour, with internal quarrelling and discontent peaking, that four German ships appeared from the west, carrying Jews heading to sea. This sight worked just like showering oil on a bonfire. Here was the proof: others could sail, and only we were stuck in this place! Others could procure good, stable ships, only we, lazy bums, had to starve and be held up in this rotting tub! Their trip from Bratislava to the sea took a few days only whereas we – months had passed since we set off, with our goal nowhere in sight! On the other hand, this coin too had two sides: a proof that turning back was not possible, seeing others in full flight by any and all means. Furthermore: seafaring with no risk was clearly feasible, as others too were sailing. Those who belittled Pentcho for being a freak later had the chance to witness illegal ships worse than her. We couldn't help but ponder the quality of these people who, while escaping from darkness towards the light, unwittingly carried the darkness with them...

Naturally, attempts began to establish and strengthen ties between the two immigrant groups. During daytime we signalled with flags, at night with torches. In the end we had to desist, as the authorities threatened to open fire if we did not halt the signalling. The signalling guys informed us that at the port of Tulcea they would be transferred into three large seafaring ships. It was a pleasure watching the change for the better in the skeptics' mood. Those who only yesterday demanded to be returned to Yugoslavia began spreading different rumours, cheerful and encouraging, such as: "they will divide us among these four ships"; those with family members aboard the opposite ships would be transferred over to them; they would all be waiting for us in Tulcea, and so on. The desperate cries towards those ships were never-ending: Take us with you! We are starving! The replies were only more questions: Where are you from? How many of you are there? When will you be sailing away from here? Do you already have a seafaring ship? Is so-and-so among you? (Searching for missing relatives); who knows a Mrs. Greimann? And some encouragement calls came in as well: We will do anything in our power! We will send you food...

It is hard to imagine what these poor souls could have done for us. But in spotting the banners alongside Pentcho with the words "Save Us!" in several languages, "We are suffering the disgrace of hunger", these poor survivors of Nazi hell did not hesitate to

help us. This “food delivery” received as a gift from passengers of “Tulcea” was worthy of being presented in a world exhibition: those same slices of bread, large and small, saved from their deprived mouths, could have taught the hostile world about the essence of the legend of Jewish capitalism. This bread of affliction was bitter and dry. Many among us could not even touch it. The following day they sailed on their way. Their ships passed alongside us. Family members [separated by destiny](#) recognized each other. A heart breaking scream tore through the air, the cry of a small girl to her father: “Daddy! My Daddy!” and the father, a soft spoken comrade, a pleasant character among those who had joined us in Yugoslavia, stared with teary eyed at the ships disappearing into the horizon. This man who had only just escaped Germany a few months ago could not even bid his family goodbye.

The time for our departure had also arrived. It seemed that the Romanians had too become fed up with this Jewish imigrantă ship that had caused them nothing but troubles, and the authorities were those who forced our Bucharest office to arrange our departure. We were informed in advance that we would no longer be allowed to dock at any Romanian port whatsoever, and were given claims that “according to international experts’ opinion”, our ship was definitely capable and strong enough to sail at sea...

It was September 11th. Pentcho was towed to the port, where a few surprises awaited. Firstly – the ship’s tanks were filled up with Păcură, right till the brim, until this pungent liquid spilled over, flooded the corridors and seeped down into the halls beneath water level. A few fowls that had been spared our amateur slaughterer’s knife ended up drowning in Păcură.

We were delighted to spot Mr. Antera on land and this delight was well reasoned: this was to be the last time we would ever see him. We also got rid of the Romanian robbers (i.e., the sailors) who disembarked loaded with heavy parcels. The following day they strolled in the port, wearing fine clothes, which more than one of the passengers recognized as clothing that disappeared from their suitcases. Mr. Fein, this mysterious friendly “enemy”, departed along with them. In place of those veteran sailors we took on four Greek sailors. They were new not only to our ship, but – as later became clear – new to their profession as well.

When we got going on the lower Danube we believed we had all that was needed for the journey. We caught up to the passengers of the four German ships in Tulcea, we also took one look at their 800 tonnes seafaring ship, and, I am sorry to say , felt comforted... We saw that not only the Pentcho was disqualified for seafaring. Our chronic complainers immediately disqualified the other ship aboard which they had yearned to continue. This ship did end up reaching the shores of our land of Israel, to the port of Haifa, but they had to undergo an even longer route than ours for the right to set foot on our native land. In the port of Haifa they were transferred to the ship Patria in

order to deport them to Mauritius Island in the Indian Ocean. But not all reached the island either. Many of them found their death in the port of Haifa waters, because of an attempt by the Haganah Zionist paramilitary organization to sabotage the ship so that it would not be able to sail away. 232 passengers lost their lives on this “Patria” convoy.

Preparing for the Long Haul

Our main concern – and another source of insecurity – was the new team of sailors. We did not trust these four Greek buccaneers right from the get go, as it was Antera who had hired them. The new “Chief Engineer” may have at one point been employed in oiling machines or automobiles, but did absolutely nothing aboard The Pentcho. A cigar never left his lips for a single moment. From dawn till dusk he’d hover in the vicinity of the girls’ cabins or near the kitchen and filled the air and the surroundings with a foul smell. The long-figured fire stoker, Kristoff, was more “sweaty” than the rest, seeing as he was occasionally required to stand near the boiler. He spent most of his time in the food pantry and bothered the keeper with ever increasing demands.

Our third “discovery” was Georg, the youngest of the bunch. He paraded around like a peacock, donning a golden-lined sailors’ cap in order to appear a real sailor in the eyes of the Jews. He had ambitions – he appointed himself Ship’s Captain. Doomed be the ship with Georg as her Captain. Good thing this ship payed him no heed and did not sail down the course he “declared”. The glorious pride and joy of the four was “boatman” – Anastasi. In his civilian life he had been a shoemaker and on board the ship he found a more vital profession for himself – boatman. But this position of his was of no burden whatsoever. He would pace about arms folded behind his back, usually drunk as a skunk, in the early mornings too. His bulging, bloodshot eyes were staring at whoever crossed his path, as if picking a fight.

Uncle Markiewicz, our Skipper, was the appropriate commander for this quartet. The old feller had served aboard ships during the Czar rule, so one could not blame him for not appreciating his current ship. Elixirs and morphine were his tipple of choice, and when these substances were unavailable, he’d sink into a depression and with a weak voice would repeat his unchanged refrain: “Na Druguyu Storonu!” But when the drug was available, a glitter of joy lit up his eyes and his face shone with satisfaction.

We could not very well entrust the ship’s controls and her machinery to this lot’s hands. Therefore, in an instant decision, we established a Jewish team. They were enthusiastic and devoted to their work. Our Jewish sailors were the ones who taught the job to the supposedly “professional” Greeks. None of the engine room workers had ever set foot

aboard a ship. One certified engineer from Danzig (Ing. Bruno Damm) displayed interest in the machinery early into our sailing on the Danube. This dedicated man, whose possessions amounted to one worn-out suit and a single sleeping gown, felt wonderful in the bowels of the ship, amongst his machines (where there was no need for a shirt). Special acknowledgement is due to Martin Gescheidt, the former management member, who “went underground” to join the boiler room workers wishing to be of help to all. Another unsung comrade turned machinist: Erwin Guen. He not only devoted himself heart and soul, he also displayed some real maritime wisdom. He worked long hours without so much as sounding a peep of a complaint.

Let us also mention the other young volunteers for these backbreaking tasks. We could trust each and every one of them, such as the two fast friends from Sečovce, Slovakia: Jicchak Mittelmann and Ferdinand Lanes. They were not only physically strong, but their self-confidence was higher than usual. They both continued to excel further along the voyage and took upon themselves tasks that separated them until the end of our journey. And what was astounding about this was that they never approached us with claims nor with demands. Their mentor and role model was old Uncle Ehrenfeld, the builder whose pipe between his teeth perpetually raised smoke. In addition to him, Meir Steinmetz, Tibi Laufer and Fritz Lederer also excelled in the machine room. They themselves could not understand how they ended up working in front of the furnace. Nobody forced them into nor offered them this job – but they all manned their posts with honour until the last moment.

We shall conclude our crew lineup paragraphs with the two new reinforcements, whom we received in Sulina, Romania: Ali, the Turkish sailor, and a young Jew: Yossi Rosenberg, the only one who performed his job out of a sense of responsibility. We had barely approached the sea when a disaster almost struck: the sailors, whom Antera hired, who the entire time showed signs of ignorance and total lack of conscience, simply abandoned their posts. The ship was left without a sailing crew and almost collided with the sprawling woods of the Danube delta shores. These “Serving Sailors” could not overcome the overflow of Păcură spilling out the full tank and flooding the corridors. Our boys had to clean up their error and mess. And so we reached the Danube delta where, at the advice of the Romanians, we once again flew the Bulgarian flag which we painted using the Hungarian flag colours, which was already useless for us at this point.

Under darkness of the night we arrived quietly and humbly at our first sea port. At first, the Romanians wanted to tow us into quarantine, but in the end they gave up on that idea and allocated us a slot right opposite port command. We observed quite a respectful company surrounding us: a destroyer astern, a warship at the ready on our starboard, but the more piquant sight for the wandering Jew was to be seen on at the other end of the port: the waving British flag atop their consulate building, and opposite

it – the swastika adorning a German trade ship anchored directly in front of it. Our two arch enemies, themselves fighting one another. The one had expelled us from our “homeland” and the other was preventing us from reaching our original motherland, our true homeland.

The British consul went a step further at sharing in the outcasts’ despondency and out of friendship sent our Captain a letter stating: “It was brought to my knowledge that the Pentcho is bound for Palestine. It is my duty to inform you that Palestine is in a battle zone. Any foreign vessel approaching that country’s coast will be regarded as hostile and the royal navy will act against it accordingly”.

We were familiar with British politeness. Our reply was to set about repairing our boat without delay and at an increased pace. We mended the damaged wheel paddles, tarred the deck so that instead of water we now had black ooze seeping [into](#) the top beds. We rinsed and sealed the cracks in the outer plating. We installed a wooden door replacing the iron door lost along the way. We prepared and adapted the life boats for our long journey. Of course, all this work was performed by our comrades, the ship’s master craftsmen, having received a meagre amount of lumber from the Romanians at great cost. Despite this we were still short of vital items, such as a radio and a compass.

We wished to collect money in order to buy a welding machine and a secondary motor, but the Romanian authorities forbade these purchases. We were trying to devise some trick by which we would acquire that licence – we were in Romania after all, were we not? While the government was under the impression that we had already left the state’s territorial waters, we obtained a short term docking permit from the port authorities, during which we attempted to collect money, but to no avail. We were sent to the quarantine port in Sulina, but our comrades (our management in Bucharest) intervened with the results were not late to arrive: we received water and fuel (Păcură). Nice; what did we have to complain about and what for? We had arrived, at long last, after four months of travel, at the Danube estuary.

The Sabbath was fast approaching. On-deck inhabitants were now accommodated in new “housing complex” inside the ship’s bowels. We were ready and set to head out to sea on our day of tradition. On Friday evening (Sabbath eve) the black market still flourished with the Romanian customs officers, and the following day, Saturday, the 21st of September 1940 – A date we shall never forget – came the order to weigh anchor. Let’s go, Pentcho! We shall attempt to erase the Danube from our Geography book along with the other meaningful names: Mohács, Bezdan, Moldova, Giurgiu, full of hope that we would soon erase the whole damn continent, Europe, as well. A Romanian captain boarded the ship and we sailed out of the port. We were escorted by a thick smoke spewing warship and this time we were united in one single cause: onwards – and with more haste!

Riding the Sea Waves

A new phase, a new path – new surprises. The nicest surprise until then was Pentcho itself. Apart from a small accident on the Danube estuary, in which two paddles broke off the starboard wheel, yet the ship sculled on and sailed in complete confidence. On the Danube, even through calm stretches, we were anxious that the ship would yaw to one side, and here, far out to sea, the terrible Black Sea, she kept her balance. The passengers in their cabins, with only a few attendants on deck, arguing about this unexpected stability.

- “This vessel is for sea, not river work”, claimed one proudly, “now, only now, will her hidden talents be revealed...”
- “This ship is as much destined for seafaring as her sailors are” – came the critiquing retort. “It is very simple: the sea happens to be calm and so she is sobered up a little from her drunkenness.”
- “Nonsense” – opined Pista Braun, the heavy-set commander of our police force – the people are nervous of the sea voyage and dare not venture out of their dens, that’s all there is to it.
- If the trip continues just like this all the way to Haifa – I will acknowledge her as a seafaring ship.

The seafaring mood prevailed below deck as well. Some of the passengers ingested large amounts of “Vezano” and other wonder cures counteracting sea sickness. In general, all known prescriptions to prevent sea sickness were tried and tested. Many mounted their bunks, lay down and did not move claiming this would help. Others claimed that the Cognac, onion and garlic cocktail were more effective in our case. Mrs. Kestenbaum listened, apparently, to all the advisers’ advices, swallowed Vezano, drank brandy, continually sniffed spicy garlic and expected to reach the Dardanelles lying [in](#) her place. Despite all this, she contracted sea sickness...

The “Acco” cabin was happily crowded with people. They concentrated on listening to the adventure stories of one of the guys, Richard Brauner. They were not bothered by sea sickness – they had a medicine for this trouble. It was Anci Antmann (if I am not wrong) who slapped the following riddle on his friends’ faces: “Fellas! Do you know what the safest cure for sea sickness is?” (No answer). “Dry Land!”

“Ilava” was not less crowded than “Acco” was. But the main problem in these two halls was this: the reproduction and spread of bedbugs! In a compressed atmosphere, crowding from all sides, it was really hard to keep it together. The puzzle that everybody was trying to solve was – how could each and every one find space for himself? But

every question had an answer: One man climbs up, pushes himself among his comrades until he somehow locates a gap...

Next door to the ‘Ilava’ hall we arranged for a small cabin to be used specifically as a “hospital”. At first just one of the boys was treated there, Grünstein, who was always deeply immersed in music and with our sailing out to sea he experienced a panic attack. He was lying on his bed, trembling from head to toe, his teeth chattering as if he was quivering from cold. He was strapped to a cork lifejacket, would not leave his cabin for the deck and also made sure not to be on the starboard side of the ship lest it capsized. The stairways leading to the “upper floors” were filled with fresh air breathers. They feared neither drowning nor sea sickness. The main speaker on the stairs said that he was a head cook on a large ship. When he saw the sea, an enthusiastic cry broke out of his throat: “Ach! Mein Meer!” If we were to believe the slanderers (whose number amongst us was not small), it was this “cook” Silberman who was the second of all passengers to contract sea sickness (the first being a pregnant woman).

The Romanian warship left us to our own devices, a sign that we had exited Romanian waters. On our right sprawled Bulgaria. We stayed clear of coasts because we once again became a flagless Pirates Ship. We did, on the other hand, prepare a Turkish flag, for we might reach Turkey’s coasts the following day. The women hurried to help us. They produced a relatively white pair of knickers, sewed the Muslim crescent onto it, which was snipped off from a red apron. Equipped with this flag, we would be able to enter the Ottoman Empire without any risk.

The sailors’ companions appeared too – the seagulls. They were friends to us as well, for they did not distinguish between ships; a ship transporting soldiers, a ship smuggling food or raw materials to blockaded countries – are all the same to them. The next day our pampering was over. The unusually smooth sea got fed up and its waves turned blustery and shook us violently. The expected reactions to the ship’s rocking from side to side were not late to arrive. But luckily, those whose health was crucial for the ship’s running – the machine room workers, the servicemen, and especially the sanitation workers group – came through commendably.

In order to keep the ship steady, the food was served to the passengers in their cabins. The previous night they still received warm food, but hardly anybody could eat anything (except one of the sanitation workers who consumed nine portions all by himself...). Now the food was cold and nobody complained. We managed to accomplish “operation cleanliness” in its entirety and therefore all passengers were to be commended. The sanitation group worked themselves to the bone all day long, and at night collapsed onto their beds dead tired. At day break – none of them were to be seen except for one, nicknamed Bar-Giora, standing strong and continuing his rounds cabin to cabin with his tools in hand.

Later that afternoon we encountered a large storm, but we had already approached the Turkish shores and were glad, for the sense of insecurity did not let up on the stormy sea. No wonder a sigh of relief erupted from the depths of our hearts, when at around 7pm we caught sight of the narrow opening for which we were so yearning, known by the name of Bosporus. The signals transmitted by the Turks from their lighthouse found us all healthy and happy. The authorities wanted to know who we were and where we were from. We answered by torch signals: "Pentcho – Bulgarian".

They did not understand, but we didn't care. The main thing was that at last we had reached the gates of Asia. We entered the strait of Bosporus and dropped anchor there in the evening. The reception was reasonable and gave us some reassurance concerning our expectations for tomorrow.

And now – where to? The direction was known to us, but how do we get there? The previous night's courteous welcome turned chilly the next day and we were requested to leave this place – at once! This treatment annoyed us, as we had planned to purchase some essentials there – water, Păcură, food – and also meet with Ben-Haim. We therefore sailed off without hesitation directly to central Istanbul and despite the authorities threats dropped anchor opposite the Sultans' Palace. The previous night we had still dispatched a delegation – the skipper, Schalk and Gescheidt (who, we found out, could speak Turkish), but a policeman stayed along with us. We then wished to get in touch with our people in Turkey. They themselves did not turn up, but instead we were expelled from the port and were forced to clear off and move forward.

We departed the Bosporus and set sail on the Sea of Marmara. The trip was wonderful. It is said that, in a storm, the Sea of Marmara packs the anger of a thousand demons. This time the sea was quiet, only the Turks themselves were furious and greeted us at every point with the first Arabic word we managed to learn: "Yalla! Yalla!" We passed through the Dardanelles, passing by Gallipoli, a historical place for Jews (Joseph Trumpeldor fought there in 1915) and tried to acquire bread and water at the last Turkish station: Çanakkale. A medical committee boarded the ship and had already agreed to our plan, but the authorities hardened their hearts and denied our request. We sensed that British interests had a hand in the proceedings as well.

We asked our Turkish escort for his opinion of us sailing the sea. The man, who looked like an undertaker in uniform, voiced encouraging words but in response to another question – what would the English have to say – he had no answer at all. Interesting, suddenly the English were at the top of our concerns.

According to the plan, our first stop was to be the island of Samos, but we were not surprised at all when we found ourselves nearer, by the island of Lesvos. We decided to search for a suitable place, a port where we could drop anchor, in order to obtain our

vital products and to send telegrams. We sailed to the port of Mytilene, situated at the heart of a breath-taking view, opposite the Turkish coast, and found ourselves among thousands of curious faces who had gathered to see us. The Greek made a much better impression on us than the Turks did, and they did not disappoint us either. Our eyes opened wide when we saw the cafés full of patrons and we practically swallowed the ice cream carts with our gaze. We toyed with the hope that soon enough we too would enjoy these goods of this world – in our land...

The Greeks allowed us to load up on water and food, but the issue of Păcură emerged yet again. We knew that our remaining quantity of three and a half oil containers was insufficient for reaching our final destination. Even if we were to sail to Piraeus – a significant and pointless detour – we would waste both time and fuel. We had to therefore get the fuel there; but what could we do – fuel was sold for dollars only. Where could we find the necessary amount in this currency?

And once again our group split into two camps, but luckily, this time it was not due to politics. The majority of the passengers wanted to sail the short route, along the Turkish coast. Our captain and Schalk as well, preferred the circumventive trip to Piraeus. I admit that I too sided with the Turkish coast route camp. The argument triggered a small crisis in the “government”. In the end we decided to sail to Piraeus for a very simple reason: no fuel was available for purchase on that island, not even for the exaggerated asking price of \$500 per container. Another reason was – we found out that all along the Turkish coast, as well as down along the entire Turkish coast, there was no port in which this type of fuel could be found.

Setting off for Piraeus, we had to get ready for the fuel purchase and prepare the change for it. The way we saw it, we had two possibilities: Hold a fundraiser among the passengers who might still be keeping this valuable currency stitched into their clothes – or ask for the money as a loan. We elected a “neutral” committee that invited all passengers for a friendly discussion in favour of this goal, important to us all.

On the 28th of September – a holy Sabbath, of course – we sailed off headed for Piraeus. En route, the real crisis erupted all the more forcefully among the “cabinet” members. Gescheidt’s resignation, early on in the beginning of the journey, left just two people in the transport’s management. Schalk’s stubbornness and introversion led to both the original convoy nucleus as well as the groups that joined along the way’s strong aversion to him. Finally, Schalk handed me his resignation and I, with all my 23 years’ experience, remained the one and only director of Pentcho. I felt this somewhat commonly unacceptable and set about selecting older “advisers” and thus enlisted masters Waldner and Dromlewicz, wise and practical people, to aid.

Management came and dissolved, but the chronic problems of Pentcho always endured. It was not possible to solve the heat issue in the lower halls, just as we could not stop the spread of bedbugs. Even when we burned and destroyed them, they multiplied further. People with initiative attempted to solve the over crowdedness individually: the number of those sneaking to get some sleep up on the deck at night was growing, and the stewards were helpless in face of the mass invasion.

Rosh Hashanah (New Year's Eve) 5701 in Piraeus

The face of the Aegean Sea turned wrinkly. By the time we had reached the island of Chios, a fierce storm raged so vigorously, causing us to circumnavigate twice in search of shelter behind the Western rocky islands. We doubled the night watch, especially on the forward bow, fearing the storm would break the anchor's chain shackles. In actual fact, we did not know what the watch could do in such an event, but we did learn that the sleep was sweeter when one knew that a watch had been placed on the deck.

The annual calendar did not take Pentcho's slow-moving speed into consideration and we reached the 1st of October. Uncle Markievicz, our learned Skipper, did not always find our true heading and the 18 hours trip had already devoured more than two whole days of our time, and still we were not in continental Greece. But at least the sun had come out of hiding and radiated its heat upon us. Suddenly – a tremendous explosion shook the air space. The shot came from behind a small island – the shell flew above our heads and fell into the sea a few dozen meters behind us. As experienced people, we were not alarmed and understood that the shot came to warn us that unexpected and unknown guests were not welcome in this part of Europe, because by the end of 1940 the spectre of war was already hovering above the entire Balkans. It just so happened that our Pentcho sailed peacefully and safely towards the Păcură and the Greeks' suspicion arose. But we were not flustered at all. We knew what was to be done, being the old ancient mariners we were. We flew the Greek flag up the mast (which we also managed to prepare) and with it waving; two small motor boats appeared, approaching to check us out, like dogs sniffing at a new guest to get to know him. They photographed the ship front and back and escorted us into the port of Piraeus.

The entrance to the port was blocked with a chain of barrels and we were not allowed to enter straight away. The escorting boat sculled ahead to port management to obtain our entry permit. Instantly we were surrounded by a herd of swift-moving agents offering their services, without which we might not get a single thing done. But then the protective barrier opened before us and we were allocated a docking space inside the

inner port, adjacent to a British trade ship. The ship's sailors rushed to visit us and swam over, and we returned their hail in their own way. We chatted with them about this and that, but the English refrained from talking about the delicate subject named "Palestine".

At 10 o'clock the following morning, a delegation of the Athenian Jewish community arrived, among them a man called Nahmias who received a telegram from Ben-Haim. Our old friend, who was Pentcho's intended deputy captain, advised us to sail along the Anatolian coast till Mersin. The negotiation was conducted by me this time, and to my relief it turned out that my French was better than my translator's. But the impression made was that our brothers in the community preferred to be rid of us as quickly as possible and we concurred. The notion was that, this time, "The Joint" (the Zionist organisation) was standing behind them. We listed our requests for provisions needed and received promises. Specifically on the matter of fuel, our guests were reserved, for we saw with our own eyes the Greek navy sailing in an unknown direction that very morning and that this country was about to join the war, possibly any day now.

A fuel export license was required from the government, and we would have to pay for that with our own money. Food, too, was difficult to procure in large quantities, but for that we would not have to pay ourselves. We were explicitly warned lest we liaise with agents and mediators and under no circumstances were we to hand them any money.

Between hope and despair, between expectations and reality, the Hebrew New Year 5701 arrived at the Pentcho as well. Five months earlier we did not believe we would not be celebrating this holiday in our homeland. The holiday changed Pentcho as well as it did its passengers. For the first time they brought their best Sabbath clothes out of their suitcases, creased yet festive, although there were some dandies who did bother to iron their clothes. Rivalries were suspended, everybody wished everybody else a "happy holiday" and, of course, "This Year in Jerusalem". This is how the Children of Israel, who were crowded together on this creature named Pentcho, received the New Year, the year 5701. There is no nation whose heart's desires were so rarely fulfilled as ours, even though our prayers and pleas were so humble: we only wanted to reach home this very year. And maybe we will reach it before Yom Kippur still, for the news we received right the next day, New Year's Day, was encouraging.

The previous day's delegation came over today as well, and informed us that the ministry approved the export of 10 tonnes of Păcură only. We replied that this was an insufficient amount and we could not depart until we filled our containers up. In the evening we received the food, almost exactly according to the list I handed them, and rather decent quantities thereof. Again, a new committee arrived, examined everything and announced in the end that they would recommend approving all our requests (were they that eager for us to leave the port as quickly as possible?). And an important

announcement was included on behalf of the community: all goods, expenses – including fuel – were on them. We would not have to pay even one single Drachma.

We were thus well satisfied with the authorities and the local community, but internally, the trenches were again in a state of unrest: we received a respectable amount of meat for the holiday. But our rabbis and learned supervisors checked and rechecked the meat meticulously and found no “Kosher” seal on it. We had thus far strictly kept to the rules of Kashrut aboard the ship and we did not want to deviate from this course, especially not during the High Holidays. It was gruelling to withstand the majority's pressure (headed by a “Mizrahi” wheeler-dealer named Dood'l) and I was forced to find a compromise: As most people claimed that we spent months without eating any meat and that this constituted “Piku'ach Nefesh” (Jewish Life-Saving Law), I henceforth issued my own personal Halachaic (Jewish) Ruling that the meat would be cooked in special cookware – on shore – and would be distributed to those passengers desiring it, with the rest of the passengers, stricter observers of Kashrut rules, would receive smoked fish and a portion of grapes (as a sign of solidarity, I too ate fish and grapes...).

We ended up receiving 25 tonnes of Păcură, a large quantity of water and, at my request, some “ammunition” against bedbugs. We painted the Bulgarian flag in strong, prominent colours on the outer panels of the ship, as befitted a neutral ship in these frenzied days. The port authorities too suggested that we travel along Turkey's coasts, explaining that we could pass the Dodecanese islands because they were cleared of their inhabitants. We were all ready to be on our way, with only one thing delaying the departure – Saturday had not arrived yet... The calendar was consistent too, the Sabbath arrived and we set off on our way but, as usual, not without mishaps: The ship was swaying from side to side, so I had to remove all passengers from the deck and corridors and only then could we set off for the last section of our journey. We bid the Jewish community goodbye by singing “Hatikva”.

Even Minefields Could Not Beat Us

The date was the 5th of October. At first, the sailing was smooth, even though we wavered here and there upon the sea. Inside the ship the atmosphere was as usual – at one moment bursting out in song, at another in a quarrel. These small problems perpetually kept us from resting. It was as if the voyage wouldn't happen had we no crisis to manage – the kitchen committee chose the very same moment to resign as we had enough food. In the evening we reached the Cyclades islands, a group of many small islands on the Aegean Sea and we preferred to drop anchor rather than sail to unknown places in the dark. The deck was filled with “infiltrators”. In the upper rooms,

where they had round windows, the more creative persons “organized” cardboard awnings, air-conditioner substitutes. The lower halls had no windows, so we had portholes installed in the ceilings of the rooms facing the deck, through which the stale air flowed outward, and which our educated passengers dubbed “ventilators”.

In the morning we continued on the smooth sea, and were it not for an external intervention, we would have gone quite far. But suddenly two torpedo boats appeared on either side of the Pentcho. We were surprised, as the authorities in Piraeus assured us that these islands were indeed emptied ... The sailors were Italian, some were sporting ‘Balbo’ style beards, life vests around their hips and armed from head to toe. Somehow, we were not startled by the Italians even in such fateful circumstances, and even when the executive officer caressed the torpedo, saying:

- You sail right behind us! At the first sight of suspicious movement – we will send you into the abyss!

Resistance did not even cross our minds. The bottom line was – they did have reasonable grounds to suspect us, for not only did Pentcho externally cast a figure resembling a “warship” (on a tiny scale), but also those seen through the circular hatches looked like cannons... the sun was setting as we entered the small bay of the gorgeous island of Astypalaia (Stampalia). On the way into port the Italians might have already guessed who their “captives” were. One of the officers even commented:

- You are lucky to have arrived here before dark. Had you been but one hour late, it is doubtful if you would have been able to gather together your worthless ship’s wooden planks...

The port commander boarded the ship and it seemed to me that all his senior staff came on board with him. They were curious, who were the weird passengers of this Noah’s ark? The officer examined the papers and asked:

- If you are bound for Paraguay, why are you sailing in the opposite direction?

Our response was not clear nor did it satisfy them. In spite of this, the commander uttered words that did not make us happy, but he added quietly: “Last night we drowned a British ship here. If you were a little late and approached us in the dark, you would have received a torpedo to the hull of your ship. And you are coming from Bratislava? I say unto you – we are at war and are risking our lives daily, but the true heroes are you who dared embark on this course on a ship like this...”

We would have renounced the title “heroes” in exchange for a larger ship. But there’s no denying that we liked the praise in his comment. But when we heard the words of the

officer who examined the machine room, we thought the blood would freeze in our veins: "well – now I understand..." said the officer.

"What?!" – asked both our translators who competed between them at competency in the Italian language. "I understand why you did not blow up in the minefields you passed above" – the officer continued – "your ship does not sit deep enough in the water. The magnetic mines did not sense it as it passed above them..." and the tough officer wiped a tear from his eye when he saw the little children around...

Our dear ship! How great your minuteness is!

We were caught deep in the inner happenings of the war. At nights, we were naturally forced to keep a complete blackout. Port Command sent a telegram to their commissioner in Rhodes – what was to be done with us? It was not hidden from them that we were en route to a hostile country – Palestine. We feared that the commissioner might decide to throw us into a detainees' camp (and such a solution was not wanted even by fans of the earlier "Move to Kladovo" plan).

The Italians did not ruin the impression they made on us in our first meeting. On the contrary, they offered us "packed lunches" – bread and water. We politely declined their offer, because we knew that they themselves did not have enough food. The following morning they gave us the signal to get moving. An Italian tug boat guided us out of the minefield and even when we parted, instructed us to turn to starboard by so-and-so degrees. The sailors bid us goodbye and wished us a successful journey.

They explained to us how to manoeuvre between the two large islands of Crete and Karpathos into the Mediterranean Sea and from there to turn northbound in the direction of the Turkish coasts to the port of Mersin (where we were to meet Ben-Haim). Whether or not he ever made it there, we do not know. We never arrived there ourselves, nor even reached Crete.

End of the Dreams – the End of Pentcho

We entered the currents of the open sea, and in the month of October the Aegean Sea is no fishpond. The waves bludgeoned the ship vigorously and most of the passengers were found clinging to the banisters, and no, not because they were amusing themselves with dolphin games. Almost nobody touched his meal, although it was told of Eng. Shapira who never suffered sea sickness and ate 14 noodle portions for one lunch... There was no pleasure in hearing the hum of the raging waves. Pentcho's outer

panels suffered and moaned and were nearly crushed under the tremendous pressure of the sea breakers.

At last – an island on the horizon. We therefore saved our souls and were headed for a safe shore to cast our anchor in its refuge. It was the island of Anafi, a detention spot for political criminals exiled there by the Greek government. Our skipper wished to use the time in this place to hire a new captain, seeing as our Greek crew were concerned only with renewing their supply of alcohol and didn't seem to mind remaining there at all.

On the following morning, the 9th of October, we sailed off without taking on a new helmsman. The ship was forced to halt several times on the open sea. It turned out that a pipeline cracked in the boiler and we had to release the valves in order to let the water out and enable the guys to enter and find out the cause. But we had neither means nor tools to fix anything. We had no welding tools, no wireless or radio that would allow us to appeal for help. Around us – a stormy sea was raging, and no sign of a dry land. Suddenly, on the eastern horizon, we noticed a grey strip; by all indications – an island, most probably under an Italian rule.

We had prepared one lifeboat for the journey. We fitted a mast on it, hoisted sails, and had five volunteer comrades (Schalk, Immi Lichtenfeld, Lanes and two crew sailors) set sail towards the island. With anxious eyes we watched the scouts' boat whilst we ourselves went to work to find a solution to our problem, for it had become a matter of self-preservation, not the saving of the ship any more, whose engines had stopped dead. We began in the engine room which was flooded and filled with water. Our boys quickly fitted pumps and pumped the water out, taking turns due to the great physical effort required. Another idea was immediately applied: a group of women arranged bedsheets and began cutting and sewing them according to instructions by the "emergency experts". Within a short time we had dressed Pentcho in her white shrouds, that is, the sails – effectively turning her into a sailing ship.

The rocking to and fro was getting fiercer. The waves played with us as if we were a nutshell. Our progress was like that of a child lost in the woods, unsure whether or not he was going in the right way. Good thing the passengers were quiet for the time being, busy guessing: what was this island we could see from far away? Was it Greek or Italian? Had the scout boat reached it yet? Would we receive help? The know-all experts had already figured out the cause of the disaster: the sailors heated the boiler with sea water instead of fresh water, which was of course absolutely forbidden, because the salt in the water accumulates sediment, cracking the pipeline. This was done maliciously, for the purpose of sabotage...

- [A late remark and correction: John Bierman wrote in his book "Odyssey" that the captain consulted with me on this very subject, and that I decreed that they

were to use a mix of half fresh water and half sea water for the boiler ... It is difficult to explain such an author's fantasy, unless he heard it from Pentcho passengers who invented this deception, maybe in order to blame me for this mishap, spread it as rumours and one of them told it to Bierman. This topic was never discussed by me with anybody, and the captain never spoke with me about professional ship operating issues!].

The evening came down and we tried to pretend that nothing was wrong. The people were sent off to sleep. Of course it was difficult to tell whether or not they actually got to sleep, which was unreasonable. But this silence stressed us out a bit. Indeed, the ship, with the help of her sails, neared the 'island of hope' while the guard at the bow was doubled. Some of the guards, serious guys, held ropes in their hands to measure the depth... minesweeping...

The horizon around us was completely desolate, with no maritime vessels in the vicinity. The distant island could have only been Italian because it was located to the east of the Cyclades. For the time being our sails were functioning properly with comfortable and desired western winds. Our speed was that of a snail, but we were approaching the island nevertheless. But suddenly the wind changed its direction and then – after midnight – the real dance began. We adjusted the direction of the sails, but this manoeuvre did not help either. The darkness around us was thick and impenetrable. At last we glimpsed a weak light and realized that our scout comrades had lit a fire in order to signal the direction towards them.

October 9th 1940 – the Demise of Pentcho

Our skipper, realizing the severity of the situation, filled his tummy with wine and his veins with morphine, and so, at these critical moments he was totally out of commission. He himself needed to be propped up and so no help could have been expected from him. Had he given us a different setting for the sails an hour earlier, we might have reached the western side of the island, that was protected from winds and easy to anchor by, and the disaster would have been prevented.

Faced with the huge, black rocks standing out dead ahead, we slashed the sails in an attempt to slow the ship's dash, being tossed powerlessly towards her destiny. When I felt the thundering waves crashing into the rocky shore right by us, I assumed command from the terrified captain's hands and assigned control of the rescue effort into my inexperienced, yet resolute, hands.

I had already given my first order to my boys: get dressed quietly and await instructions. A large portion of the passengers was already awake when we encountered the first enormous thrust. Those who were now awoken were either scared speechless, or began to yell in terror. A rattling sound of a chain came from our casting the anchor, but it was already too late – the anchor did not clasp the bottom. We were a mere few meters offshore. We even noticed shadows of trees, but only in the morning it turned out that there were no trees on the island at all; what we saw were shadows of rocks. Another huge bang shook the entire ship, her keel hit the rocky basin at the bottom with tremendous force – and still the anchor did not grip yet. This last blow woke up those who were lingering asleep. The ship shook to and fro and occasionally hit the rocks repeatedly. The skipper was incapacitated. I grabbed the tin loudspeaker cone from his hands and shouted through the rooms' airing hatches: "get dressed and remain right where you are – we will be going ashore, await instructions!"

And then, at the last moment, just like in the movies, the anchor caught hold of a huge rock fissure and then just like that... we were at a standstill. We wanted to secure the swaying ship to the rocky coast. The hind mast was swinging back and forth so a few muscular and determined lads held it in place with ropes tied from different directions. The reserve mast, a long beam adorned with sharp ironwork at its top, lay on the deck. We lifted it and slid it onto the coast; Cibi Braun slid down on it with ease, and as he was standing in the stormy coastal waters he secured the rear beam with ropes and additional boards onto one suitable rock, to which we later added a board constructed of locally found planks. This is how we formed a "bridge" adjacent to cabin number 2, by the coast. This bridge did not excel, of course, in solidity, but nor did it disappoint us. Again, young volunteers entered the waters and supported both bridge and passengers crossing it, following the instruction:

- "We will all come ashore!" – I roared through the loudspeaker – "keep your spirits cool and await your turn. Those who cut in line will leave last. First to go up will be mothers with their children, followed by the old and the sick, the women and only at the end will be the men, last of which – dwellers of the "Acco" lounge. Do not carry any parcels; the bridge is narrow and shaky. Take with you only blankets and eating utensils. We will take care of all other items after we've managed to successfully make it ashore..."

In the meantime the rudder came loose, one of the deck's bridges fell off and shattered, but we didn't allow any incident to interfere with the rescue operations. The survivors themselves began accumulating on the coast near the bridge, which interfered with the operation. It became imperative to remove them from the landing area and so the young commander threatened them with a weapon, if they wouldn't shove off, up and away from there! (Only that I had no weapon in my possession, except the "loudspeaker"). The sailors behaved cowardly and were of no help whatsoever. They did nothing but

packed up their belongings, drank, and walked about the halls in order to collect "souvenirs". One of the passengers too rummaged through others' suitcases, and later, stolen goods were found in his possession. It is worth mentioning that indeed the Betar majority, under strict discipline, followed all orders and carried out all tasks, but during this calamity, and during the next day on the island, everybody, all youngsters gave their share in the joint effort.

I managed to convince the captain to disembark and join us on the island, and after all passengers had "landed" safely I called some of the lads back. We broke open the kitchen door (because the cook made a point of locking it with a key...) in order to begin bringing out essentials: drinking water and food, until it was found out that sea water had managed to penetrate our water tanks. The last two to exit along with me before daybreak were Janku Wiesner and Onki Spiegel, who found some Halva (sesame paste-based confection) in one corner – which we shared.

But the people who gave their all in this rescue operation were so exhausted that we had to suspend the work; what's more, sea water had already reached the engine room stairs and the ship's shakings increased. We decided, therefore, to disembark and to make our decision at dawn as to what else was left for us to try and do. We were still of the mind that we could still remove people's goods, but in the dark and with Pentcho's dancing with the devil we could not risk any more human lives.

Kamilonisi, Χαμηλή

Dawn rose on Thursday, the 10th of October. The people lay and trembled on the desolate rocks and gazed around. Someone recalled that perhaps our forefathers sat in such a fashion as well, "On the rivers of Babylon". But we did not cry. The bed was hard enough and it is doubtful if anyone managed to get any sleep, not even out of sheer exhaustion. Of course no one imagined our first hours of feeling solid land beneath our feet to be like these. And if life was already saved – what does The Jew think about? About his "property" left on Pentcho and about his empty stomach.

But despite it, the operation's pinnacle – that which assured us a future, quite a commendable achievement – was that no one got hurt, fell ill and particularly that no one was lost on this terrible tragic night.

Come morning we could take a gander at our new homeland. A desolate, small and longish island resting quietly on its rocks – until the preceding night, that is. No trees, no flora and probably no fresh water either. If anyone had taken a photo of this island in the

morning along with its invaders, nobody would have believed it was real. The mothers quieted their children, the families were united here. Touring amongst the survivors, I found no desperation – on the contrary. They were convinced that as refugees who had just survived shipwreck, they would now certainly grant us immigration permits... And those who caused me nothing but trouble during the journey, now hugged me and exclaimed “unbelievable!” that I had saved their lives. This was, of course, grossly exaggerated and these compliments faded in the future...

The scouts exploring the island found ash remnants of an old bonfire and an Italian-made rifle bullet cartridge. This drew the clear conclusion that the island was Italian and if the maps were correct, then the name of our new haven was Kamilonisi, Καμηλονήσι, that is “Low Island”, also short-named Chamili, Χαμηλή, that is, “Low”. The rocks were strewn in a colourful mix and we managed to assert that the island was of volcanic origin. The sun came out on the 10th of October just as it did on any other day, but it must have wondered a little about the sight in front of it. Down there a ship was engaged in the dance of the madmen, and multitudes ran and sprinted downhill. Daylight found us in the same situation that the dark of night had laid us in.

Our Pentcho continued to battle the waves and the rocks. It was still dangerous to be aboard her, but as long as she existed we had to salvage everything possible. We therefore called all the youths “to the flag”. We first removed all the passengers' belongings and assembled them all on the top of the island. When this chore was completed, we began dismantling the beds. And as long as we still could – why not look for all our goods? Where was my soap? The fact is, we would still need to wash our underwear on the island too. Another pair of shoes? Of course we will salvage them, one could not walk around the rocks barefoot! I located my toothpaste, but where was the toothbrush? Oh dear god! Where are my diary and the albums from home? We must save the memories of the past.

The island itself was shaped like a semicircle. Its proximal side was a peaceful rocky bay, but the outer curve was scattered with black rocks which did not connect in any way and did not form any sort of ridge. Before our arrival, flora was represented on the island by Lygeum grass. This grass burned well, but you could not prepare soup with it...fauna was limited to two imported species living on Pentcho: bedbugs and rats who settled on the coast. I could not see any logic in the Captain's demands that we do not dismantle anything from the ship which could be dismantled. We would need the wood for cooking and for signalling with nightly bonfires, the ship would have no use for it at the bottom of the sea.

Two central issues bothered us straight away: drawing international attention to us, the invaders to this island being under the sovereignty of a regime that was our chief

enemy's ally; and the water issue. We knew that without water we would not survive for even a few days.

We always had our "experts" for all things. On this occasion they installed a desalination machine, in order to turn seawater into drinkable fresh water. Such attempts might have been successful in certain countries. We were unsuccessful. We had dismantled the entire ship's pipelines for this purpose - in vain.

We therefore launched a "scientific" expedition to search for fresh water sources on the island. Success came from a young man who was actually not a scientist: he noticed a bird exiting a deep cavern. Moshe (Jidzik) Davidovich was our miracle worker and he was the one who rappelled by rope into the cave, tasted the cavern's water and tugged on the rope. No more than two minutes had passed after he emerged from the pit for the rumour to spread like a flash of lightning:

- "Water! We've found water!" The masses' ecstatic yells echoed from the rocks.

According to the rules of these legends, it is at this point that the hugging, kissing, throwing hats in the air and dancing with joy commence. With us it was different. Reality is evidently more boring than fiction. The eruptions of happiness and joy were quickly forgotten and the island dwellers moved to the orders of the day. Slowly we got used to the idea that miracles, in our case, are daily matters.

The water was not fresh; it only contained less salt than sea water did. The water was adequate for cooking and for the most stressful of days. Sea waves washed over the island during stormy rainy seasons and filled this hole as well. The salt probably sank down during the calmer days; hence this water was slightly less salty. We brought in all the pipelines dismantled off of the ship, lowered them into the hole and the nice chaps installed a pump. Three or four times a day we used a lifeboat pulley to lower a solid young man down the hole, and he pumped water for kitchen and drinking uses.

Setting Off to Look for Help

To our south-east, far on the horizon, we spotted something bobbing up and down: a sailboat! Will it come to our aid? Will it sail closer to us? No! It is moving away! We tied a bedsheets on the mast we salvaged from the ship and waved it wildly, to no avail. The good and wise counsellors, who were always prepared to risk the lives of others, cried out: [we](#) must sail towards her! But our only remaining lifeboat was damaged and we had brought it ashore in order to repair it and make it usable for an important task. The other lifeboat was destroyed during the salvage operations. We raised an enormous racket,

with everyone waving something about. But the ship (most likely Greek) continued its withdrawal at an increased pace...

We were back to reality: if the ships do not want to come near us, we must initiate a measure which will get us near them. We therefore went about preparing the lifeboat, "Little Pentcho", for a seafaring journey. Its keel was repaired so that water would not penetrate through its cracks, we fitted it with a steering wheel and one of our "Mr. Fix It" guys constructed a small mast, sails and oars. All this was done in one day.

Many volunteers were ready to go on this dangerous excursion. We selected the quickest and strongest amongst them. The boat could fit five people at most; [these](#) were Zoltan Schalk (who no longer had a title in our group), Emerich (Imi) Lichtenfeld (a powerful athlete), Ferdinand Lanes and Josef (Joska) Hertz, two strong-as-cedars lads from Sečovce, and Ali, the Turkish sailor. Schalk bid goodbye to his sister, his brother and his brother-in-law with his typical calmness, stoic and sealed in his typical silence. We stocked them with food and drink for a few days, and we even found some dollars for them. We also gave them telegrams written in English, to be sent to the intended institutes when they reached Crete. It was the eve of Yom Kippur 1940 when we took our leave from the rescue expedition and did not see them again until many years later.

Safe trip, brothers! Be heroes upon the waves of the sea and may there be no need for the few message bottles you took with you. Return soon with help!

Months had elapsed and we received no word regarding their fate, except some meaningless bad news. We did not or could not dare assume that they were still alive. Until, one day, a message came from the Red Cross stating that they were all alive and in a hospital in Alexandria. How they got there, what they endured on their way, how they were pulled out of the water – half drowned – is a heroic story in itself. Suffice it to say here that they all arrived safely in the Land of Israel.

While the five rescuers were sailing off, all movement down the island's hill was suspended. Everyone watched the "Little Pentcho" sailing away with, once again, the Red Cross flag on its bow, and three letters on its sails asking for help: S.O.S., to let the world know the severity of our situation. A fragile toothpick floating on the face of the great sea, struggling over its fate and that of five hundred brothers and sisters.

As we began to settle for a stay of an unknown length of time on our conquered island, the general shattering of Pentcho began too. On the top of the island we erected a store room, constructed of beams and boards salvaged from the ship, to stock the remaining food that might save us from hunger for some time. People dragged rocks, erecting boundaries around their sleeping areas to protect them from the winds. On the hill's peak our country's makeshift flag was waving – a white bedsheet.

It was as if nature itself was cleared and purified in preparation for the Big Day of Judgment. Never before had we felt the sombre meaning of Yom Kippur as we did there. On Kamilonisi nobody would find the traditional fasting difficult. The evening twilight was bursting with festivity. The mass of worshipers stood clean-shaven, shoe-shined, dressed in their Sabbath clothes. Their appearance was festive, as if attending some elegant synagogue in a wealthy community instead of on this unknown stone pile.

On the eastern border of our “country”, some three or four large groups were praying. The abnormal conditions under which the service was being conducted made a huge impression on us, even on the infidel non-believers and indifferent ones in the group. Camaraderie and a spirit of reconciliation sneaked into our hearts. We truly felt the Genesis verse “how terrible this place” was and how elated this hour was. On the eve of the Jewish New Year in Piraeus we were more sensitive and our eyes were filled with tears. The gentleness spread over our faces made room for a new expression, the expression of absolute hope, and expression of latent certainty. One group after another stood praying or listening to the doleful tune of “Kol Nidrey” (*all our vows*) prayer.

The Days of Awe were celebrated in 5701 (fall 1940) when the entire world Jewry was deep in mourning and fear. The sounds of Kol Nidrey seeped out of prisons, detainee camps, no-man’s-lands between borders, from over ships’ decks, from ghettos, from death sentenced cells throughout the world, from the Pacific Ocean coasts, from Japan to the Atlantic Ocean as far as occupied France. We had not experienced such a hard and horrible Yom Kippur for hundreds of years. And this Yom Kippur for us was not harsher than the one celebrated by our brethren in the diaspora, not by location conditions, not by the prayers’ transcendence – the dome of the skies above, bare rocks below and around – waves hum as they hit the coast, giving musical accompaniment to the cantor’s singing.

Here they were praying, and there – we lit a huge bonfire as a hearth and fuelled it with Păcură. We then took hold of burning poles and waved them about in the dark, perhaps signalling to our five comrades rowing out at sea, perhaps signalling non-coming ships.

The night of Kol Nidrey passed and we returned to reality. The holiday itself was devoted to work, out of pure necessity. Chores were divided up: to the old, the elderly and the weak – prayer. To the youths – hard labour aboard the ship. We could see that the structure which had once been our home was approaching its final hour, and wanted to salvage anything possible, for every wood chip, any small appliance, every bolt could be of worth for us. So, we split up all over the creaking carcass and began dismantling it into parts: boards, wooden beams, ropes, metal wires. Pentcho had been transformed into carpentry workshop wherein all the workers destroyed, dismantled and poured their vengeful fury onto the cadaver which had irked them so when it was a ship: beat, broke, wrecked and chopped up the skeleton which defended itself with its last

ounce of strength. The rear mast fell, the bridge's top dislocated, going berserk. The rear rudder wings would alternately rise and fall, preventing access to the rear store rooms. The bow rose upright like a dog's nose sniffing the air. But we had to salvage the fuel – to feed our bonfire, the anchor of our rescue. We consequently lined up a chain of lads who shifted the buckets full of this valuable fluid to an empty cavern on the peak of the rock bellied island.

No personal belongings remained aboard the ship and if there were any, they were trampled and crushed during the first hour of the rescue operation. Broken bottle shards, razor blades, books, brassieres, bandages, torn socks, all rolled around like corpses on a battlefield. We were forced to cease the work out of mortal danger. The wind grew stronger and it became clear that the Pentcho would not survive till dawn. But before we left we grabbed brooms and cleaned the upper halls to pay last respects to this ark which we did not believe would see tomorrow.

At the top of the hill the worshippers were praying. Good for them, they were exempt from this work. Only the young were made to work as well as fast too. In fact, all of us were fasting, because the kitchen did not serve any food this day. That evening, after the meal, a few brilliant economists even demanded portions of the food from the store room be distributed. I told them that had I managed the food supply according to their will, half the people would have already been starved to death.

The evening relieved the blazing heat of the day. A piercing cold night descended. The people shivered in the cold where they lay. Neighbours crowded closer to each other and crammed into a small space like wet birds. There were those who put on all their clothes in order to warm up a little. Occasionally we poured Păcură on the bonfire on the island peak so that flames would rise to the sky. We persisted in waving burning poles, a desperate signal in the dark of night, maybe we could draw the attention of ships happening by chance upon this area, if at all. The rising flames illuminated the faces of the weary people, who after five months of wandering were cast onto a deserted island, far from their goal and far from any helping hand. Who will have mercy on them and on their little children? Their bed was made of stones and a weary sheet; the ceiling above them – nothing, only the infinite sky and the sea.

The bonfire awakened sentimental memories in us (remember summer camps?). Shame we had to banish them and concentrate on our reality all around. The changing of the shifts; the hungry relieved the tired. Most did not lay down to rest. Better to feed the bonfire and chat about recent days' exploits, and who among them did not experience anything riveting, personal, compelling and heartening? The moonlight turned the guards' faces even paler. The cold grew deeper; we blew into our cupped palms, turned our collars up high and trembled from the chill and doleful thoughts.

Pentcho's dance of death drew our gaze. This huge whale fluttered and convulsed in terrible agony. She was making every effort to slide towards the open sea, but the vicious waves threw her back in towards the coast. Death isn't given freely and not easily. Her prolonged screeching, her pitiful swaying, astounded the observer's face. The moon's rays washed the scenery silver, flickered briefly on her deck, and then, they too disappeared behind the black clouds.

Our old friend's groaning, her anguished passing, proved that the inanimate too has a soul, like an animal struggling to stay alive fully recognising it has no chance of surviving. At times one would imagine that the shrieks merged into songs, as if she wished to say something before she died. A sort of Last Will and Testament, perhaps? But those whom the words are intended for are sleeping the sleep of the weary.

I stand alone atop the rocks. Half past two after midnight. "On the fast day of Kippur it shall be decided and signed... who shall live and who shall die..." Pentcho's fate had been decreed. Once more she raised her nose, like a soldier fallen in battle standing up before collapsing for good. The verdict had been read out, the victim handed over to the hangman. A deafening noise and a tremendous fracture. Her stern, already filled with water, detached from the corpse and sank into the sea. The chimney stood upright for a brief moment – like a black exclamation mark in the darkness – and then it too vanished. In the blink of an eye the bow descended as well, with the "Acco" hall. And for a moment – it was as if all had disappeared from the surface of the sea followed immediately by the emergence of a few solitary planks, dancing and floating where once was the ship – like feathers of a drowned bird.

Pentcho had reached its end. She did not deliver us to our destination nor did she arrive at her deserved place of rest – the national museum of the Hebrew Ha'apala [illegal immigration].

Kamilonisi



Fitting a sail after the blow that cracked the pipe bringing water to the tank



Pentcho is clinging to the coast of the island Kamilonisi, before her sinking



Kamilonisi, aerial shot from the east



The morning after, on the rocks of Kamilonisi



The “waterhole”, where we found less salty water



We erected the kitchen salvaged from the drowning ship



The queue for the kitchen, awaiting the daily soup



The southern part of the island, where the wind was gentler



The five volunteers go searching for help



The “fauna” on Kamilonisi



Our return visit to Kamilonisi forty years later

Life and Governance on the Rock Island

Apart from thoughts of the impending rescue, the primary concern was – food. Two daily “meals” were served after the minister of supplies (Jancu Reichenthal) had calculated and determined that we could provide soup twice a day for ten days. At 11am the soup was served, this was the brunch. The second soup was delivered at 4pm. What was there to do between those two meals? Wait. Where? By the kitchen, where many people were standing for hours in a long queue, awaiting the ringing of the bell (another item dismantled from the Pentcho) signalling meal time.

Others searched for more comfortable “dwellings” and chose two caves in the eastern bay. Indeed, the cave of the prehistoric man was more modern than these, but in our era we had wooden boards and also clothing that they did not have then. The more enterprising among us were prepared to go fishing. Pins could be twisted – and there is an instant fishing hook. Flies or worms could be appropriated for bait, but the fish did

not easily capitulate their lives at sea. Another discovery: there were snails on the island – cooking snail soup might be attempted (though eating it would be more difficult).

Our flag fluttered at the top of the hill: a white rag fashioned from an erstwhile bedsheet. Aside it, atop the pole, a soot covered field torch, though there was nothing with which to fill it. Next to these trembled the on-duty lookouts, advanced age people unable to sustain physical work.

There was no shortage in the demand for physical work in our country. The most sought-after sector was “house” building. A topic troubling many developed nations was easily solved in our case: two boards on the rocky soil – and there we have a bed; surround your bed with a stone fence, spread a blanket above it – there is a roof; no shortage of land plots. We relocated the kitchen by the water hole. The food was guarded by the veteran soldier Jisrael Dukes from inside the only “palace” we built here with the reconstituted police force, also protecting the communal treasure. Police had weapons too: two handguns that made a strong impression on the Greek sailors (unbeknownst to them, we had no bullets for these pistols).

Once we formed a “state” in Kamilonisi, there was a need for a government as well. At the people’s behest, I appointed a 12-member council from all groups of the public; but their stone chambers did not manage to supply solutions to the people’s problems. We divided the physically able into three groups, two of which were on duty and the third at rest. They helped build the shelters, i.e. homes. We also established a “post office”, in which S.O.S. messages were written in several languages and sent via registered mail (bottles) upon the waves. We also made sure the perpetual fire on the island’s peak would burn every night, all night. One comrade owned a small folding table. He loaned it to the Ministry of Justice: two members of the management team, in shifts, received public appeals and queries. The Ministry of Labour, with the help of the “drafted” workforce, erected public toilets, naturally made of rocks and situated far from the residential areas. The labour ministry also determined the number of work hours, in the spirit of ultra-socialism, at three a day (strikes and struggles over pay did not get to arise). The health office built a provisional hospital, with bedsheet walls, which was a shining example to all medical institutions: throughout our time on the island, it had no patients (through no fault of our doctors).

The haters of Israel have always claimed that we were not a constructive nation... and here, even on this little island lacking natural resources, this assertion was refuted. We were a positive constituent and laid infrastructure for state practices. A handful of deported Jews, remnants of a sunken ship, entangled in a period of war and hatred among nations, lived upon rocks and stones, but from the very first moment they set foot on this island – their yearning for a civilized order of conduct emerged.

All in the sign of S.O.S.

There [were](#) philosophers in Kamilonisi. One of them said that the laws of nature were stronger than us. The human body has its demands, even if one is on a deserted, desolate island. Indeed, the body was missing much and it was easy to notice our people getting weaker. Hunger and weakness imprinted themselves on the mood. Even the kitchen soup queue – which was most sparse – shortened. Some even went without the food so that they would not be forced to queue for long. Indifference is also dangerous. In a state of despair, it is natural for a person to be agitated, annoyed, aggressive and rude, irritating one's comrades and getting angry. But growing indifferent and accepting the situation is even more dangerous.

We did not turn indifferent. We knew that help could only come from the sea, which is why we concentrated on making use of every opportunity to attract the world's awareness. The weather also changed. The sea raged, the winds strengthened and the ships – did not appear. There were those who wrote out their last Wills and sent them out to sea in bottles. We had no more bottles, so, women emptied out their cologne bottles to gain "transport vessels". Leadership did not, naturally, trust in these primitive ventures and we therefore endeavoured to find more updated methods. Păcură and other fuels dwindled too and there was a great need to conserve our resources as much as possible. To this end, we fashioned torches out of tin cans filled with kerosene-soaked rags. The advantage in such torches was that they ignited easily and emanated a large fire. The disadvantage: our torches never managed to ignite...

We had aviators among us at whose suggestion we constructed a big kite, 2 meters by 2 meters large, with a wooden frame, cloth body, and hundreds of meters of tying cords could fly it up and keep it up there. On the cloth we wrote the geographical location of this island (our captain laboured for days on fixing the location) and in the centre of the cloth, huge letters recited our chorus: S.O.S. (for this inscription we once again needed to sequester black shoe polish pastes). We awaited the kite's launch brimming with anxiety and hope; alas, the wind wreaked havoc on it, ripped its body to shreds – just as the sea did to the body of Pentcho.

We do not despair. The flight did not fare well? We will try sailing. We began with a crate, fitted a bottle with our message inside it and closed it. The crate cast off and floated slowly in the direction of Crete, but it very quickly fell into a coma, froze in its spot and moved no further. We built a small raft too, fitted a mast and a sail on it, fixed a torch onto its mast and glued our message on it. The crate's fate was carried over to the raft as well. The raft set off on its way, sailed for several hundreds of meters at such embarrassing slowness, that it may actually still be hovering in the vicinity of Kamilonisi.

The island transformed into one big call of S.O.S.; every “house”, every “roof”, flew the magic banner crying: Save Us! We first and foremost wished to capture the attention of airplanes but they were in no hurry to appear in the skies over Kamilonisi. We devised a new lure to stimulate the plane pilots’ curiosity: we stitched several bedsheets together and stretched the creation atop the high spots on the hill. We divided the people into groups and ordered them onto the “white” zones. At hearing the rattle of an airplane, one group would signal in dark clothes and the others would yell: “S.O.S.”, and each group was performing its role willingly and faithfully.

In order to implement the S.O.S. programme came a need for internal borrowings. We expropriated a number of vital materials for this purpose: bedsheets and, of course, black shoe polish (this seizure was performed just like in the austerity period of 1950’s Israel. Shosha, for example; handed over all her sheets, whilst certain others, as of this book’s writing time – 1951 – were still making use of the bedsheets they had on board the Pentcho). The shoe polish had run out very quickly. Mirror shards were nailed onto a door which became a large mirror. The desired purpose was to dazzle the eyes of pilots passing overhead, otherwise oblivious to us.

We castaways had one remaining lifeboat, albeit a badly damaged one. We dragged “Pentcho 3” onto the eastern side of the island and began preparing it to meet the needs of the second expedition. A strong blowing wind prevented us from setting sail. We made use of this reprieve by arguing about the personnel composition of the mission. It is worthwhile mentioning the volunteer candidates by name: Gescheidt, Mittelmann, Tibor Horvath, two sailors and I. Of the two sailors, one only would sail.

The adults’ discussions inspired the youth who were always better gifted with richer imagination. A few of them approached me, truly the finest of our youngsters, and suggested assembling a raft out of bed boards salvaged from Pentcho and sailing out to sea. They declared: we would rather take the risk than die a miserable death on this starvation island. Their plan was not feasible. A wooden board raft would have been broken into pieces even on calm waters. We appreciated the spirit of the young ones, who already visualized with their vivid imagination the elderly holding a lottery to determine which child was to be eaten next...

We were halfway through October already and fortune smiled upon us once more. These would regularly be the rainy days of the season, but in our honour the rains and wetness were delayed. Luckily, we did not have pneumonia or other dampness-inflicted diseases to treat. And then came the holiday of Tabernacles – we all had our own “Sukkah”. We were forced to cut down on food – to one soup portion a day only. The stock Piraeus-bought crackers had also run out, leaving only the canned goods (from Sulina) – enough to last but one meal. We ceased activities for the public work

“draftees”. They had no energy for that. The Păcură was used up, so, we began heating by burning wood boards. And the rainy season was on our tail...

Not everybody's spirits had fallen. Observe – the two Mendels, Simcha Steiner, good uncle Schönfeld and others, erected a Sukkah – I do not know how or what with – and prayed. Correspondingly – the nation's youth sat in their own “Sukkah” at the centre of the island and, lo and behold, they began singing Hebrew songs with enthusiasm and vigour. The heart shrinks, the empty stomach moans, the limbs anguish, “and you are singing grace”! I remember almost everything that I told the fine youths that evening:

- “We are on the dividing line between warring sides where neither side wishes to be staying in this neighbourhood. The Greek and the Italians alike know of us, therefore diplomatic measures are required to be taken in order for something to be done for us. And diplomatic mills turn that much more slowly when the flour is intended for Jews. We have food to last us another four to five days and I am positively certain that the rescue will arrive by then too”.

I went to our captain who for lack of choice was sober, but spoke logically. In his opinion, no initiative of ours could succeed so long as the sea was stormy. In his opinion, the change of weather would come the day after tomorrow, on Friday, and even then – aid could not afford to be delayed for long.

That Sukkoth evening was an unforgettable landmark in the saga of our long wanderings. Tearful mothers hunch over their hungry children, women despondent from hardship and displacement shrink from the cold in their burrows, hunger-stricken old and young dream of long tables – and suddenly the sounds of “HaTikva” (The Hope) erupt, the hymn of faith and security. The playing of this noble song soothed the despaired. The tune of the national anthem broke out, rose skyward and spread to all corners of the island. It entered caves, peered through the bedsheet tent walls, caressed the warm faces of Haviva, Mira, Perla, Levi, and Shanika, consoled the sleepless malcontents, calmed, anaesthetised and lay bonds of sleep, saturated with the nearing salvation, upon the eyes of the twentieth century's victims. It was heart-rending, for it was precisely as I have described – an honest truth!

The Rescue

Tomorrow will already be the 18th of October... Tomorrow – the second expedition will depart ... Tomorrow we will be receiving but one spoonful of soup a day... Tomorrow

we will begin confiscating “personal” boards in order to feed the “eternal flame”, for if that fire dies down, our hope too will die with it...

Tomorrow – it is actually today already – the 18th of October, Jabotinsky’s 60th birthday, the first without his presence. His youth commemorated this day with a festive display at the top of the hill. But the rows were depleted there as well, with only a few dozen standing instead of hundreds. But stand they did, and discussed the Land of Israel! And so the beginning of this day was not at all bad; on the contrary. The storm had calmed down and passed. In the early morning hours we heard an airplane’s jangle. The plane was high flying and we could not speculate whether or not it spotted us. The answer was given by the airplane itself, which surprisingly turned back, this time from the south-east. There was no doubt now that it had spotted us, as from behind the third hill, on the northern part of the island, it flew low, turned around, made a semicircle and resumed the direction of Rhodes. This was probably an Italian airplane. This time the guards on duty were alert in their outlook post, working precisely as instructed.

The turnaround in the general mood was truly revolutionary. Here, now they know about us and will certainly return and rescue us. It was a Friday and we intended to launch our last boat the following day. I was on my way to see the captain, who demanded that two sailors would be sent along with the mission. I told him only one would, and should he insist, we would not take any sailor with us at all. Suddenly someone stopped me and showed me, there, from the east, some black form was approaching us. I did not doubt for a single moment that this was a ship, but before I could think of further steps, people on the island erupted with unbridled screams. It took us a great effort to calm them down, more or less.

Oh, what a moment! When they rescued Robinson and his Man Friday, they also must have been delighted. But here, five hundred throats were crying! They weren’t interested to know who it was, their nationality, where would they lead us. The main thing – out of here, at any cost and right away! Perhaps already tonight we will be sleeping on a bed... This was the dream: to sleep on a bed, eat a slice of bread, drink fresh water. Half of the people were now yelling and the other half were silencing those yelling. Our saviours drew nearer and could now hear us.

- Save us! Take us with you! We are starving! Our ship sank in the sea! Don’t shoot...

They did not shoot; they were Italians, not British. The Italian battleship approached and anchored near the coast. They addressed us through a loudspeaker and scrambled to look for our two translators: Goldberger and Salzberger. They eventually managed to translate the Italians’ question:

- Do you want us to rescue you?

Considering our situation, this was a naive question. I replied with a question: “where will you be taking us?” but my question did not reach them. The positive Italian “Si, Si!” answer was stifled and all at once the island’s people dispersed and commenced packing. An hour ago they were ready to give away all their “possessions” for a cup of fresh water. Now – they did not even want to leave their empty cup behind.

But first the Jews cried: “Viva Italia!” The next order came from the ship: extinguish all lights! The bonfire! Even the cigarettes!

[And again a correction and a comment to John Bierman’s book “Odyssey”: he wrote that our people shouted “long live Mussolini!” Indeed, we did not consider it a crime at the time, but this is a total fabrication. I was there, I instructed the translators and I heard everything. Nobody mentioned Mussolini, they only praised Italy].

An Italian military physician stepped off of a boat that had reached the coast and he conducted the rescue operation. The sailors were stern-faced, but they were polite and even nice to us. They gathered the mothers with their children and led them to their lifeboat. They then announced decisively: No packages and suitcases allowed, only the most vital items. The doctor examined the women and was surprised by their good health. He expressed his frank opinion that only a stubborn people as the Jews could endure so wonderfully...

The doctor added and said that they had meant to come the day before, but a British aerial attack prevented this. They feared they would only find dead and dying here ... (such grave rumours were also spread “at home” too, that is, in Slovakia; relatives mourned us, with some even sitting “Shiva” [seven days of mourning] for their [kinfolks](#)).

The survivors were transferred by small boats to the ship, without luggage. The Italians said they wanted to rescue the “live cargo” first. Our lifeboat, “Pentcho 3”, also wanted to take part in the rescue efforts, but failed on the first attempt – and went out of service. We dreaded thinking that the following day it was supposed to sail off towards the island of Crete.

Captain Carlo Orlandi, the commander of the ship Camogli, anchoring in the small island Leros in the Aegean Sea, was asked by the Italian Rhodes authorities to sail to Kamilonisi and save us. Camogli was quickly filled up and only half of our people could board it. The women all boarded (except for Mrs. Kutten and Mrs. Gescheidt who did not wish to part from their beloved husbands) as did the old and the weak, among them young Willi Bauer who, aided by his Dollars, was one of the first to board the ship – with his suitcases in tow... Prior to the ship setting sail, the Italian captain promised that during the evening hours of the next day, they would come back to collect the rest of the passengers-refugees. Those remaining were given a box of canned meat, three bags of crackers and fifty liters of drinking water! At the vigorous demand of the “opposition”

(better call them “the chronically dissatisfied”) we distributed the water that very night. The Camogli sailed off at 1:30am, loyal to the Pentcho tradition – on a Saturday.

The Final Day on the Island

From the top of the hill to the downslopes of the bay, where the passengers had boarded the ship, lingered an avenue of parcels and suitcases that those departing were forced to leave behind. This final day was also the hardest and ugliest of all the days we knew on Kamilonisi and still the miracles and luck followed us. The rain began, the wind whipped the water into our faces. In spite of it all we managed to once again organize a chain of young volunteers and through the wrathful rain we moved all the parcels into the big eastern cave, although there too water dripped from the walls and the ceiling.

How lucky that the women and children were no longer here! It was difficult to imagine them having to roll around in this water and mud. Many wore their entire wardrobe on, possibly due to the cold or possibly out of fear of having to leave them behind. Our cooks again lived up to this situation: in pouring rain they prepared a large amount of macaroni and then a miracle occurred: the beans cooked yesterday were also offered, but nobody wanted to eat them. Any wonder? Indeed, they had received tinned food and became picky. I also gave some of the people the matches, lemons and preserved milk – our last reserves. I also tried to organize the boarding of the ship when it arrived in the evening, but the people were busy with their matter at hand: eating. Tents were collapsed, belongings trampled on, unused clothes discarded and the place was left in disorder and with heaps of garbage. Occasional coughing and sneezing could now be heard.

At twilight we spotted the ship, already from afar. The people gathered with their belongings near the large cave. The boarding process promptly began. The breakers were so high that it was only possible to anchor near the north eastern corner of the island; but this was about a kilometer and a half away from our place of assembly. They set off, racing each other on a rocky path, their legs failing, their backs bearing packs, their hands lugging suitcases. Many packages were cast aside, on both sides of the path lay ownerless bundles.

We then received permission to leave fifty people on the island to safeguard the parcels until tomorrow. I made a list of the remaining fifty, but then the Italians reduced the number to twenty. We stayed, the ones who still believed that the “true saviours” would arrive tomorrow and then, at 2:30am, the Italian commander announced that he had

received a telegram from Rhodes, stating that he was ordered to evacuate any and all living from this island! However, I knew that some of the twenty remaining had gone to sleep inside some cave or had dispersed over the island. How could we find them?

I did know that little Shimon Müller had gone off somewhere with my stuff. What will he do, poor feller, here all alone? No, I shall not move without him! We set upon the entire island and searched for the wretch in every corner. Our throats were hoarse from shouting – and the child was gone. The captain was agitated; everybody was on board already, but for a few looking for the missing boy. The Italian captain said again: if we did not board at once, they would drag me on by force. I was out of strength to resist. Shoutings from the ship announced to me that Müller was already on board – so I gave up. (It turned out that this was the second Müller).

They brought me on board the ‘Soncini’, and I dropped like a sack onto a pile of ropes. In the morning, at the roll call, it turned out that not one was missing, but four more: Danny Klein, Willi Blau, Waldner and the famous Grünstein, who once again fell ill and avoided boarding. The others fell asleep in a cave and did not hear our calls. However – in three days’ time two sailboats would depart Rhodes carrying ten of our strong lads, to bring the remaining Robinson Crusoes and our mountains of parcels to Rhodes. They also reported that the following day saw a Greek ship arriving on the island with food products. The Greek advised those five missing to re-join their friends, and this is how they were discovered on the island.

The 19th of October was a longer than usual day – it lasted and lasted right until the next morning. For ten days we inhabited the island of Kamilonisi, and leaving it raised no sentiments in us. But this island did save us from the depths and provided us shelter as best as it could, in its caves, upon its rocks, and even held back the rain until we left.

As we arrived, at sunset, at the area of Rhodes port, the waves became more moderate too. We anchored right by the coast. The first to disembark across the narrow walkway were passengers, and then we offloaded the remaining parcels, and in the end, we too said goodbye to the Soncini. Here, again, I was last to depart the ship and set off on Italian soil with veiled mistrust, because a guy in uniform spoke to the incoming passengers in German. The belongings were piled onto trucks; we were arranged in triads to be transferred to our new living quarters. The port was already dark. It was a strange feeling – marching through the streets of a city in darkness until we reached our tent camp. Geographically we were closer to our hearts’ desire, but not in reality. We had moved a great distance away from our goal, both timewise and in objective chances for the future. But we were rescued from the island and had to endure the consequences of said rescue...

Rhodes (Rodi), Ρόδος

Firstly – we will take a look round our new residence: It is the sports stadium of the city of Rhodes. Surrounded by a high wall, the stadium's rear featured a small seating gallery facing a riding arena. The lion's share of the area around the sports field was 80cm higher than the field's surface, where small six-people military tents were tilted and also two adjacent tennis courts, probably not for us. On the lower section were three large tents, already overrun by our elders, and two tents for the women and children. But old Berl Schwetz saved a place for me, as he knew I would return tired...

And at the core of our days was – the food. The first group was not too thrilled about these arrangements. For the first day they received 250 grams of bread and a few figs and olives, plus what we were given by the authorities and by our brethren, the people of the large Jewish community – promises. And those were given in abundance. We swiftly learned the meaning of the Italian promise: "Domani, Domani" (tomorrow), until we understood that the true meaning of the word was – maybe, or never (like Mâine in Romanian, mañana in global Spanish, بکرا (Bukra) in Arabic, and more, and more...).

During these first days we got the impression that the sense of unity and camaraderie had gone and drowned along with the corpse of Pentcho. The war for survival imposed a new moral, which was: selfishness.

Guarding us was done by the Fascist Militia. They were quite friendly, but we had practically no contact with them. Later on, delegates of the authorities arrived in order to conduct a roll call. We asked them to send a ship to Kamilonisi and collect our five remainders there along with our suitcases, the refugees' only belongings. The definition of our status was: survivors of a sunken ship. But in international language we were: civilian war detainees.

I still headed our group, though I had already considered my resignation. So far we managed to arrange for four telegrams to be sent: to Bucharest, to Athens, to Bratislava and to the Jewish Agency in Geneva. The soldiers erected eighteen additional tents and thus got us all settled. We also received two military blankets each. The military alone promised to tend for our supplies; the Jewish community appeared to be avoiding us while the militia men along the walls, who could see what our life was like, handed their meals over to our children now and again.

The soldiers brought us a field kitchen, but it could not be set up due to the strong rain. Instead, we dug waterways around the tents, because one way or the other, it was hard to lie on the wet soil, with or without blankets. The camp commander, the "Maresciallo", a mature man, strong minded but good hearted, wanted to appoint our representative delegation to him. The following day they managed to erect the kitchen and promised

that tomorrow ("Domani") we would receive rice and meat too. In the meantime we again received one bun a day, but we also drank tea and honey. If the military commander thought he could succeed in setting a daily order for us – times for wake up, meals and sleep – nobody seriously thought about maintaining such an order. Even so – in the beginning, breakfast was only received in the afternoon hours, and this was our only meal for the day.

They explained to us that everything the island inhabitants themselves received was under strict rationing because of the British curfew on the island, and that supply ships from the "homeland" could not always make it. The Jewish community people claimed that they were a poor congregation (but we did know that they had several millionaires among them). The city council allocated us 30 grams of legumes per person and a weekly ration of 30 grams macaroni. But we had at least one plentiful thing, on which we were dreaming on the rocky island: water.

Later, the situation "improved": twice a week we received cows' bones, parts of heads and thighs to spice up our scanty soup. The Italians named these bones "meat", but the only part in the soup that showed some relations signs or family proximity to what people call meat, were hair strings floating over the soup. Somewhat later we received gift parcels from the Jewish community – thin bread slices decorated with cigarettes...

We showered a torrent of telegrams on the Jewish institutes. Some of them replied to us reasonably: "how can we help you?" Again we asked that they would take care to provide us with some vital maintenance and try to get a neutral ship that would take us out of this sea blockaded island. They surely had heard about the disaster that fell upon us and this must have raised feelings of compassion and empathy. But when we asked them for real steps, they preferred to keep quiet or shut their eyes in front of our problems. The Joint too kept their mouths shut at first, and later began mumbling about difficulties in the transferring of Dollars. We requested the Jewish Agency for immigration licenses granted to survivors of wrecked ships; the answer came from Geneva and did not disappoint us: "write to us the names of the transport managers"... a telegram of condolences came from the New Zionist Organization. A telegram – and nothing else. And the need for help turned to be more and more urgent from day to day, because in the meantime there arrived –

The days of the rains

On the day of Simchat Torah the Italian division commander summoned me and told me that there was no other commander in there but him! As I had no ambition to take his

role and degree away from him, I got out. He himself appointed, among the people, those who would be responsible for cleaning, but in the end he gave us a promise that he would do everything for us, that is, for improving the supply and even on the matter of continuing our journey.

At night, October 26th, there were such strong showers, that they dropped our mood below zero. In such weather, with the addition of hunger, epidemics might spread (Typhoid, Rheumatism, Kidney inflammation etc.). My old friend Dukes entered the Maresciallo's office and told him that he could not endure this doing-nothing state, he was not a prisoner of war, he committed no crime – it would be better if they shot him to death, but one could not go on living like this. The Maresciallo actually liked the brave old man, but nobody's stomach was filled by this.

We too began digging canals around the tents and we connected them to the main canal, but the water preferred to remain around the tents and their canvas sheets began to rot by mud and clay thrown over them. Children contracted whooping cough. The poor mothers could not shut their eyes at nights, guarding their children, and whoever heard the choking coughing sounds felt so sorry for the innocent little kids. People of the first group received blankets – two per person. The rest had to wait for weeks until they received their share. And even if a person had two blankets, he wouldn't know what to do first: cover themselves or spread them over the wet soil. Most dressed heavily at night, as if they were planning a tour of the north pole, for protection from the cold of the night.

The power to resist diseases declined steeply. We had to set up our own "hospital" that was always fully occupied. Muscled boys, very strong in the past, fainted in the yard out of sheer weakness. And then Dysentery burst out too, claiming its victims. The first one to die of it was old uncle Metzger, and after him – my friend, the loyal veteran soldier – Israel Dukes. The third was quiet and modest Jisrael Landshut; only twenty people were allowed to leave to attend the funerals.

Rainy days in Rhodes are harder to sustain on an empty stomach, this was the conclusion after our bitter experience. One woman outburst in a kind of breakdown, ran into the yard in heavy rain dressed only in a nightgown, and shouted that her son-in-law had arrived from America. Hunger removed the image of god from the faces of humans and all thoughts were concentrated around the stomach. Boredom and inactivity increased even further the desire for bread. And they began trading with the militiamen, who bought everything – gold, valuables, clothes – for food. Our swift traders quickly acquired the important Italian words such as "pane" or "quanto costa?" and, of course, everybody already knew the numbers in this language. Prices of daily stock market assumed a stable form and our people sold belongings that looked unnecessary to them: rings, earrings, cameras and more.

The bartering did not stop later either, during the period we were staying in Italy. This “industry” too began in Rhodes, and in the meantime it was limited to the construction of ovens: our handymen created, out of tinned cans, cooking ovens that were used for air warming too inside the tents. Later they created pans and pots from the same material. The happy owners of the ovens cooked from morning to night and got warmer in the light of their oven. What did they cook? The cabbage leaves that were thrown to the garbage. The fuel was sneaked from anywhere, mocking the Italians’ prohibitions: over trees, wood fences etc.

As promised by them, the Italians sent two sailboats to Kamilonisi with strong lads, and they indeed returned together with our five missing friends. Out if this sprang a new internal quarrel among our eternally-unhappy comrades. When they began bringing the suitcases in, they had to take them back to the entrance gate so that the Italians could perform... customs examinations! And another problem: all the suitcases were open, locks broken and many items were missing. Out of this arose quarrels, suspicions, speculations. The guys hardly had a chance after the hard trip from the island, because they had to anchor near Karpathos for three days because of a storm.

From a human point of view we could understand these “thefts”. After the visit of the Greek ship, they thought they’d stay there or would be transferred elsewhere. It would be a shame to leave the tinned food in the suitcases of people who, they assumed, in the meantime are being supplied in Rhodes with plenty of good food. The rest of the “selected” items pulled out of the suitcases were supposed, of course, to be returned now to their owners.

We began getting acquainted with the Italians, and despite their being “enemies”, we liked them. Their attitude, to our matters too, was sometimes superficial, but this was how they also treated the war (an officer in the fascist militia expressed his anger to me: he cursed Mussolini for entering the war on Germany’s side, because otherwise they could live today quietly and – so he said – affluently). We did not know that the 28th of October was a national holiday for them, same as in Masaryk’s Czechoslovakia, but the main thing was that we received 250 grams of bread per person on that day plus 200 blankets to ease the cold. The authorities promised that if life in our camp would be alright, they may allow few of us to work in town. The general, deputy commissioner of the Dodecanese islands told us that we could go as we wish to any place, even to the Land of Israel (enemy territory), but – soon!

Jews and Italians

The commander of the camp was an old fascist, Maresciallo, who was given the title "Knight" by our very capable translator (Goldberger). He wanted to demonstrate that he was strict with discipline, cleanliness and order, but his humane approach was spotted through the thin layer of military-like fashion within. He became a good-hearted friend and counsellor. He cared about authority and honour and demanded that even the telegrams we sent for help from institutions would go under his scrutiny. When he felt it was too much for him, he gave up on this too. It happened that as he was strolling inside the camp he would occasionally hand his piece of bread to one of our kids.

We had another unlikely personality in Rhodes. Tirol-born Carabiniere (gendarme) who spoke German and Italian and thus won the role of the camp translator. He also took care of our letters. This long-moustached guy who was an inveterate gossip turned quickly into our intelligence bureau. Every secret that concerned us could be extracted from him; but his knowledge of what was being done in the higher echelons was very limited. So, we had to be satisfied with letters' collecting and mailing. These mailings grew more and more frequent.

Visits by the Jewish community committee members began to be more frequent too. During our first period of stay in Rhodes we received nothing from them (except for promises, of course). As communications with Jewish institutions abroad expanded, the interest of our brethren grew too. We still did not know it, but we sensed that chances of getting support from the Joint, for example, increased. The Jewish community became our Guardians – using the money transferred for us by Jewish institutions. We assumed at a later stage, when Jewish families in Rhodes took our (bigger) children to their homes, that they undoubtedly received their dues for their humanity.

The Italians' liberal attitude towards us continued to grow. We already had permission to go to town, escorted by a policeman, to coordinate matters with the Jewish community, the banks, the post office etc. Usually we went out in a group of three; Goldberger was always one of them. We were left alone and could do some shopping, too, for our friends who gave the group money for that purpose. Most of the Jews of Rhodes were later massacred by the Nazi Devil, after our people had already left the island.

When we arrived at the island – wet, hungry and weary – we could not be satiated with words of comfort. The first Jewish community that transferred a sum of 2500 Italian Lire for our wellbeing was that of Benghazi (Libya). Our brethren in Rhodes could not even pay for the telegrams we sent to appeal for help, claiming that they had no money. But when sums of money began coming in, via the union of the Hebrew Communities in Italy (DELASEM in Genoa, a branch of Unione delle Comunità Ebraiche Italiane), they handed out the money as if it was charity from their own pockets; but it turned out that

the source of support was The Joint. We had no control over the receipt of these sums or over their expenditure.

Once we did receive support from Genoa, they bought us floorboards for the women and old men's tents because the water flooded the entire camp at that time. In the end we had to appreciate the situation our brethren in Rhodes were in. we did feel our own hunger only, but when the "big" children were hosted by middle class Jewish families we understood that their nutrition situation was not much better than ours.

We were guarded by the fascist Militia, people of The Black Shirts. Their main mission was to organize and run the black market. Truth is that their own share of food portions was far from being satisfying; but they were not choosy in grabbing extras for themselves: it happened that when they caught a cat, they skinned it and roasted it for themselves. When they got friendly with the Jews, one could see that, ideologically, the "Fascist perception" was far away from them. But the population, even when it suffered an oppressive regime, could not and dared not express its dissatisfaction.

But we were closed in a camp and were not afraid of demonstrations: here, we were being fed with cabbage for weeks. Of course we were utterly fed up with this. We also knew that vegetables were important to the body; but they were not the appropriate medicine for people who suffered from dysentery... and on one nice day, when the fat supplier, Kudrun, came to camp, everybody gathered in mimicking the goats bleating (mmeh, mmehh, mmehh...) and stoned the supplier with cabbage bits. He retreated and abandoned the set with shameful expression. But the situation did not change. We kept on eating cabbage and were glad that at least there was enough of this vegetable...

Life with no Taste or Smell

We had already spent a month on Hunger Island (not Kamilonisi, but Rhodes). We led a very "active" life. Nobody was happy with the situation, with the neighbours, with the kitchen, with himself – and with the management. Passing criticism on every leader was everybody's favourite activity. Time had come for me to release myself from the duty of taking care of a community that might not want me. Despite the Maresciallo's principles, on November 15th I entered the "old man's" office with the letters, among which was my resignation.

The main ambition of our loyal people was – choose a new presidency and flunk it. Again and again, put up a list, put up a different list and, again, reject it. A leadership of five people was offered, then three people. After they resign, there is something to do:

beg them to take back their resignation; or: construct a 15 persons' "Crown Committee", and if the number of reverence-seeking people is bigger, then increase the number of elected. Each group with its own demands: even the so-called academics (ex-students) think they deserve rights; they are, after all, the cream and frosting of the nation...

Many wild weeds flourished in our inner lives, among which two were standing out: hunger and the urge to be prominently visible. It is hard to determine which one of the two was larger. The era of councils and committees arrived: a committee for internal censorship, a council for writing letters to institutions, a council for telegram sending, a kitchen committee and also a committee for the assembling of other committees. The splitting apart urge of the Jews did not desert us even in those hard days. Emigrants from different countries were getting organised, made lists, corresponded with the whole world and believed that their activities, and only theirs, would bring salvation (of course, only to their identical views holders, their witnesses, their sects).

These faithfully addictive public go-getters had rich imagination and the industry of rumours was flourishing. Here: the Portuguese ship has already departed its port and will move us to Messina. Or: the Red Cross ship will move us directly to the Land of Israel. (No ships came, of course). Or: Italian motor boats are ready to move us to Turkey and there – of course – we will receive immigration certificates (to Palestine).

A unique event that enriched the boring camp life was, at first, encouraging, but turned tragic: our German group received a message, and later another message, from Silberstein in Switzerland (the one who once paid Antera our travel fees in Bezdan), that a ship had left the Bulgarian port of Varna with immigrants on it. It will stop in Rhodes and take the group which joined us in Bezdan to the Land of Israel, because they all had relatives there. The happy people began selling their items and bid farewell to their friends. The authorities confirmed that such a plan indeed existed. On December 15th we received terrible tragic news: the ship San Salvador hit a reef on the Sea of Marmara and 300 out of its 800 passengers drowned. In the end it was found that they all perished! Later it turned out that in reality, the ship carried 352 passengers and 238 of them were killed.

Not surprisingly, none of us could sleep that night. Who but we were aware of the dangers luring immigrants sailing on trashy ships upon mighty waters. In our imagination we were together with them in the wrecked ship and we envisioned the disaster with our own flesh. We imagined the pandemonium breaking in the sinking ship. Hundreds of people in the freezing waves in a stormy sea. Children holding on to their desperate mothers, but beating waves separate between them. Screams of horror come out and up and compete with the thunders of the brutal storm. Boards hit one another powerfully opposite the Silivri coastal rocks in Turkey, and distorted bodies are trying to hang on to them with their remaining powers. The salty sea water burns the

poor people's wounds. The body weakens and quivers with no consciousness until death feels sorry for it...

No, we could not sleep that night. We were once too close to the situation in which our dear brethren found their death. In our hearts, hateful flames toward the variously-oriented world leaders are burning as their stone hearts caused – directly or indirectly – the loss of hundreds and thousands of brothers in the waves of the seas. Will they ever be summoned to justice?

On December 15th, 1940, I wrote in my personal diary in Rhodes: "In the morning the Inspector brought the terrible news, according to which the ship "Salvador" hit a reef by the Turkish coastline and sank. There is still no formal notice about it, but as it seems – to our great sorrow – it is correct. The blame shouts against the world's conscience! They expel thousands and tens of thousands of Jews, old, women, sick, children, who leave out to waves of the open sea in their final despair, so that their 2000 years old hope, the hope of the Jewish past and its future, will be destroyed and sink in the grave of the waves. Subjects of an ancient nation must look for their homeland, wandering around like beaten dogs. Who will be blamed for this? Who can repay for a sea of pain and mourning? Who will wipe off tears of so many widows and orphans? Who will be accountable for the most horrible injustice that happened to any nation during the entire human history?"

Our Lives Stabilize for a Long Time

At last the Italians understood that if they did not want never-ending complications, they must relieve our conditions. Improving our provisions was a doubtful contemplation at that moment. Lately they were more liberal in allowing us leave to go to town. First – the management and then groups of 25-30 men or women, to pay a visit to the public bath house. On the way there one could buy vegetables, or, if they had money, more "noble" products. Money transfers from abroad had already begun to arrive – from relatives, friends and from institutions too.

Gold was first sold to the Italian bank, but very soon our people became more acquainted with the "other" commerce. The exchange trade was mainly conducted

through the militia men, guarding the camp. Our people easily and quickly learned the Italian language and the rates of exchange. The official rate of the black exchange market was the price of the daily bread portion, about 150-200 grams. The most wanted and relatively cheapest product was – oranges. Our experts have already determined in their research that a number of oranges contain more calories than 150 grams of bread. Our hunger related greater importance to quantity and for a loaf of bread we could get several oranges. Of course, we were strict and carefully peeled the oranges, so that only the skin itself would be removed. The flesh was eaten together with the white layer separating it from the skin. We also had a canteen in which we could exchange different products too.

The hunger significantly influenced the camp morale too, albeit in a very small measure. There were several ladies who preferred to diversify the boredom of the long winter nights and bind the pleasant with the beneficial. These two needs were provided to them by the guard soldiers. It should be mentioned, as praise to the general ethics, that the number of these “light headed” ladies did not exceed five, that it, one percent of our population, of whom only one came to our country, and she is the most modest of that group.

When money began arriving regularly from the Joint Distribution Committee, the learned heads of the Jewish commune allotted us a daily budget of 600 Lire to improve our food. They wanted to increase this sum, not from their own money but from transfers received by some of our people from relatives in America. Naturally there were few patriots among us who were ready to give up their relatives’ money. Others did not even agree to ask for any sum in order not to furnish the Germans and Italians with dollars.

We began social activities too. The social committee began drawing a tiny amount from each allowance we received. With this money they specially supported poor people, took care of the sick, bought milk for the babies and for small children too. In these inactive days, the birth rate increased. The living conditions and the cold aided it... the new Ze’ev (Wolf) baby was born to the Weingarten couple, and Yolishka had Naomi. A new marriage wave started later and by the time we reached the end of our camp living, in 1943 in Italy, only one woman remained single.

But the living situation remained unbearable. The tents were filled with water. Despite this, we had a little luck: the rains began on our last day on Kamilonisi, but in Rhodes we found a reasonable solution before Dysentery, that began spreading around, became more dangerous. There were rumours about promises to house us in a school in town; others “heard” that huts would be erected for us, but what we eventually received was better for all of us.

Campo “San Giovanni”

Not-too-small a role in changing our camp location for the better was that of half a dozen Betar members who received my permission to leave on a dangerous, but effective, adventure. On the 15th of December, nine young men climbed over the stadium walls. Three of them (Onki, Ewald and Anci) preferred to sneak to town and try and eat something with Jewish families, but the other six headed directly to the police building. The speaker was Feri Neumann, who could already speak a little Italian. It was a night of powerful rains, pitch darkness and strong winds. The policemen locked the six in an empty police cell. Feri Neumann did not keep quiet, of course, and demanded to see the officer. Feri managed to make the officer aware of the fact that we could not tolerate the inhuman conditions in the camp and threatened: “you either give us suitable living arrangements, or we escape every night out of the camp...”

The interrogation of the young men lasted a long time, but only Feri could speak their language. The guys began asking for food, because they were hungry. What can one get in Rhodes? Fresh cabbage, of course. They brought them a huge piece and added cauliflower to it. The guys assaulted the vegetables like carnivorous wolves. The Italians, fed up from having to escort the guys to the toilets every few minutes, left the cell door open. The monotonous food, all watery, and the cold in the camp caused great damages to the guys’ health and I will skip the description of the sight found the next morning in their cell.

After this “organized trip” the Italians could not go on ignoring the solving of our main issue; neither did they seek more clashes, and so it happened that on the eve of Hanukkah, which happened to be on the eve of Christmas, we were transferred to a big new barracks building, where we were put on the bottom floor. They had twelve halls there, serving probably as garages, but not yet in use. On the floor above us, whose entrance was on another side of the building, were Italian sailors on vacation. Later they accommodated there German pilots, and on top of these idyll – a huge symbol of the Red Cross.

Breaking the curfew and escaping from the camp did not pass through smoothly. The Maresciallo lit up the camp in the evenings for a roll call. The next mornings – an orderly count again, but the young ones were already at home. They were not scared by threats of court marshals. When the Maresciallo summoned Feri again to his office, he asked him if he came alone. The answer was, no, I am here with my sister. Therefore, as a “punishment”, the old man gave him two portions of bread and a nudge on his shoulder.

The move to our new camp was conducted like a military operation. We collected all the boards (people wrote their names on them) and packed our belongings. Military trucks first moved the stuff and then us. The camp entered our private history with the name

“Campo San Giovanni”. The Barracks was built on the highest point of town, a convenient target for both air attacks and sea bombardments. But we were not bothered by war problems. In our tents camp too, we heard bombings and whoever could sleep – slept without these disturbing them.

The new place was spacious and dry, and we could get along like human beings. The boards we brought with us were used by our carpenters to make wide beds. People could find room in the halls with their friends or families, because couples and families with children had separate halls. There was a special building in the yard, built as a kitchen, and we too erected, at our initiative, the toilet “rooms”. An old house was standing downhill, near us, where we fitted a small hospital, and from where it was easier to sneak towards town as well.

Having settled in the rooms and in the kitchen, we could turn to solving our other problems, and these were not few. It was hard to solve them, given the separating of people into groups and the existence of petty interests groups. Of course, the top of the issues was the food, the supplies, the duties justifying an additional spoonful of soup and, thus, the rule by which positions among the kitchen workers would be allocated. Every meagre spoon of soup, given as a “professional” addition to the kitchen workers, ignited a great deal of anger and inter-party arguments.

Besides exchange commerce, and also for cash money that many had already begun to receive, private enterprises began operating too: we did have many professional people. The hairdressers were first, and then young boys with no profession brushed shoes, washed and cleaned sleeping corners of “capitalists” who were receiving regular sums of money. There were some teachers of languages too. When the flow of money did not stop (from the United States, Yugoslavia, Slovakia and Hungary), the advantageous ones did quite well. But the rest, devoid of means, had to do with selling their last belongings. Watches were removed from arms, golden chains wandered away from their owners, others sold cameras and even fountain pens for food.

As providers of various services, one triad was excelling itself – Laufer, Steinmetz, Salomon. They performed all sorts of work, and with expertise. They were contracting carpentry, metalwork, locksmiths, baking (they built ovens out of tins, in which excellent casseroles were baked), and distilled spirit out of carob sugar. But Tibi Laufer, despite it all, always complained. When he opened a “kiosk”, buyers surged to him and fought for the actual goods that tickled their palate: cooked corn grains...

The pigs and geese were already consumed on the island and therefore we could only get corn. The grains were ground with stones and the flour was used to cook polenta. Occasionally did we receive small portions of meat-sausage (Mortadella), but only in the canteen as the sausage was not kosher? When they announced in the rooms (on a

Saturday, in the middle of prayers) that there was mortadella in the canteen, this incredible occasion made our friend old Elias forsake the praying, and with the prayer shawl on his shoulder he rushed to the canteen, not to miss this rare opportunity.

As said, many found occupations and they filled their time with paying activities. But there were those who broke down under the heavy burden of boredom and inactivity. They sank into nonstop cards and Solitaire games in order to forget their hunger. Young people, who set off on the journey expecting nearby salvation, could not adjust to the new conditions of life. Inactivity shaped different figures. Some were walking around in a daze, others tried to be alone with no company, or treated other people like animals seeking victims to bite or tease them and throw their anger on them. All these weird types were given by the Rhodes folklore the general title “train workers” (implying rattling and shuddering...).

But the situation did not reach spiritual degeneration. The heads of the youth movements and the leaders of Zionist parties acknowledged the danger involved in inactivity and decided on organized cultural activities.

Cultural Activity

The meaning of this is not debating evenings, or customary members' meetings. Those were anyway carried out every day. The point is that the people in the camp did not like to sit together for any length of time. There were no days without scandals or fights, even fist fights among hot headed friends. We realised it would be difficult to end this moral-spiritual depression that increased with the hunger, the captivity and the inactivity, unless we found some medication, some counter-measure. Establishing cultural work might fulfil this role.

With hindsight, I think that we should not undervalue this social triumph, achieved by five hundred Jews, detached from their homes, from their public activities and from the outside world. We did not have particularly outstanding people among us – geniuses, authors or artists – but most of us were motivated by the Zionist urge and the will not to surrender to destiny but to create something out of nothing even in this period of global crisis and in this area afflicted by great danger. Our Zionist willpower supported us and we succeeded in improving relationships, righting ideological conflicts and overcoming difficulties.

We did not have professors, but we did have an abundance of people who could master languages. Many began learning, either privately or in small groups, Italian, English, French, Spanish and Hebrew too. Our days in Rhodes did not excel in Zionist activity

alone, but every public event was saturated with national Jewish spirit, although the spoken language in the camp was German. We took care of the young adolescents so that they would not descend into pointless games such as cards etc. We created a "high school", kind of a popular university, where our book-smart friends lectured about fifteen topics (topic groups). Of course, we could not reach perfection. There were cases in which the teacher did not know more than his pupils did, but was more diligent and readied himself for the lessons.

We did not forget a toddlers' kindergarten and a small school for pupils aged 10-13. There were, of course, synagogues with their traditional quarrels: choosing their handlers, Kosher problems etc. The Matzos, provided by the local Jewish community, had an unusual shape, at least in the eyes of the Ashkenazi Jews. The stricter among us were afraid to eat them and tortured their souls for the eight days of Passover living on onions and radishes. As if to complete the scene, on one clear day three Catholic ministers appeared in our camp in order to accept three passengers of Pentcho to the bosom of the church. These guys (named Grünstein, Grünberger and Georg Weiss – pure Aryans according to their names) believed in the possible material advantages of the ruling religion, missing salvation more so than the Saviour...

The joint Zionist activity began with a sign of quarrels between the two organizations, the Zionist Association ("the Old One") and the Revisionist Zionists with Betar. Only when a young man with principles and good intention was elected as head of the Zionist Association (Asher Dominitz), did coordinated work begin. We founded agricultural training, with the help of the authorities, for twenty young men. They specialized in agricultural work for a daily fee of twenty figs a day... lucky them, the fruit of their labour was not eaten in that place (we were moved to Italy).

We celebrated the Israel holidays with actuality programs: speeches, lectures, skits. These were given on the 15th of Shevat (Trees' New Year's Day), 11th of Adar (Memorial Day for Trumpeldor), Purim, Passover and more. Our youngsters in room 4 – my room – excelled in all these programs. As we had neither books nor resources, we had to trust our memory. We did not adorn ourselves with others' feathers, our artists came from among our brethren. Doctor Pártos (who earned his degree on Pentcho) presented concerts of his own compositions. In balls dedicated to, say, Yiddish songs, Jiccu Schächter did not get tired of repeating the favourite tune "Belz". The "Chief Kantor" Eliezer Perl joined the singers. New stars-artists emerged and flourished like mushrooms after the rain: Jiccik Seinwell, Ossi Drechsler and more and more. They all loved to play their pleasant voices, or appear on stage in any part. Whoever failed as a soloist tried his luck as a choir member.

The good mood and the youth's cheerfulness could not be suppressed even by hunger. When we were too hungry, just then the joy and happiness broke out, as if we were trying to drown our worries and suffering inside the joyful waves. Anci came up with the

slogan: “Each Day and its Program”! On Diamant’s birthday the whole camp was rolling around with laughter. Dr. Heller’s day was celebrated with a comic torches parade and speeches. The Italians could not apprehend us and a Sergeant of theirs said:

- Indeed you are a definitely a weird people! The whole world is hounding you; you are all hungry, locked in a camp and instead of crying – you are singing and dancing... (Of course, we have to add and emphasize for the thousandth time: all this was only possible because we fell into the hands of the Italians. Had we, God forbid, been “saved” by German forces, our mood would have been different and the future proved it in a tragic way...).

The Gentiles did not realize that this was our armament; this is how we protect us from ourselves. This is how we followed the prophet’s words: “Man will help his mate and will tell his brother: get strong!” here, Sani Roth, who already was in our land beforehand, lectured about his travels and his experiences and also about life in the fatherland; another one bored us citing chapters from his book that was never published and never will be. Even when we did not schedule anything for an evening, we searched and found a reason to get together and sing – “from head to mouth”.

Room 4 reached the top of its programs in the summer, when they decided to broadcast every evening “Pentcho Radio Program”. The actuality programs, biting and rebellious that had high cultural values, occasionally threatened to create an internal crisis. This was because the Perlman government no longer enjoyed public trust, and their companion, our Hans Goldberger who was the provider of goods, was even less popular. Sometimes they voiced – albeit in a camouflaged way – news and commentary on political situations in the world and in the neighbourhood. The editors, creators and authors were a number of youngsters, like Laci Weiner (“Strauss”) and Erwin Grünbaum. Ahron Helinger and Punzl Neumann aided the planning and editing.

The days of Passover arrived, the Holiday of Freedom that found us closed behind barbed wire fences. But neither the memories nor the sharp contradiction between the pleasure of the holiday and the gleam of the reality of our situation could spoil our mood. This state of affairs was specially felt by those sitting at the young people’s table. We were very worried about the destiny of millions of our brothers whose condition was so much tougher than ours. We found some comfort in the air attacks that the island received during Passover days. This encouragement arrived on time, because the mood sank so deeply with the news about the surrender of Belgrade and the new Nuremberg laws that were introduced in Slovakia too.

As opposed to our “Radio News”, strange rumours were spread around, sometimes originating from the Greek internees near us and also by island inhabitants who were in touch with our people outside our quarters. These rumours were not taken seriously by us but I will list some of them from the days of December 1940 to April 1941:

- Riots erupted in various Italian towns;
- The United States joined the war (a number of times, until it really did);
- They began drafting 16-17 years old children;
- Turkey presented an ultimatum to Italy to drive away the German units from its territories;
- Hebrew units destroyed the city of Tripoli in Libya;
- One hundred thousand young Jews in the Land of Israel drafted and were moved to Egypt...
- And more, and more, and more...

Rhodes



**The tents camp in Campo Stadione (The football grounds),
our first station in Rhodes**



Residents of the young people's Camerata in Rhodes



The kindergarten with teacher Yocheved in Rhodes



**A veterans' party in the barracks' yard in Rhodes
(Sitting in the middle – Jicu Mittelmann)**



The commanders and instructors of Slovakia Betar units in Rhodes



**Agricultural training made at our initiative
with the authorities' approval in Rhodes**



Rhodes Betar unit – emigrants from Slovakia



**The first wedding in the Pentcho family –
Bonitzer-Zelmanovich, January 1941, Rhodes**



Packing up again – before the second group's journey from Rhodes to Ferramonti



On board the ship Vesta on the way to Italy



The memorial to our friends who died in Rhodes, in the Rhodes city cemetery

Out of Here – No Matter Where

This slogan was of course uttered by the chronically unsatisfied – most of whom were camp survivors from Germany. In the spring of 1941 all Europe's Jews were immersed in anxiety and confusion about their lives. They all felt the earth burning under their feet and their lives were hanging in the balance. They wanted to run away, escape – no matter where. Unfortunately, the escape fervour did not pass us over either. We bumped into people who were ready to replace Rhodes even with a concentration camp in Europe! Unbelievable! I will not bring here the names of these few.

The main reason for this was, of course, the hunger. The fact that in the meantime we received assistance from almost all European countries made them think, erroneously, that the situation there is not that terrible... The management did not handle plans to leave the area, and the public blamed it for not wanting to move out of the area at all. At times, our condition was even better than that of some of the island population. They started sending our children, who were staying with families, back to us, claiming that there was not enough food even for their own people.

There were only two cases in our group where two Pentcho people managed to leave for Europe, thanks to their relatives' connections. The first one to succeed was Elias Finger. He flew to Rome in an Italian bomber! Before his trip he swore in front of the Holy Ark that he would not forget us and would do anything he could for us. (The first part of his promise was indeed kept by him: he did write to his friend from Rome and did not forget to ask him for the five Lire he loaned him here). The second one was a young man too, also from Germany, Heinz Wisla. He promised nothing and fulfilled nothing too. But he did get a visa for Italy, with the help of rich relatives, and managed to reach Israel. Here he wrote a small book in German, under an assumed name, in which he assailed and defamed the organizers of the immigration and faked many details. Very quickly he disappeared from the land and nobody knows what his fate was.

The third application was presented by one named Jicchak Cyter. The German patriotism woke in him and he wrote a message to Adolph Hitler (!) in which he asked the world's hangman to allow him to return to his country so that he could dedicate his powers and knowledge for the development of his "beloved homeland". He was not answered, but fate ended his life: he came to our land with us and his wife was among the passengers of Patria. They were both killed in the War of Independence in their apartment, when Jerusalem was bombed.

If we leave – where to? The question "how to" was not properly clarified by us. The Turkish coast was so near! So why couldn't we cross there on a boat, even in small boats or rafts? The plan was forming in some friends' minds, who added the theoretical approval of the authorities. When "Capo" Perlman objected and wouldn't even agree to

discuss it, the majority demanded new elections. Indeed, elections did take place, the old management fell and we were in “government” again. But these budding plans never materialized.

Some of the people who emigrated from Slovakia were not touched by Zionist education, and with the encouragement of their relatives in their forsaken “homeland” they attempted to receive permission to return there. A list of interested persons was written but the initiative ended there. Most of the Slovakian emigrants informed this “initiating committee” that even if they receive the Slovaks’ permission, they would only be removed from here by force and handcuffs. Another reason for the ending of the “return home” initiative was: the Slovaks did not even want to discuss it.

But this subject raised an agitation in the camp and the enthusiasts clashed with the opponents. They reached fights and clashes and the plan did not get off the order of the days for several weeks. The old leadership resisted new elections, for “security” reasons too: elections were forbidden at that time in Fascist Italy... but in Rhodes it was easier to ignore the regime’s policy towards prisoners. They did not interfere with what was done behind closed doors in our rooms. Among the suggestions was immigration to South America too, that could admit us. But this never materialized either.

No emigration from here? Lack of food here? So, we will continue to eat each other. The new management removed the corruption in both food allowances and products purchases. Instead of additional food we received a calories table... many preferred it to the “Vitamin P”, that is, Perlman, who apparently received some bribe from the bakers and providers, in return for transferring their products to the black market in the camp.

In the meantime, the air attacks continued. We expected them evening by evening, and were disappointed when British airplanes did not arrive. Several times the guards entered our rooms and hid under our beds while we were enjoying the fireworks outside, not realizing that they could hurt us too. Our delight during the bombings did not escape the Maresciallo’s eyes, our behaviour infuriated him and he angrily commented:

- “I always knew that the Jews collaborated with the British”.

He ordered us into the building and forbade us to go out during bombings, so that we would not be able to collaborate. But as the bombings increased, he ordered the firing of green rockets above the building to show the pilots that this was a captives’ camp.

Near us there were Greek detainees too, most of whom were rich traders. During a bombing alarm they were well pressed behind sand sacks and so they hid from the RAF pilots’ curious eyes. They also supplied us with news “from most trustworthy sources” and we swallowed it all without doubting them. This was how we were “informed” that

the English demanded the surrender of Rhodes and that the island was declared a demilitarized zone. We said “Amen” to both suggestions and continued to expect moonlit nights that brought to us our welcome guests.

But the news brought to us by the Italians themselves was even more cheerful: Italian sailors told us that in the fights in Libya some of the tanks that were looted were marked with Stars of David! We deduced from this that the Hebrew Army was founded and was fighting, and our hearts were filled with pride! These rumours sounded plausible to us and the proof was – the authorities increased our restrictions and denied us permission to leave the camp. From now we were real enemies. But the Italian anger did not last long and the rumours were unfounded. However, we learned not to dismiss rumours, as sometimes they were our only comfort. We especially liked the rumours about Turkey joining the war with the allies – because then, at a distance of a few kilometres from the enemy, Rhodes could not last long...

One Grey Day in the Camp

Immortalizing our presence in the camp, so that we remember for many years how we once lived, was my purpose. I sold my camera for food and a little cash – all went into the “family” box (Laufer, Steinmetz, Salomon and I). This is why I could not photograph the situation in which boredom and lack of activity ruled. I therefore moved my desk to the yard, sat in a strategically suitable position and this is what I saw:

This camp was a blocked area, well-guarded, but with no horror regime, no forced hard labour and no continual fear of death. Our lives, the orders of our existence within the camp, work assignment and food were all determined by us and we supervised them. The Italians were pleased that we did not add to their worries and tried not to interfere with our matters.

Early summer in Rhodes. The hour is early too, the sun has just come out from the east, from the direction of the Land of Israel. Everybody is still lying on bed or sleeping, except the kitchen workers. Kopo (Shmuel Kopolovitz RIP, who was later killed in the War of Independence) finished his prayer and approached the kitchen to help in the cabbage cutting. Although the days are long and there is no need to lengthen them by waking up in the morning, people are cheered up by the call of:

- Serving tea!...

The orderly who runs among the rooms is trying to save his voice by announcing his message in the spaces between two rooms. People are not enthusiastic about the

announcement, on the contrary. The sleepy ones complain about the disturbance and walk to the kitchen to receive the lukewarm liquid, made of grass and releasing an unpleasant odour. The liquid is indeed not worthy of drinking, but it is warm and can be used for washing purposes...

There is a long ditch in the yard, and along it there is a pipe with holes in it, out of which water is flowing, but only between 6am and 8am. We go out to the ditch with towels around our necks, having a conversation about yesterday's events. Even Pistreich gets up, although he finished his bread the day before yesterday. But he has work: mending a pair of shoes. He now brushes his teeth with a clothes' washing soap using a toothbrush with missing bristles. Whoever did not have breakfast continues lying down or sleeping in order to forget about food.

Our handymen's day begins with a good sign. One soldier is already at Meirco (Steinmetz) with a thimble that Meir turns into a lighter. Little Miller rinses the tools of the "rich" Podolintz people. This work brings in a meagre pay, but it is a pay. In one of the family rooms there is complete pandemonium – general house cleaning to rid it of fleas. Turo Neumann is busy too – mending a broken bed. Döngö László earns one Liretta a day – he pulls out the bed boards of an old couple, rinses them and returns them to the room. Then he gets on his bed and starts reading, for the ninth time, his book – the only one in his library – "Klari is Going Out to Bad Culture"...

Our chicken slaughterer, Poldi Schlesinger, as no chickens are around, washes his laundry (with no soap, of course). And here – Moko Spiegel has woken up too and he is spraying water drops from his wet hair all around. He later wakes up his neighbour too, and they both go out to dust their blankets with united forces. In room 5, where believers are concentrated, they finish their morning prayers and as they wrap their Tefillin around they argue about community matters that are kept secret from those who are not familiar with these things.

The sun managed to reach the top of the skies when Diamant pulled his Sparrow-like head from under the blanket. He is immediately sniffing for news, but usually creates his own rumours in order to spread them later. The censors sit in room 3: Old Bruno Bernstein and Fritzi Cohen chuckle as they read the letters (internal censorship is important because the Italians are sensitive to writing unwanted details and erase many lines with black ink). Today, for example, Pali Friedmann is writing to his relatives in Slovakia: "send shaving blades, iodine and crispbread, as my legs are covered with wounds"...

In room 4, too, life begins to bustle: the Bratislava corner people finish their thin loaves they have prepared for breakfast. After this first course they turn to their main course: card games. The empty plates near them are set and ready to storm the kitchen when

the signal for lunch is given. All this is in strong contradiction to the common camp philosophy condemning speed and haste in getting food, that is, "you ate first – you finished first!" But even these correct and superior principles cannot resist the empty stomach, whispering and begging "run and grab!"

"There are sheep head bones in the kitchen", the orderly declares in a loud voice. This means: the new management observes a kosher kitchen and does not allow cooking the bones brought in by the suppliers. They therefore sell them publically to the camp's capitalists and with their return they buy vegetables or legumes for all. Demand today is very small. No money. The blockade was hardened. The island is closed even to post carrying ships.

Another industry in the camp: Leibek Seinwell and Shlomo Weiss, who are very diligent book binders, got some coarse wrapping paper of which they make envelopes, a vital and tradable commodity in the camp. Even Ali Mahrer buys them, although writing is very difficult for him. But one must use the opportunity, because as civilian detainees in a war we are exempt from sticking stamps on the letters (one letter a week) and we can correspond with the entire world. Today the camp is one big desk; everybody is writing. Some write in their diaries, some write letters, and the editors of "Evening Broadcasts" are sitting in a room next door, joined by Laci Ickovits, who quietly makes his helpful comments and inserts them into the texts. They say about Laci Ickovits that he is the originator of the most successful proverbs and he is also the author of the programs "Stories for Children", having allegorical contents that already caused a diplomatic feud in our inner lives and also with the distinguished community of the Rhodes Jews.

Our promenade is along the barbed wire fence. Jaakov Wulkan explains something, with convincing enthusiasm, to his ship plan colleague, Iccu Mittelmann. The ship plan pulled the youths' hearts together, although it has no real substance in it. The Italian lawyer, who was called from the outside to arrange the necessary paperwork, is also unresponsive to the planners. Another pair is near the fence – Dr. Halpern and Enci Fischer. They are holding booklets in their hands. Together they learn a range of languages – three at once: Hebrew, French and Italian. Most walkers wear wooden shoes, another handiwork of our handymen. They are wearing short trousers (shortened from long ones) and with no shirts (this is economical too – the shirt is kept in good condition and they save on washings too).

- Take your bread!

At last! Many and good have been waiting for this for more than 24 hours. When they bring in the bread bags through the gate, a long queue is already curving near the distribution place. Some take three or four loaves of bread, for their neighbours too, and are weighing the loaves with their arms to feel which loaf is heavier... but 150 grams

remain 150 grams – even in Rhodes. So, they choose for themselves the prettiest or the widest one and chop the edge of their prettiest loaf to signal that this is theirs.

We reached lunch deliveries, the only meal of the day. This time we have a new order: the camp residents approach the big boilers in the kitchen by their room numbers. Each one has a ticket, presented to the kitchen man, for which he receives two spoons of dense soup (in the camp we call it “compact”).

After-lunch resting has become a sacred notion in the camp. From the outside it is possible to hear the argument about the value of complete silence in the hours after the meal. Observing resting time is strictly rigorous in family rooms with children, or with old couples; but many forget basic manners. Dr. Gross and his wife cover themselves with their blanket over their ears and feel as if they are lying in a dark room in splendid isolation. With other couples one feels the education and the gentleness; man and his wife are lying back to back, regaining forces and resting after the exhausting work of standing in line twice a day.

They aren't all taking a rest. Here, Siega Perl and Zolo Fixler, the pair of tailors, are stitching diligently and nobody interferes with them. Only room 4 is exceptional in this area too. Hellinger and red head Rappel stubbornly fighting their Solitaire game war that will probably never reach its end. Today, luck smiles at Herscho and the whole camp must realize this: he is laughing and shouting at the top of his voice and sends his playmate to Mrs. Mandell asking her to kindly lend him the washing line.

Near the camp entrance there is an ambush by a few spiritually broken people. Their clothes are worn out and they are waiting for the guard soldiers who receive their evening meal already in the afternoon. When an Italian soldier comes out with a plate in his hand, meaning to spill the leftovers into a garbage bin, our people spread their dishes like beggars. The Italian, out of pity, gives few noodles to the lowly beggars and they thank him too with “Grazie! Grazie!” The Italian turns his face away with embarrassment or shame (instead of them being so) in order not to hear the thanks.

There is one more thing capable of electrifying all the camp's residents: “Post! Post arriving!” And then Inspector Antonio appears with the post bag. Maybe I will really receive something... the rooms get empty, people crowding near the window of room 3, Hilwerth is already reading the names aloud and the crowd is quiet. This may be the only minute in the camp when everybody is silent. Here, some newspapers and short novels were received for Gross and his “library”. He himself does not read papers nor novels, only lends his books for twenty centimes a day and the camp gratifies him and honours him with the title “Intelligent Gross”.

Many already prepare their evening meals; not the “formal” meal, already consumed in the kitchen at lunch time, but in private “restaurants” near the wall, where they cook in

self-made ovens and Tibi Laufer's kiosk is cooking for lire-owning customers. In the canteen, too, there are only few goods, there is no money in the camp and even "Vitamin P", the "black" bread loaves, find no buyers. The sun begins to set; one must hurry because soon they will turn off the lights and extinguish the fires. The pairs and commune members (there are some of those, two or more friends managing a joint kitchen and account) dine last. They allocate the soup equally – one spoon for me, one spoon for you. Enjoy the food! Of course the soup is tasty; they are the ones who cooked it! Whoever does not have anything to eat in the evening needs to find ways for suitable entertainment during these hours. The choice is not too limited: one can go and pray, read, play cards, have a conversation about internal or external politics, curse the heads of the kitchen and the quality of food; one can also sing in company or as a soloist in a group.

This is roughly how a [normal](#) day looks in Campo San Giovanni in Rhodes. Poverty and deprivation are everybody's share and nothing depresses our youths. In the evening twilight the number of couples strolling by the wall increases – this is the time and the atmosphere too for solemn contemplations. Some groups are chatting under the trees and the evening fills up with singing voices and songs. In room 4 – Hebrew; in room 7 – Slovak. We can also [spot](#) Madam Regina negotiating with the Italian soldier marching on the wall. The magic word was heard: pane (bread). The Italian wants, naturally, a fair recompense and in the end, it seems, they reached an agreement.

I have to bring the desk back into the room, it is impossible to write in the dark. Inside, some people are already setting their places for the night's rest. But first we go to room 4, to hear the "news". We are eager to hear who will be "fixed" this evening on Radio Pentcho, what is written in the newspaper (the "radio" brings in news flashes invented or made up in the camp...). We leave disappointed. The broadcast was mediocre, mild; they didn't "fix" the tops. They do not want to break the harmony prevailing now in the camp, because the contest about the composition of the mission to Geneva has begun.

The time is 10pm. The orderlies call the camp's residents to their rooms. Here and there a girl lingers in the boys' rooms. Never mind. The pleasant darkness here covers everything. The duty orderly moves along the rooms with his ladder and turns off the light bulbs. It is the time for the interim plans, between getting on bed and sleeping. We chew today's jokes over again, and again an ancient argument begins between the two parties. Politics is not a topic in this argument. A war is raging between those who wish to sleep and those who do not. The latter are winning.

The erupted argument is rather harsh and the intervention of neutral groups does not help here. The storm is blowing: singing, making noise, knocking on the beds and the cutlery and crockery. Slowly the heroes are getting tired. They must sleep and rest a little, because the British might arrive at 11pm and bomb, and then we have to get up

and watch the fires. We hear bitter crying from the children's room, then quiet. Only shoemaker Rosenberg's snoring can be heard quite loudly. His friend pulls his blanket and Rosenberg quiets down. Silence in the camp. The moon rises behind the mountains of Anatolia. In a few minutes we will hear the sirens signalling – an air attack.

A Note about my Book and my Diary

We have many compliments and thanks to the Italians for their behaviour and treatment of us. But I did not realise how strict and meticulous their censorship was, until I bumped into a serious near-incident with them. They summoned me urgently to the commander's office. A high ranking intelligence officer was present, saying that the Italian ministry for internal affairs wanted to find out what was the meaning of a letter I had written to a girl in Slovakia in which I described how we congregated every evening and were singing and that I was writing a book about our trip.

The Maresciallo, who had always treated us liberally, broke up in anger this time:

- This is not Palestine here! No congregations here, no singing Hebrew national songs around here! You better care for your stomachs and pray to God!

This knocking did not affect us. We knew the "old man". I then explained: "there is a large number of us concentrated in here. In the evenings we do not leave our rooms, so we discuss the "ark" plan, that the authorities are aware of it too (this topic has been keeping the camp busy for a while: hiring a ship or boats that will move us to Turkey, from where the Jewish establishments will care for the continuation of our way). Naturally, we do sing songs having religious contents – we are young. We also read out letters received from "home". I personally write letters and began noting the tale of our journey as a book.

OK, he wanted the book. The carabiniere escorted me to my room and then I made the biggest mistake. In a moment of embarrassment, when my diary was on my desk, I gave it to the soldier. Then panic struck the camp: Many ran diaries in the camp, but mine was the most "reliable" one. Every day I wrote down the events, the prices of products in the black market, the meanings of "Vitamin P", what happened in the world, including the weird rumours spread in the camps from various sources, and my interpretations that did not compliment the Germans nor even the Italians. In short: I turned into the most hated person in the eyes of the opponents, whose number had grown since I stopped being the "transport manager". Those involved in this affair were

scared for their income and their security and, of course, black colour ruled the thoughts, including a court martial against me.

This atmosphere, with fear for the future, lasted two weeks. Many had destroyed their diaries. I did not expect a harsh response, after all these were Italians we were dealing with. After a few days, following an investigation by an intelligence officer who was interested in the kind of links I had with Slovakia and who with, the Italians' emotions unwound. At the peak of our worries, expecting the authorities' conclusions, "Inspector" Antonio appeared in our room and asked me to hand him the book I was writing, not the diary. "And what about the diary?" I asked. "This is alright... they will return the diary to you". I therefore handed him the three large copybooks in which I was writing the Pentcho story, hoping that after our release I would be able to publish them under the title "Yet Despite All!" and I calmed down.

Two days later they returned my diary to me and the mood changed wonders. The handwriting was not too readable; it was difficult to write letters clear for others in the tiny notebook. They told me that Dr. Frischer and his wife were the ones "translating" the book to the Italians and they were invited to "translate", again and again, contents that interested them. At the time the diary was given back to me, the most hated man in the camp at that time was beside me – the supplier, the wholesaler of bringing in goods for "black" trade, the man who made a fortune out of it. In the diary I wrote his name, the prices of oil, sugar, rice, oranges and vegetables that were frequently changing. He, Goldberger, hugged and kissed me and immediately ordered 30 litres of red wine for the "guys". Relief for all of us, although I myself was not worried, but against my will I may have probably jeopardized the supply and the freedom of people involved in this trading.

I never saw my large notebooks again, the book that reached its chapter 28. I assume the Italians didn't bother to translate them either. I was re-elected to any position I wanted – but I wanted none.

Of all days, now came up the possibility to launch a two-member mission from the camp to Genoa. The authorities gave their agreement to this suggestion. From there, the couriers would have to cross to Switzerland and discuss our destiny with the Jewish organisations there. The camp had, naturally, divided opinions but the Jewish democracy won and secret ballots were held for the election of the couriers. The two elected were Perlman and... me! To my wonder, I received more votes than he did. But we did not reach the materialization of this journey, because in the meantime the authorities reached a decision which was both fateful and unambiguous: moving the residents of Campo San Giovanni to southern Italy, to the largest detainees' camp of all in Italy – Ferramonti.

Moving Two Hundred People to Southern Italy

With all the humane mitigations, the inhuman suffering remained in the camp – the hunger. From the previous chapter it is possible to deduce that not everybody was really hungry. But as the United States and Yugoslavia entered the war, the support transfers lessened significantly. One young man wanted to put an end to his life; he cut his arteries but survived (only to fall in battle, in the Czechoslovak army in France, after we were freed). Another young man, Marzi Porjes, did not die of hunger but of overeating. He received a large sum of money from home, ate anything he could hold in his hands and stuff to his mouth, got intestinal torsion and died in hospital.

Inactivity bore improbable phenomena and the victims were the inexperienced young ones. Betting games were done, such as, who could gobble in more bread in twenty minutes without drinking water, or who could consume more figs in a given period of time. A gifted sportsman with a pleasant voice (Schneller) stood in the yard and began singing well known beautiful Italian arias – the Italian sailors on the second floor threw him his pay – cigarettes. There were more such phenomena that did not bring dignity to the camp residents. Why? Because we were the National Zionist Youth and we wanted to keep our national dignity in this situation too.

And then, the as-if salvation appeared: the authorities decided to move the camp to Italy. The decision was made known to us in advance and, of course, the marathon of arguments began. For historical truth's sake: the national youth were not enthusiastic with this decision, because: a- Italy is farther away from the Land of Israel, much farther than Rhodes; b- already then, in 1942, we were afraid that during the Germans retreat – and nobody doubted that it would happen – the Jews on the retreat track would be in danger. This was not the situation in Rhodes, being far from the war fronts. We must admit that we were wrong with both issues together: Calabria, our new exile land, was practically nearer the Land of Israel than the island of Rhodes was, and the Jews of Rhodes were transported during the German retreat to the furnaces of Auschwitz.

On another side, rumours said that Italy was richer in food products than its hunger stricken colony, Rhodes. Luckily for us, the transfer did not depend on our arguments and the fact was that the majority was glad about the change in the camp's place. The 12th of January 1942 came and a first group of Pentcho people, 200 persons, went on its way. This time, again, the Italians first selected women, old people and sick ones. The ones left behind envied them and the travellers naturally took all their belongings with them. Old Gewirtz did not forget to drag his old oven with him and Mister Otto Schaeffer carried his two encyclopaedia volumes under his armpits.

Their ship had a reputation among sailors. Her name was "Kalimno". She had been attacked by the British about a dozen times and each time she dodged the submarines' torpedoes. The route was not safe at all. The ship had to stopover by a small island for a few days and terrible rumours reached us about her fate, replaced by a happier news item: Mrs. Bertha Ehrlich could not wait until she reached Italy and gave birth to her second son, Benny, near that island. Even the circumcision was conducted by the religious Ehrlichs on the Italian ship, with the help of a doctor.

We were relieved when we received the first letter from the first passengers who wrote to us from Ferramonti. We therefore continued waiting for the coming events and a few weeks later we were counted and got ready to embark on our way.

A Tragic Attempt to Escape

The life in the camp inevitably changed. We thought that as our number was reduced by 40% it would be easier to manage our food. The opposite happened. Food quantities were reduced and life became unbearable. Most of the remaining ones were young and they did not accept the worsening condition. The young took more and more risks in adventuring, sneaked out of camp every evening trying to dine with Jewish families in town. There were some who already managed to learn the language as much as daring to go to a movie house! (When we think about our life in the Rhodes camp, only a few years later, we cannot stop thinking about how lucky we were not to have fallen in the hands of the Germans). The "Podesta" (the mayor) was meagre with our portions, hunger gnawed at us and discipline weakened. Our clothes wore out too, after all two years had passed since we left. We knew, as said before, that we were getting geographically further away from our homeland and this fact ripened a daring and dangerous plan in the minds of several friends who could not overcome their yearning for our country.

The shores of Turkey could clearly [be](#) seen from the camp, and in our eyes they were not too far. Some youngsters came to a decision (and decided not to tell me) to get a boat in the Rhodes port, paddle to Turkey's shores and there, along the coastline, just like our plan for Pentcho in Piraeus was, reach Cyprus. There they would be in the hands of the English – and everything would settle well. All six were trained guys, physically strong and determined to reach their goal.

The leading spirit among them was Laci Kürti, our dentist. The two "cedar trees" from Sečovce, joined too: Jiccu Mittelmann and Jeshajahu Rosenfeld. Among them too was Oskar Elbert from Trnava (Slovakia) and the youngest of the group, Anci Antmann. The

sixth, Miksha Kritzler, decided at the last moment, when they already reached the port, before sailing off, to remain in Rhodes.

The guys did their preparations secretly. They sneaked out of the camp several times and chose a boat that seemed suitable for them. They made oars in the camp and nobody noticed it. They also performed "patrols" in order to observe the place they would be sailing from. They gradually sold their belongings so that they could acquire food for their journey, and waited for the proper time to execute their plan that seemed to them to be practical and not too dangerous.

As the first batch of the camp's residents moved to Italy, the initiative holders thought it was time for it to materialize. People who were close to the group found out about the sailing only a few minutes before its execution, so that they would have no time to coax and dissuade them out of carrying out their plan. The escapees congregated in Kürti's room and set out to the port from there. It was the night of February 13th. The town was under lockdown, residents were not allowed to be on the streets after 10pm. The six friends marched in pairs in the dark of night with the oars on their shoulders, like rifles, and giving the impression of a military guard.

They successfully reached the port. There they untied the boat's ropes and the five who were left, after Kritzler stayed back, rowed quietly with their oars and went out to the open sea towards freedom. What they did not know (this was made known to us by the Maresciallo, the first commander of the camp, who was actually the owner of the boat) was that the boat had been standing still all year in the water and the sun dried it off. It had not undergone any revised insulation, its cracks widened and water seaped in.

The escapees got about four kilometres away from the coast when the water level began to rise at a worrying rate and they began to pump out the sea water, taking turns. There was a serious fear that they all understood, even without being sailors, that the boat would fill up with water before they reach the safety of the shore that was only fifteen kilometres away. What would they do? They carried out a hurried consultation and decided to quickly return to Rhodes. They shifted the boat back, but the manoeuvre did not succeed. They could not overcome the waves and the boat flipped over.

Only two of the five could swim: Kürti and Elbert. They all fell into the water and began fighting for their lives. Kürti and Elbert began dragging the boat towards the shore; Mittelmann and Rosenfeld, whose heavy boots were not helping at all, held onto the tip of the boat and hoped that with the help of their friends they would reach land. The fifth, the young optimist Anci Antmann, lost hope quickly and began to pray. He murmured "Shema Israel", probably the only chapter he could remember of all prayers he ever learned. At the same time he banged the waves with his arms and legs, trying to hold on. Water had already entered his mouth when his hand suddenly held on to something.

It was a small life belt, the only one they brought with them. The sea itself handed Anci his life belt with which he arrived, after a super-human effort, at the coast.

The swimmers, the boat-draggers, lost their powers and the four agreed that the two swimmers would swim on their own, as fast as possible, to the shore, summon the guards for help for the ones left behind. Jiccu and Shaja agreed. Thus, the two old friends remained there, holding on to a boat, trembling with cold and fear. Two strong, healthy guys holding on to the boat's slippery boards and lost touch with them. Their mates disappeared in the dark of night and they remained, waiting, with only a tiny spark of hope in their hearts.

Soaking wet, shivering from cold, clothes torn and bodies bruised is how the first two reached the coast, powerless. They began shouting as loud as they could: "Help! Help!" – No sound, no reply. The island of Rhodes, under enemy curfew, well-fortified, the capital city and the major port of the Italian Dodecanese – and no guard to be found on the beach... The tired escapees, worried for their friends who remained on the boat's boards, had to run around and look for the port's night guard. At last they spotted a few soldiers. When their officer realised the guys were from camp San Giovanni, actually prisoners, he began hitting them forcefully for daring and succeeding to escape from the island that was guarded so well by the security forces...

They were brought to the island's citadel and only then did they start scanning the sea with floodlights. The sea was smooth. They found nothing. The boat disappeared and with it – its two miserable passengers.

Light broke out on February 14th – and the camp was like a beehive. A military committee, investigations, threats, limitations, prohibitions... we learned from all this that the act did not succeed and our hearts were filled with anxiety for the fate of our brothers. We learned from Kritzler what the terrible truth was. He was captured at night by the guard and brought to camp only in the morning, to get some clothes for the three who remained alive. Pale like whitewash, with failing legs, he entered the camp with his guards and his lips whispered quietly:

- Bagoly is already dead... dead... dying...

Bagoly (owl) was Mittelmann's nickname, the likely guy who fell victim to his love of freedom and his yearning for The Land. With him died an idealist with a pure soul, Jeshajahu Rosenfeld. He was in Betar training already in 1931, but did not receive an immigration licence and only nine years later tried to embark on his way, home to the motherland, but disappeared in the depths of the sea.

The camp was in mourning. We did not worry about the other three too much, for they were jailed in the citadel. We knew they would face a military court and may be

sentenced to death. But we also knew that their judges were Italians and no harm would happen to them. And indeed, after a few days, they were returned to us – shaven, pale from the mental suffering and waited in the camp until their trial would be clarified.

The commander of the camp and the guardsmen were punished for neglecting their duties – by confinement to the quarters. They naturally were mad at us, we were the ones inflicting all this trouble on them; but eventually they were appeased, as happened previously after conflicts. Now we were informed that Kürti left a goodbye letter before he left in which he begged forgiveness for the unpleasantness that the escape must cause the commander (me)... “We could not accept the idea that we return to Europe, this is why we chose this way”, he wrote.

A typical epilogue to this failed operation was a proof to the good heartedness and humanitarianism of the people of Italy. They saw it as a sign and even a miracle. About a week after the tragic night, several officers appeared in the camp, among them one high ranking officer from the intelligence service dealing with refugee matters. They entered the camp with the commander and called me by my name. I was surprised by his question when I stood in front of him:

- What is the meaning of the words “In blood and fire Judea fell, in blood and fire Judea will rise”?

I could see the Italian translation on the paper and there was no point in getting in trouble with lies. I replied and gave them the exact translation of the quote.

- Against whom do Jews voice this militaristic aggressive slogan?
- This is an ancient saying, from the days when our forefathers were fighting the Greek...
- Is that so?... against the Greek?... Well, alright.

The Italian officer handed me an object wrapped in wax paper. I accepted it with happiness and excitement, the way to welcome an old friend who disappeared and reappears now. It was the flag of the students union attached to Betar in Bratislava, “Yavneh and Yodfat”. Our friend Laci Kürti took the flag with him to this planned and dangerous way, meaning to give it to the Betar museum as he was certain he would get there. When the boat drowned, the flag too fell in the water. The waves carried it to the rocks. A few days after the boat disaster, a powerful storm hit the sea, a storm named “Sirocco”. The stormy sea shook and tossed the object to the Rhodes shore. Soldiers found it in the sands and as it looked mysterious, they handed it to the police. This was our investigation in the camp and the flag was returned to us with honour.

The flag was kept together with other flags we had in the Torah books closet, both in Rhodes and in Ferramonti camps, and reached its destination two and a half years late.

Back to the European Continent

After the two hundred left for Italy, three hundred and thirteen people remained in the camp. The economic situation was deteriorating, the town council and other authorities refused to relieve our situation; quite the reverse: the quantity of food was reduced, the formal portions we were supposed to receive remained somewhere and we had to fight for the “Podesta” (mayor) to pay his debt back to us. This for us was “Black February”. At last, we finally received the telegrams coming from Ferramonti. After several relatively light adventures, everybody reached the camp in one piece.

And then came this failed escape attempt and we lost two of our best friends. The news from the state of Slovakia was depressing too, and in order to blacken this month even more, the rumour about the Struma immigrants’ ship disaster reached us. It was the beginning of 1942 and we were already receiving clear messages about the beginning of deportation of Jews in Slovakia on the death trains carrying their live cargo to Poland, to be exterminated.

In this aura came the happy news about our transfer to Italy. It was the evening of Purim holiday, March 2nd: our inspector rushed hurriedly to the camp and announced that we must get ready because tomorrow afternoon we would be travelling to Italy.

We turned the night into a day; working, packing, hammering, washing, making wooden shoes, fitting boxes from bed boards and trying again, for the last time, to do business with the militia men. Our friends in Ferramonti had already reported to us what the most important commodities were there, and what we should bring with us; therefore, our traders hurried to obtain cigarettes and leather goods. But the pessimists, the ones who either way had nothing to sell or buy, mocked them: when we get there you will realize that all these goods will be available in abundance. During our 500 days of stay in Rhodes there were some friends who settled on the island as working citizens and intended to stay there: the two brothers Fahn and also Sydney Fahn’s wife Reshka, an expert in leather tanning, and Oskar Teichmann, an excellent tailor. Even R.M. got her wish: to continue with her “trade” in Rhodes... the three friends, arrested after their tragic escape and having served their sentence in the citadel, had to stay behind. A few months later they joined us in Ferramonti. Only family Fahn remained: Reshka, Rudi, Sydney and baby Alexander who was born there. They were exterminated together with

the ancient and large Jewish community of Rhodes when the Germans retreated. They were transported to Auschwitz and only the head of the family, Sydney, survived.

It seems that only few people remember the last breakfast in Rhodes, although it was tasty and filling: a good, thick pea soup. Many left it untouched out of sheer excitement. We did not manage to complete our joint enterprise, the kitchen, for lack of time. We therefore allotted all our stock as "road meals": every person received a portion of onions and lemons...

We stocked our parcels, growing in numbers, in the yard: tables, benches, boards and ovens were added to the pack. We already had enough experience to make us appreciate the value of every item. Even the smallest of them might come in handy some day. The canteen stock caused problems to some people. From the money that was still left they handed out some 300 lire among the needy ones (well, we did have a social committee that knew who the needy ones were). In addition to the pea soup, each person also received 400 grams of figs.

Fifteen big trucks were needed to carry our cargo and us to the port. We thus left Campo San Giovanni and the island of Rhodes (where we stayed for 500 days and endured 57 air strikes) with no regrets. There were friends who took care of noting the exact numbers ("for history"). The ship Vesta anchored and when we were uploading our parcels, the local navy admiral arrived and forbade us from taking food off the blockaded island. We even left our toasted bread bits there. But nobody disputed the number of parcels and their "quality" (that is, boards, ovens etc.).

We boarded the ship and began organizing ourselves in its belly. Throughout this journey we never stopped comparing the two ships, Vesta and Pentcho. "Our" new ship was 3800 tonnes, 14 times bigger than Pentcho, but it was not more comfortable for us. Here we had to lie in big store rooms with cold iron floors. We were using the life belts we all received as beddings. The kitchen was too small; but we were promised cooking autonomy. The "toilets", quickly improvised with boards, frightened us...

When we sailed off on the night of March 2nd, we remembered leaving eight brothers to fate in the Rhodes cemetery and nine more friends who remained on the island, some of their own free will and some were forced to (the jailed escapees). The captain of Pentcho too remained on the island because his wife died there. We left almost all the belongings that we still had in Rhodes, and also the health of many of us. There were people among us who never went out of the camp's limits and did not see the town from close quarters, only rooftops that were visible from the camp.

The Germans in Rhodes kept pressuring the Italians to hand over to them the Jews who possessed foreign citizenships (like us, for example). A little over a year after we were

moved to Italy, the Germans took control over Rhodes, moved all its Jews to Piraeus and from there, together with the rest of the Jews of Greece, to extermination.

Campo di Concentramento di FERRAMONTI

The journey to the “motherland” was dangerous. We knew at the beginning of 1942 not to expect a luxury trip, the war was at its peak and underwater “birds” from both fighting sides lurked. There were already many blunders and this worried us. (More than once warships bombed and even drowned their own navy’s ships, especially at night). Indeed, we were escorted by two warships and an airplane hovered above us, but we did not want to see our chaperons forced to actively protect us. The ship was indeed old, but her engines operated properly and the group of sailors, we could determine as experienced specialists, was excellent. All the way the Italians tried to hug the coastlines. They took great care of their “precious cargo”.

A disappointment that befell us was on the subject of food. The daily national dish was polenta and this too was allotted to us in meagre quantities. The ship had no canteen and no black market, therefore the more well-to-do among us suffered more than those who were already used to frugal living. Those who suffered more were the ones who did not contract sea sickness. Prostitutes who practiced their profession on the island did not remain out of work. Sailors are, as we know, good hearted people, especially with girls.

At the dawn of March 5th we reached Piraeus port. Good Heavens! How things changed since we were here 17 months ago. A sunken ship’s chimney protruded from the sea; the bustling life in the big factory opposite the port, whose chimneys blew smoke like a pipe, was quietened. Whoever approached us in a boat immediately started trying to barter with us, a sign of starvation. The Greek offered us soap or cigarettes and they were not ready to accept anything in exchange – but food. For 200 pieces of toast, for example, one could get 80-90 cigarettes.

Getting food from us?! But this is where the food stock that saved us on the island of Kamilonisi came from a year and a half ago! And our friends – are giving. One of us tossed a small loaf of bread onto a Greek man’s boat; the old man picked up the bread and kissed it several times – with tears dripping from his eyes. Our heart fell when we saw how the poor man gobbled the dry bread. We could not imagine that the Nazis would be wise enough to deplete this blessed land so quickly. Here we also bade farewell to the Pentcho Greek sailors.

We had already grown accustomed to wonders and miracles ushering us along our voyage. This time we were not disappointed either. At 5pm we left Piraeus and the next day two ships were drowned in the port by a British submarine. Some time after our sailing off, in the dark of night, from the port of Patras, the sirens were heard there, and as we heard from the sailors, there were some serious hits there. Just before we reached Vlorë in Albania we hit a mine field and when we got out of this trouble, thanks to the Vesta crew who were already familiar with this neighbourhood, we almost collided with a cargo ship that joined our convoy. The good spirit of Pentcho did not desert us and apart from the Italian sailors' alarm there was no damage.

The journey was indeed dangerous, but it did not lack wonderful and unforgettable sightseeing views. For example, sailing through the Corinth canal; the view of the town of Lefkada (on the northern tip of Lefkada Island); the island of Corfu, etc. And the most beautiful of all – a pile of shattered German airplanes shot down on both banks of the canal... We were delayed for a few days in the Corinth bay and waited until the sea would be safe from enemies. Our strategists thought that the waiting was useless, as the British knew it all, of course, so it didn't escape their eyes that we were sailing on Vesta, and therefore there was no cause for anxiety.

On days when Vesta was anchored, our handymen again had a chance to work. For example, Sani Fixler created watch straps and those were admired by the sailors, especially when Sani inserted the names of their girlfriends into the straps. With this handiwork he could afford to satiate himself with food. Others tried to fish, but in vain, because what they were missing was – rods, and fish too...

Again we had a chance to compare Vesta to Pentcho (many years would have to pass before we would stop comparing everything in our lives to Pentcho). The caution and strict observance of the ship's balance as we were passing through the Santa Maura strait reminded us of our passage through the "Iron Gate". From there we reached the beautiful island of Corfu with its wonderful view. Occupation did not do well to its inhabitants. A flotilla of boats circled around our ship and the cruisers offered oil in barrels. The Italians turned assertive here; they captured the boats, tied them to one another and dragged the whole flotilla to the police. Some of them managed to tie ropes to the jugs' stems and drop them to sea as the end of the rope was attached to the boat's side. The police were looking and found nothing. Whoever sneaked away in this manner from the police went back and continued their trade.

The most dangerous section of the whole sailing was the last: crossing the Adriatic Sea from the Albanian coast to the coast of Italy. The fear of the sailors infected us too. We stood on the deck, wearing life belts all through the time of sailing along this section. The Adriatic waters disappointed us. We knew it was a delightful sea of light blue, but we just saw a dirty green colour. The blue skies of the Adria too were grey this time. We

were forbidden to leave the deck, but we could “illegally” sneak under and grab [a nap](#) in the storage area of the ship.

When we were already getting accustomed and prepared to danger alerts, we finally noticed the shores of Brindisi on the horizon. We did not approach the port but turned north and sailed along the coastline. We were flushed with curiosity, but calm; with fine weather and easy sailing we reached our final destination – the port of Bari.

Our trip from Rhodes lasted twelve days, of which only 75 hours were actually on the water.

On Italian Soil

We had to spend another unpleasant night on the ship. A medical committee arrived, but they did not examine us at all. We had a general count and they told us we had to wash ourselves and our clothes. Nobody slept; we were all getting ready for our new lives. We were looking for our belongings and arranging our parcels. Here is Dud'l the dealer too, he was setting up his eleven thousand cigarettes. He does not begin a new life “empty handed”.

Carts arrived in the morning, together with a crane that pushed its nose into the ship's hold and began to bring out our luggage. These carts moved a special train that waited for us across the port and stored the colourful cargo. We understood the first signposts we could see in the port: “Be Quiet! Silence!” We were silent.

They counted us again and divided us into groups of 60. We had to march, with a heavy guard besides us, to a bathhouse. The neighbourhood tykes, the unemployed guys and the ones just sitting on street corners, all strolling around the port square, thought we were English captives and quickly organized a noisy demonstration against us. At first they just shouted expletives at us, but the atmosphere got hotter, the crowds demonstrated, shook fists and threw stones at us. The armed policemen (the Carabinieri) explained their mistake to them, but in vain. The mob naturally knows better who we are. Had we not quickly reached the bathing house, they would have lynched us.

The misunderstanding was quickly settled when our escorts explained that we were Jews. Peace immediately materialized between the mob and us and instead of throwing stones at us they began bringing us bread, fruit and vegetables. The anger of the Italians turned to open sympathy and when the train was leaving the terminal, going south, the previously hostile multitudes waved us goodbye with colourful handkerchiefs.

A strange feeling fell upon us: we had not been on a train for two years, not heard a radio for more than a year and a half and had not experienced a warm shower such as we had on Vesta. The train was racing with us, with me on it, southwards, through orchards, vineyards, fields and woods on both sides. The trip itself was not too comfortable. Congestion was beyond imagination and we had not received food yet, nor water. We impatiently expected our "station" named "Ferramonti". We looked it up on the map but this name did not appear on it at all.

The train stopped. We remained in the station of Sibari, Province of Cosenza, for six hours in freezing cold and only then did we continue travelling through the fields of the Province of Calabria. In the afternoon hours we passed through a short tunnel and beyond that the sight of the "famous" (for us) camp was revealed, our place of living for the next two and a quarter years. The train halted in an open field, shuddered and ejected the wandering passengers out of it. With sluggish legs, from the long crowded sitting, broken and crushed, hungry and thirsty we left the train. We were arranged in rows and marched into the largest detainees' camp in Italy, where our brethren were already awaiting us, the two hundred from Rhodes.

We reached Ferramonti on March 17th, 1942.

The "Concentration" Camp

Calabria is the southernmost province of Italy. Its capital city is Cosenza. At the heart of this province, in the center of a valley surrounded by mountains, lies Ferramonti. In 1939 the Parrini company began draining the swamps in the valley in order to build a camp there. The first detainees were brought there only in June 1940, practically all of them were Jews with foreign citizenships who lived in Italy. Apart from Jews, the authorities arrested other foreign citizens as well, such as Greek, Chinese, Yugoslavs and more. But the camp was run by our brethren, Children of Israel, who were the vast majority of its inhabitants throughout its existence.

We did not see swamps, but many of the camp's residents felt the malaria inflicted by their inhabitants, the mosquitos. The only scenery we viewed from the camp was the green mountains, rising to medium heights. The township nearest to us, about five kilometers north-east from the camp, was Tarsia, from where we received our mail too. Tarsia lay on a hill, and a beautiful twisting road was seen leading to it. To our southwest, about eighteen kilometers from us, was the biggest town around, Mongrassano, whence came parcels and a part of our supplies came to. A railway

passed by, a short distance from the camp. There was no railway station around here, but parallel to the rails was a main road crossing Calabria in a north-south direction.

Had you been familiar with the running of the camp, the attitude of the authorities to the detainees, the atmosphere among the local people and the ones who came from different countries, the liberal attitude of the Fascist administrators, the worry about the needs of the detainees and their safety, and more and more – you would have understood why I put the word “concentration” in quotation marks. There is no basis for comparison between Ferramonti camp and other camps in occupied Europe.

Ninety two equal sized shacks were constructed for the camp's residents. They included family shacks that were divided into ten rooms, and every two families were sharing a kitchenette. The size of the kitchenette did not enable two housewives to be there together. The length of the shacks was about 25 meters, their width, 6 meters and the height (not including attics) was about 6 meters. The shacks (camerata in Italian) were made of asbestos boards and were covered with slate. Every two shacks were connected with a hall meant to be for dining, but the detainees turned them into store rooms, studios for youngsters, schools and later – café houses, clubs etc. Between any twin shacks there was another small construction that served as toilets on one side and as a kitchen on the other. Outside, there were concrete basins for washing clothes, but the pipes and the water openings were too frequently jammed.

At the camp entrance were the central store house, the guards' buildings and their residences, and other office buildings such as post, hospital, grocery store and houses of the administrators and the militia. The camp was surrounded by a simple barbed wire fence that was not too difficult to sneak through; every fifty meters, a guard pylon was situated, that was not always manned. These were also the places where commerce with farmers, or black market, was centered.

The Italian commune around the camp was scant. Here and there one could see few houses on the hills. The association between the camp's detainees and the surrounding residents was more than good, really friendly. The simple Calabrian people did not know the reason for the detention of these “educated” people and did not mind it. They treated us with respect, because they realized that on the cultural level, in our manners and clothing, we were even above the “noble” among their Italian acquaintances. When they did ask for the cause of our arrest, we explained to them that we were Jews. But this answer did not satisfy them, they kept on investigating:

- So what are actually “Jews” (Ebrei)?

We tried to explain to them that we were people who were not Fascist. But they did not understand this either. “Neither are we, and still they do not detain us in a camp!”

The place was ideal for a concentration camp. And if it is true that Ferramonti was constructed on the southern tip of the Italian Boot as it is farthest from the German border, we owe tribute and appreciative gratitude to the Italians for their humanity. Indeed we do remember that the surrender of the Italians to the Allies and its preceding period (the fall of Mussolini and the following havoc) brought many dangers upon us Jews, but it is clear that it was never the fault of the Italians.

And now back to reality: we arrived at the camp. Group B of "Rhodi" marched in fours into the detention camp, and as we were entering it there were, together with us, 1415 detainees, out of whom 1070 were Jews.

The first impression, following Rhodes, was certainly good. The reception was humane and we acclimatized very quickly. After all, we were among our national brethren. The Italians did not omit, of course, a preliminary investigation and searches by police agents (the veteran detainees called them "khappers" – from the word "khan" (grab) in Yiddish – why? Because they "grabbed" those who were outside the shacks after the night roll call. When we arrived, the good Italians had to give up on this unpleasant habit because they received from us some lessons in politeness ...). They also searched our pockets and, to our great wonder, for the famous flag too. The Rhodes police was quick enough to report to them that among the second group there was a large number of boys who had been given military training. The Italians were troubled by any organization or military trainers that were not their own. The flag was not given to them. All flags were hidden in the Holy Ark in the synagogue and the Italians were not searching there.

We got some pleasant surprises: we received beds, mattresses, two blankets per person and a chair, too, for each person. What else is needed for perfect happiness? We thought that "concentration" camp was a derogatory name for the conditions prevailing there. The second surprise: members of the 200 group, the first one of Pentcho people, invited their respective friends and acquaintances and offered us bread! Well, there must be something to eat here too. The ugly selfishness passed away and we expected a friendly atmosphere in the new camp.

Every detainee received 8 Lire a day from the governors; from this they deducted 4.7 Lire for the kitchen. Everyone could choose which of the eight kitchens he wanted to join. One could use the change left from the allowance to buy bread and other products. Only the water supply was unsatisfactory. There were eight taps near the "wells", and long lines of queues tailing nearby.

Domestic life was arranged just like in any ordinary Jewish community, with its own bodies. As expected, they always tried to bring in further improvements and here, it was found out, the more dignified ones were fighting for any "job" or, at least, respect. In

every cabin there lived thirty men or women and they elected their “capo” in secret, democratic elections. The word “capo” – “head” in Italian – was acceptable and respected here, with no hint of associations with the German camps. The group of cabin heads elected a camp representative to the authorities; he was the chief capo (Capo dei Capi) and earned respect from the authorities too. In their meetings, the cabin heads discussed and made decisions about all matters and problems relating to our life in the camp.

An important body in the camp was the social committee that had a representative in every cabin. The top forum of this body was the “board of trustees”. Each cabin had one of those and they elected a president of this group and members of management. This committee had various financial sources and the main part of the budget came from the center of communities in Rome, Unione delle Comunità Ebraiche Italiane UCEI, through the Delegation for the Assistance of Jewish Emigrants – DELASEM. This body too had a competitor, named “Mensa dei Bambini”, founded and financed by a warm Jew (albeit being a member of the anti-Zionist “Bond”), the engineer Dr. Israel Kalk, resident of Milan. His representative in Ferramonti was Mr. Mandler and the money transfers (that Dr. Kalk collected) took care of milk for babies and children, toys, sports instruments and even a hot shower (to be paid for) in one of the shacks.

Two huts served as two synagogues; one was Orthodox-Liberal and the other – Orthodox-Sephardi. The Liberal synagogue hosted an excellent choir conducted by Prof. Lev Mirski. We had our Zionist meetings in the synagogues, as well as memorials, jubilees and important dates in the Zionist life. We could speak there freely and without interference. Many secular people joined the Sabbath eve prayers, wishing to listen to the choir, and among the audience we could spot Chinese, Yugoslav, Greek Christians and the police agents and soldiers were moving around the entrance and under the windows in order to hear “Master of the World” and “Walk, my Beloved”...

An important role in the life of our youth was filled by sports club that both educated and trained them. In the framework of Ferramonti’s football championship, the teams comprised seven players only because the sports ground, in the heart of the camp, was narrow and much smaller than the customary ones. In sort-of “international” matches, teams from Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland and Austria competed. They then increased the number of players to nine and hundreds of enthusiastic spectators came to cheer and enjoy the competitions. The union had a serious problem: how do we get, by Sunday, whole shoes of the right sizes, fit for playing? We also held Ping-Pong championships for teams and for singles.

A library with hundreds of books stood at the disposal of readers, enabling them to read and extend their studies there. A café too was founded in one of the halls connecting two cabins and coffee, tea and cookies were served there. The number of cafés

increased until it was larger than the number of kitchens. Besides the choir and its recognized soloists a theater group was founded too, showing several times von Kleist's play *The Broken Jug*, but under these conditions it was difficult to extend its repertoire.

The Pentcho Group Generated a Revolution

We do not mean turmoil and bloodshed, God forbid. The revolution was definitely a positive one and was due to the fact that most of us, especially the second group that arrived from Rhodes, were young people with different opinions and education from the Jews, foreign citizens or not, who lived in Italy and were moved to Ferramonti. A large part of these Jews was assimilated and diaspora was submerged in their blood. We continued our national education and wanted maximum freedom here too. We did not yield to the diaspora habit requiring strict adherence to all instructions only because they were demanded by the authorities.

Among the old-time inhabitants of the camp there were, of course, some Zionists too, especially among the Yugoslav Jews, and we found a common language with them. The presence of the second part of the "Rhodes people" was immediately felt as they entered the camp. This was the first time that Ferramonti residents gained a true "Sabbath Pleasure", for example. It is odd that this event was not to the liking of the assimilants and certainly not of the converted. It is not polite to carry out such a "provocative" act in a concentration camp, they claimed.

Police agents too commanded us to shut up, but we succumbed to the youth's resolve, not only on this subject. The artificial moral of the Catholic Italians was ridiculous at times: boys were not allowed to enter girls' cabins; unmarried couples were not allowed to stroll hand-in-hand in the camp; on the eve of Pesach detectives entered the hall to see if boys were sitting next to girls; they once arrested two boys who were found outside their cabin with no shirts on. It is possible that all this was due to the manager Paolo Salvatore, himself a renowned womanizer, but who wanted to guard the "morale". All these instructions were quickly forgotten after the youngsters of the Pentcho immigration left their mark on the cultural and sporting lives of the camp.

In Rhodes we were not forbidden to exit outside to the yard after the presence roll call. In Ferramonti this was the practice. If inspection arrived and someone was missing from the cabin – the Capo was held responsible for this. The "criminal" himself was put in a dungeon for the night and was fined for the offence too. Our boys made sure that the "Khappers" would be weaned from their bad habit. In my cabin it happened several times that I remained alone after the evening count because all the boys sneaked out to

visit other cabins... maybe this is the way of totalitarian regimes: be rigorous about external items and pay no attention to internal rot gnawing their society.

We were strict though about not ruining our relations with the Italians. We explained to them that we were not meant to settle in their country – we were heading for the Land of Israel. Also, we had no intention of escaping the camp, because one way or another, there was no way of reaching our destination before the end of the war. If we were doomed to remain in the camp, we wanted to conduct our lives in the best and most convenient way under the circumstances. If rules bother us – we might bypass them; if we are not disturbed, we will make their work and inspection easy.

Our skilled youngsters won a good reputation in the camp and could earn a little and add to their allotted food. Most kitchens had Pentcho cookers; the carpenters, locksmiths, tailors and shoemakers worked as much as they wished. Another phenomenon typified the youth of Rhodes: when we had finished organizing and settling in, a marriage plague erupted; as if every boy wanted to be a family man. When almost all the Pentcho girls passed the process of holy matrimony, “mixed” marriages began among the groups.

We reached a powerful status that all elements in the camp had to consider. When an internal crisis occurred, or elections were due, one could see the old “politicians” hovering around the leaders of the young Rhodes group and asking for their support. This sometimes led to strange and interesting situations. One day we were notified about a reduction of the allotted bread quantities. There was a suggestion not to accept the reduced portions. Supporters of this move were, naturally, the Greek and Yugoslav groups, the Communists. But the punch power was ours, because the majority of youngsters was organized in Betar. Therefore, the heads of the Communists visited Betar’s commissioner to discuss the possibility of a joint move. At this opportunity our joint interest against the British Imperialism was discussed, although nowadays the British were our allies in our war against the Germans.

Emotions did not reach demonstrations, because the chief Capo intervened and the argument was settled. But since then, the friendly relationships between the National Jewish youth and the non-Jewish groups having different opinions to ours did not stop. They lasted until the camp was liberated.

The general opinion was – and this was confirmed by both group leaders and the non-Zionist groups – that the appearance of the Rhodes group streamed new blood into the camp. Zionism occupied an important place in the lives and assorted opinions in the detainees’ camp.

The Pentcho group, and especially its young members, changed the atmosphere and attitude to Zionism in the camp, whose number of residents rose to 2000. A new spirit

entered the Rhodes-Pentcho group too, so much so that our members were elected to the camp's institutes and excelled in all areas. When new representatives were elected for our immigration group, I was elected, the former commander of the ship who resigned in Rhodes, through secret voting in all the group's cabins, together with two more members. (We began using the Greek name of the island – Rodos – instead of its Italian name, Rodi). This leadership enjoyed the trust of its voters not only in Ferramonti but, unofficially, after reaching our land too.

Zionists and Assimilant Jews in the Camp

With hindsight, it is hard to understand how it happened that during the very harsh days of the holocaust, the biggest tragedy of the Jewish people and only six to three years prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, the disparity between sections of the twentieth century victims was so significant and destructive. It seems that loathing ensued between devotees of the nation's survival and the objectors of Zionism. Had it only been between Zionists and non-Zionists, so be it. But besides these two elements there were in the camp two more sects hostile to the Zionist idea: the professional, spineless wheeler-dealers of purposeless communities, who were always skipping between positions; and a previous part of the nation: the converted sect.

Our hand was on top in every aspect of life in the camp, thanks to our unity, the homogeneity of our human substance (despite certain groups with no ideology) and our tactical and political activity along our whole period here. The national consolidation, as far as we knew it, was born in Ferramonti. The Zionist movement with its two factions (the Zionist Association and the New Zionist Association) began cooperating in everything concerning Jewish life in general and in maintaining the Zionist character of the camp in particular.

Thanks to our unity and the human resources available to us – in quantities too – we attempted and succeeded in entering our people into all key positions to reinforce our opinions among the detainees. Here, the social committee, with its huge importance under these conditions, fell in our hands. A short time later our representative was elected to be head of the camp (Capo dei Capi). It was Mr. Herbert Landau, an excellent journalist from the town of Fiume, then in Italy, an enthusiastic Zionist, very educated and a man who knew how to assert his-our interests. He foresaw the nearing end of the war (and was not mistaken), a pronounced optimist and a brave man, who did not recoil from travelling to Rome in the critical days in the camp and in southern Italy and return from there in a dangerous, hazardous way after the liberation.

The veteran residents, some of them indifferent to our causes, began supporting this policy. No more separate ceremonies on jubilees or memorials (Herzl, Bialik, Jabotinsky), all was joint together. The youth movements too worked under cooperation and even the management of the sports association was in our hands. Our influence on the education of the children was not put aside either. We could easily beat our opponents who tried hard to get away from Judaism as far as possible, but there was no point trying to convince them. The very idea of assimilation prevented them from getting together, because it comprised the need to keep away from their ex-nation. Their number was too low and it was not hard to push them aside and ignore them.

At first, the number of converted Jews was large (according to the Nuremberg laws, a Jew who was converted to Christianity was still a Jew, by his parents). They came from all over Italy. They had an orderly church (a prayer house) that was supported by the Vatican with the help of Priest Calliste Lopinot, who could not wreak havoc among the camp's Jews after the Pentcho group had arrived. Real Christians almost never visited that converts' church. The church prayers were communists and odd elements who embraced Christianity expecting to receive material benefits from the move. When a renowned engineer, bearing a Jewish name, was proposed as head of the camp and found to have converted to Christianity, his candidacy failed. Many managed to hide their origin.

Those who did not succeed in hiding it were recognized by the expressions on their faces. They pushed themselves first into the Catholic Church. They also had a "community president", a Czech Jew named Dr. Mautner. He was the priest's confidant. We knew he was not happy to see us coming to Ferramonti, he was not pleased with us at all. Anywhere he turned he had to face mockery and sneers. He also had a deputy, his brother to the holy baptism, named Schlesinger. His huge crooked nose left no doubt of his Semite origin. In order to mend the "aesthetic impairment" he wore a cross around his neck that only competed with the size of his nose. On Christmas Eve this Catholic companionship congregated in cabin 1 and had a celebrity meal in honour of Jesus the Jew. The holy meal was so festive that it put the Italian festivities into the shade (and they were angry about this).

The director and center of the Catholics' religious life was a priest of a German origin, a smooth talker, qualified by the Vatican, a typical missionary. His looks aroused trust and he made a friendly impression on everybody. In a detainees' camp, it is not difficult to set a trap to young people who were anyway far from Judaism. Let us not forget that many monetary resources were at his disposal and in exchange for accepting the burden of Christianity the candidate won a pair of shoes, a new suit and three hundred Lire in cash. When we got to know the priest better, we wondered why a clever and educated person would believe tricksters with petty interests.

It is impossible not to maintain honest relationships among the religious bodies in a concentration camp. But there were more clashes between the two Jewish communities. For example, Professor Mirski, founder and conductor of the Orthodox-Liberal synagogue choir, appeared every Sunday as the conductor of the Catholic Church choir too. This was for the good of the camp, maintaining good relationships with the priest. His main concern was to win hearts among the Jews. But he could help us too and he did. His intervention sometimes saved the lives of that detainee or another. The “double life” of the choir conductor caused clashes between our two communities. The more religious could not accept that a man and soloist in a choir that sings in a synagogue could entertain the gentiles too on their holidays. We better not have a choir at all. The religious fights lasted a while.

Luckily for us, the political situation and the worry about our future worsened, and the attention was diverted away from the choir. We had a conflict with the school principal too, a Czech Jew, not a convert but a distinct anti-Zionist. He forbade the children to visit Zionist youth movements whose activities were intensive. But our children were more powerful than Mr. Jan Hermann and his crusade against the Zionist “reactionaries” did not succeed. Quite the reverse: the pupils organized their mates, including children of converted parents and children from mixed marriages, to be active in youth movements. These children became “disasters” in their families, because they quickly abandoned their parents’ religion and returned to Judaism.

Some Eccentric Types in the Camp

Among the two thousand detainees, from different nations, were [some](#) people with strong characters and some were spineless. There were good ones and bad ones, simple and strange, in short: “Characters”. Among the noticeable in them, nobody arrived to our Land of Israel. From the beginning they had no intention of immigrating there, and not because they sinned in Zionism were they detained here. Unintentionally, they attracted attention and curiosity from their fellow detainees. To some extent, they all had some mental problems, and sometimes the circumstances shaped their images, not them.

Here, one old man whom everybody called “Oy Marie”, because nobody knew his name. He did not attract special attention; a Jew from Galicia, like tens of thousands of others. Here he was the type of “Alte Sachen”, “old stuff”, a small peddler by any benchmark. He grabbed his merchandise in a tin box and his sales offers were standard as well. But instead of buying from him, people teased him and harassed him. The old man was too sensitive to their tricks and when they provoked him too far, he burst out

into colourful swear words and curses in juicy Yiddish, so much so that fear fell on his tormentors. People said that his children were living in America and he was badly missing them badly.

Or: Arnold Levi. We did know his name, but he was a repulsive character, unlike "Oy Marie". He wore filthy rags and rolled through the camp paths like a heavyweight ball. Only with the greatest efforts could one peel the clothes off him. This mission was sometimes cast on the soldiers, and this was a most hated thing for him (he only hated the heads of the social committee more), because after all that he had to wash! Indeed, he read many books, but these were not "digested" properly in his mind. He mixed foreign words and almost-literature words in his speech and gave the impression of a formerly educated man. He complained about everything from morning till night. He was always demanding something, especially shoes (the devil knows what he did with them, because even iron shoes would wear out within two weeks on his peculiar feet).

More pleasant was our postman, Max. He brought us our postal money orders too, and when he turned up in any cabin with his papers in his hands, everybody hoped he would turn to him. He respected his "noble" role and spoke to nobody, always rushing to fulfil his duty. How can a man refrain from speaking? Max complemented this shortcoming too: he talked to himself for many long hours and the listeners claimed that he found a great interest in his conversations with himself. He also suffered because of his girlfriend, Regina, who did not make his dreams come true...

Another oddball in our camp was known as Lola. He was a dandy and proud of his "feminine" legs, which he willingly exposed. His stock was clothes. He offered his merchandize on his arm and was afraid to enter our youngsters' cabin, because they immediately began taunting him – pretending to be undressing...

In our camp there was a Slovenian detainee, a gentile, whose obsession was anti-Marxism. He hated the Third International and his hatred took the form of avoiding anything connected with the number three or with the colour red. He refused to live in a cabin whose number contained the digit 3. On Tuesdays he did not go to the kitchen to receive his food; he did not eat beetroot because if its colour; he wouldn't live together with his Yugoslav friends because some of them were Communists. When he found out that Betar members were not fond of the International, he asked their Capo to share their cabin. When the boys saw that it was impossible to get rid of him, they burst into singing the International, and the Slovenian escaped immediately.

Another Yugoslav detainee who was kept for a long time in Nazi jailhouses got so used to his narrow cell (six meters) that he fitted for himself a path, near his cabin, six meters long, where he marched to and fro every morning. In the Rhodes group we too had a "weirdo", but he was nice to people and not at all crazy. He was older than all the others

in his cabin. His name was Marci, and the guys put it into his head that he was a British Intelligence agent and that he had a secret transmitter in the wall. Not only did he believe it, but he gave signs that he knew what was going on in the outside world, but he should not say anything. He also apparently knew when the war would end...

The camp too made its own contribution to many detainees' minds that turned "weird". One was deaf and sang songs nonstop. His voice caused physical pain to everybody who heard him. Another one imagined he was a bear that, as we know, hides during the winter months and hibernates. This man never left his bed from the end of October till mid-March. Luckily for us, and lucky for all our weirdos, Ferramonti was not a German camp and a man could do as he pleased, as long as he did not harm the interests of the public. There must have been a weirdo in every cabin, one who was selected as a victim to tint the grey life of the camp.

People from Other Nations in the Camp

Nobody imagined that the passengers of Pentcho would arrive, after some unexpected experiences, at a detention camp in southern Italy. But it so happened and Ferramonti is an inseparable part of the story of the Pentcho immigration. And so the residents of Ferramonti too, their deeds and their nature, belong to our field of interest.

It was quite natural that in a liberal regime such as we had in Ferramonti, people from different countries would unite by origins and interests. It was not difficult to maintain differentiation, but it was not prohibited to form cooperation among all groups with joint interests. The heads of the groups in the camp were naturally Jews, not only due to their large number, but, let us humbly admit, due to their education, knowledge of languages and their capabilities. Nobody disputed the fact that the Jews there were the more educated, suitable and publically active ones.

The camp authorities respected the international agreements concerning political detainees. One of the Yugoslavs wrote to his homeland, to Ljubljana, and complained about the low quality of food and supplies; and this was in a period when everything was really in order from this respect. The commander of the camp summoned all cabin heads to a special meeting and asked us, politely and with no annoyance, to be honest and behave loyally, if this does not contradict justice. He was also concerned about "what will the gentiles say", the good reputation of Italy in the world was dear to him.

Our first camp director was Paolo Salvatore. He was an interesting man in every respect. A Fascist who turned blind eyes when he saw corruption and bribery; supporter

of a protectionist regime, quick to forget his promises – and his threats too – and his extreme temperament led him occasionally to burst-outs, but to true and honest softness too. On January 1st 1943, the Christian-Civilian New Year's Day, the heads of the camp gathered to congratulate him, and the man, who loved to speak out, said then, no more and no less: "This war is unlike the previous one. This is a sad contest. Today I am the Direttore and you are the detainees. Who knows, maybe in one year you will be the directors and I will be the detainee". His prophecy did materialize, although we were not his guards.

We could only say good things about the Italians, although with time there were some deviations from their normal human way of life. The mutual hostility between the militia and the police agents only brought us relief. This hostility stemmed from the mutual contempt between their two commanders and the competition among their privates in the black market. They knew almost everything about us, they could easily see the trading, but turned a blind eye to it. When the selling of cookies was prohibited throughout Italy, here they sold them openly. When food supplies were withheld due to bombings or transport difficulties, the director of the camp got out and went to the road, stopped in the middle of the road and confiscated rice sacks that were assigned to the Italian population, so that the camp residents would not starve.

As mentioned above, a relatively large ethnic group in the camp was that of the Yugoslavs. Most of them arrived in Ferramonti in the beginning of 1943, having been dispersed in different small camps before. Ideologically we had a deep chasm between us – most of them, particularly the young ones, were communists and made no effort to take part in the camp's communal life. The heads of the communist group, who came from Manfredonia (on the Adriatic coast in Italy) were, of course, two young Jews.

Not less differentiated were the Greeks, too. Somehow, the Italians treated them more severely. They arrived at the camp bound with chains and with shaven heads. They did not mix with other camp residents, but later, the sports, that filled a vital role in the life of the camp, got them closer to the rest of us, the "Landsmanschafts". The Greeks notably excelled in volleyball, and we also learned from them how to avoid the Fascist raised hand salute when we met "official" Italians. We simply slipped in among the cabins when we saw an Italian clerk coming near. We did not like doing the raised hand salute, after all we already knew the Germans. The Greeks wore hats and greeted the authorities' representatives by removing their hats. It annoyed the Italians at first, but with time they got used to it that we did not always behave according to their own will.

The other minority, already in the camp when we arrived, was that of the Chinese. They, too, managed to split into two groups – progressives and conservatives. Their common sin was that they were all regarded as followers of Chiang Kai-shek. Before the war they worked in the marine company Lloyd Triestino. In Ferramonti they dealt in laundering;

they organized some launderettes for themselves. It was hard to understand their moods, because we could not tell when they were kidding and when they were serious. Only when a bloody fight broke out among them and they beat each other up until they dripped blood (and this happened more than once), did we understand that they were really angry.

Among all the Arian ethnic minorities we could not find any considerable anti-Semites, and it was just one Chinese, dark and bad hearted, who expressed his hatred to us. When a delegate of the Pope visited the camp, this guy pushed himself on him and expressed himself to him screaming:

- I am hungry, and my friends too receive very little food, because the Jews accumulate all the food and sell it all at exaggerated prices...

This was the only Chinese who could speak a little German and he even used the word "know". This was soon common knowledge, and our friends from Rhodes blunted his white teeth and beat him up as a retribution for his nastiness.

There was another small group, the French group, which was well known thanks to one of its members, a retired General. The General made no impression on us. He was wearing civilian clothes, of course. His group mates were mostly Corsicans boys with tanned faces, suspected of belonging to Maquis, the French resistance; this group was brought to us a few months before liberation and we must emphasize that they all were brave people and were confident of a quick allied victory. They were not involved in black market matters, but were mostly interested in the political situation. They knew that as soon as their country was liberated they would return to it, and we knew that even after liberation we would have to fight for our right to immigrate to our land. The sense of responsibility in us strengthened our will to hold on and wear our national pride among these gentiles.

Other minorities were simply individuals from different nationalities, although some of them were unique. Someone who was (according to his own testimony) the driver of King Zogu of Albania spoke fluent Hungarian and told spectacular stories. Nobody – except Meirco – treated him seriously. Two adventurous young men from Czechia were here. They escaped from Ferramonti and were recaptured. There was one from the Italian "minority", an old train worker, an old communist. When Mussolini's regime was toppled down, the old man took his stick and backpack, bid goodbye to his Jewish friends with teary eyes and returned to northern Italy, to his wife. His town was captured by the Germans and the old man fell into their hands.

The Anglo-Saxon superpowers were represented by two RAF officers and a Canadian priest. They were not prisoners of war, but civilian detainees. They took part in the Russo-Finnish war as volunteers on the Finnish side, and on their way back via Italy the

war broke out between the Axis Powers and their countries, and so they were arrested as citizens of enemy states. In the Catholic church there were two more Polish men who did not hide their hatred of the Jews. Despite their anti-Semitism and their sympathy for enemies of Israel, they preferred sitting in an Italian concentration camp to living in the “General Government” of Poland at that time.

We will mention here the Christian women married to Jews. We did not have Jewish women married to gentiles among us. The Jews’ Christian wives accompanied their husbands to the Land of Israel, or to other countries, wherever destiny hurled them. These women’s origins were German, Hungarian, Czech and Serbian, but their children were organized in Zionist youth movements, even when this was in conflict with their parents’ opinions.

All the detainees were, so to speak, enemies of the Italian regime. This is why we were arrested... we must repeat and acknowledge that the Italians treated us with humanity and generosity. When the communists began escaping from Dalmatia (then, a part of Yugoslavia) to Italy, they were detained in jails, not deported back to Dalmatia and not handed over to the hands of the Germans. They were deported to the southern part of Italy, the place farthest away from the Germans. The Italians did this on purpose, as we could see and learn later. Three young Jewish men, too, who ran away from Poland hiding under a train carriage carrying Italian soldiers to Italy back from the front, were sent to Ferramonti (in 1943!). In this way the Italians gathered “privilege points” towards the end of the war, and their sure-to-come defeat.

A Quick Look at Cabin Number 19 (35)

I tried to document one day’s routine in Camp San Giovanni in Rhodes, and I will try it again with our cabin, Number 19, in Ferramonti (partly burnt and after restoration was renamed as cabin number 35). It was the young people’s cabin, and we may argue, the most active one in the camp in the most positive sense of the word.

At the heart of the camp, opposite the two rival synagogues, stood this famous cabin. The director of the camp, too, would make a detour when out walking so that he wouldn’t accidentally enter that cabin. He did not feel powerful enough, or his heart prevented him from restraining the young, with their healthy cheerfulness sparkling in their cabin. When a fire broke out from a cooking stove next to the cabin wall, the boys quickly smothered the fire and hurried to play football. The roof was indeed burnt – it was the stove owner’s fault (Made in Rhodes) – but they still did not want to live under the sky and therefore invaded the next-door cabin which was empty (number 20). The

commander was furious and threatened that he would deduct the repair costs from their "Dekada" (the tri-monthly allowance). But after forgetting his threats he ordered the workers of the camp engineer to repair and paint the whole cabin, while we were "ready" to return to the cabin that its fleas were burnt.

Working people wake up early in the morning, in a concentration camp too. Today Anci woke up first. His huge shoes creaked and this reminded him every day of his tragic escape in a boat in Rhodes, because he was given his shoes by an English soldier in the camp of Apollona, Rhodes, where he stayed after his trial. We already got used to the creaking of his shoes and his snappy steps. The problems began when he opened his mouth to sing, and this was hard to sustain (especially for people with a musical ear). But he was enjoying his singing and repeated several times the Czech song, "Be glad and happy for your life, comrade". Then he prayed, because he still did not forget the oath he vowed after their boat turned over, and Anci happened to grab the only small life belt they had. After praying, he headed towards the forest to chop trees. The Italian engineer was employing about twenty men in tree chopping and the wood was then sold to the camp's kitchens for full money.

One by one the woods workers got up and left to the cold of the day. Moku went to the synagogue; he had no choice. If he wanted to marry into the Stern family, he had to make this sacrifice. Richard Brauner still lay on his bed smoking his pipe. This was his big pleasure, and also a breakfast substitute. Marci Cohen was on duty (the Piantoni). He marched with flexible steps, his shoes knocking like a whole company's parade, and this noise caused other sleepy heads to wake up. In the morning, Marci received the portion of Quinine and Atabrine (which we all must swallow against malaria), and his friends burst out singing "the cabin's hymn" by the rhythm of his steps. The hymn, borrowed from the composer Gounod, or rather from his "Faust", was fitting to such opportunities.

Pobudka! (Alarm!) – Icu was suddenly shouting and after this battle cry, who could still snooze under his blanket? And once everybody was awake, conversation began to roll, usually on a new, fresh, interesting topic – women and similar. The room's philosopher asserted that this was "a sexual phenomenon, stemming from surplus stimulation after a pleasant sleep", and tried to shift the conversation into less embarrassing topics.

Here comes the duty kitchen guy, bringing the boiled water. Its advantage was that it was very hot; its disadvantage was – its black colour. This is why they named this water in the kitchen "black coffee". Only old Reiss, and a limited number of lucky owners of some property, who had a stock of sugar, drank this water. The cook came in with the morning news: Stalingrad had fallen! And so the conversation moved immediately to politics, in which the knowledgeable expert was "Kucur" – Diamant.

Someone in the corner decided to change the subject to shoes problems. Out of innately proximate topics, they recalled the football match about to be held today. Upon hearing the word football, Ferike too sneaked his head out and jumped away from his bed. He cleaned his spectacles, having a dioptre of some 30, listening, all ears. His silence came from tense expectation: would he be included in the group's team? If so, he already was deep in and argued about our chances in the match. If he would not play, then black prophecies came out of his mouth and his doubts would sadden his selected friends. (This time he was lucky and he was included in the team, but results were not happy, Ferike let in five goals, and was also beaten up by Hans. But it was not his fault – it was the two guys on defence and the opponent team too...).

The time is 8am. Appello! (Roll call!). Everybody was up already, except for three who stayed in bed: Aussi was ill, Ezekiel was lazy and Mahrer did not want to wash. The Capo handed the police agent the report detailing the number of persons in the cabin and the agent walked by the beds and counted. On his way he was greeted with "good morning" from every side, and he of course he got tangled and lost his count. In truth, seven boys were missing and they explained to the Agent: one is in the camp office (Farber), one is out chopping trees, two in the kitchen, one is ill etc. Others pushed themselves around him and explained, the Italian listened, waved his hand in despair and left.

The room emptied. Marci left with a basket in his hand to get the daily ration of bread. In fact, he was marching with a happy marching song accompanying his steps. The handymen in the cabin got to work too. They had to earn their bread. Pistreich the shoemaker was performing his art. Laufer was sitting next to him. He was learning the skill so that he could fix his own shoes himself, like many others. A joint venture was being cooked in his mind and he was picking on "Fischis" to sell his idea to him. Gabi Lustig had made a mattress for a rich Yugoslav. The mattress was made of simple straw, but its external look was pretty impressive. The two barbers, Brauner and Fischer, fitted themselves a furnished barber shop and arranged it with taste (theirs). For that, they confiscated the empty next-door cabin, where they were scratching their guests' faces with a razor. On the walls they put pictures of graceful maidens. With barbers, everything was fitting and useful (except for the razor). In the noon roll call more people were missing from the cabin than in the morning. This was the Italians' fault; why confuse us three times a day? It was lunch time now. The residents of the cabin arrived from various kitchens, each one full of praise for the kitchen he was returning from.

The early afternoon hours belonged to assorted traders. Old Bruno was offering pancakes. Robert Reichenthal was buying off him (because he had money). And here was Icu Schechter with his goods. Robert bought again, paid and concentrated on his work: inspecting documents from "his" kitchen. There were cabins where we were not to

disturb them between 1pm and 3pm. These were resting and sleeping hours. Our cabin was exceptional in this respect too, they even put up a note on the door: "we do not have resting hours". The traders were coming – but only few bought anything. Those of us who really wanted to have a rest could not do it because of the bothersome flies.

The various bodies' meetings were held in the afternoon, but discussions were far from reasonable levels. The heat influenced the brain too. Only at dusk did a pleasant breeze blow, the heat of the day disappeared and the camp was waking up from its tiredness. An important event was about to take place: the eternal Derby, the match between two strong and stable opponents – the Ferramonti team vs. the Rhodes team. One must mark the field and this was the work of Lazar Perl. Others pulled benches out of the synagogue and were now selling tickets. Anyone who wished to sit had to pay! We did not work hard for nothing and people would not have such a chance to watch such a big match every day, because on the field were contending players from Austria, Yugoslavia, Poland and Czechoslovakia. If Cibi Braun did not cause a scandal, everybody was bound to enjoy it. Both teams had excellent players and the audience, like any audience on earth, was cheering their chosen teams and they even gambled. We could hear curses aimed at the referee, and after the match – a hearty meal for the winners. Just like "outside".

When the referee blew his whistle to signal the end of the match, the crowd dispersed and ran to get their dinner. In our cabin was great delight. We won! Among the cabin residents were two guys from Yugoslavia, but they would find their beds outside in the yard. This cabin is for Rhodes! The two poor guys sat on their beds in the yard because their team lost; and the Rhodes "patriots" screamed a marching song of the Czech Sokol in their excitement. It was worth risking arrest for such a victory. As an addition to the joy, two of our friends celebrated their weddings today, of all days, despite the win.

Before the evening roll call begins, we will move for a moment to Café Sopriko (short for Sonnenfeld, Prinz and Kohn). They lived in cabin 21, but they were all our brothers. They belonged to the Rhodes group. The hall was full and crowded, filled with smoke, haze and Jews. Dejko Sonnenfeld could hardly squeeze through the tables occupied by young people, because the day of the "Dekada" payments was today. Dejko served the cups of coffee. The guests read newspapers, played Chess, drank and ate cookies. Eat and drink, because tomorrow maybe there will be not a penny left from your Dekada! (We forgot to remind ourselves that all this happened in a "concentration" camp).

The roll call went through peacefully. Agent Domanika, who was on duty today, took a liking to our cabin and most of the time did not make difficulties. His mate, agent Amoroso, was a bastard and was hated by everyone. From the time of the roll call hour it was prohibited to leave the cabins, making these hours most boring. The guys spread out, and almost nobody remained in the cabin to "guard home". It also was not worth

sleeping, because those returning appeared one by one (even after 1am) and woke up the others with the noise they were making.

At 10pm they put out the lights and the chit-chat began. Those who returned to the cabin exchanged information. Ezekiel lit up his candle. As long as it was giving light, he could busy himself with different things. It apparently was easier for him to write letters in candle light. Tibi Laufer rolled his last cigarette for today and sat on the end of his bed with clasped legs. He was listening to a conversation between two guys and considered when it would be worthwhile for him to intervene. Solo Rosenberg (a Yugoslav from the "Hilfswerk" management who fell in love with our cabin and asked to move in with us) was eager to sleep. Work in the social committee must be tiresome. Sleep was not made easy. The guys were plotting some kind of practical joke and Solo did not want to miss out on such an opportunity. They heard that there had been an outbreak of diarrhoea in the cabin next-door (21). We were now in the watermelon season and the residents of the next-door cabin had more than enough money. (This diarrhoea was not serious, unlike the malaria that was wreaking havoc upon us).

Well, Meirko the tinsmith sealed the door of 21 from the outside in a "hermetic" fashion. We then heard deafening shouting and banging on the door, they had to get out. In the end they dismantled the mosquito net and jumped out the window. The pessimists among them did not undress at all and kept their trousers on. For several days the relationship between the residents of the two cabins was tense, but who could hold a grudge against our cabin for a long?

Eventually, the noise died down in our cabin too. Everyone needed some sleep; but not yet. Ferike returned at midnight and wanted to get into his bed in the dark. The bed was gone. Having looked outside in every possible place – in the yard, in the toilets, he gave up hope and started singing; but nobody responded to his singing. He began to look among the beds, feeling, knocking over tables and chairs (as if saying: you won't sleep either). In the end, he lit a match, looked up, where he spotted his bed from the rafters.

The time was already 1 after midnight. Was it finally time to get some sleep? Mistake. Eli Mahrer, who sleeps during the day, must work at night. He returned to the cabin with full sacks. Zoli got up too, helping to drag the commodity to the "branches". A militia man entered the room. Not to worry – he was the supplier. They lit up a candle and began calculating, and with Mahrer this was not simple. It did not matter what they wrote on paper, the main thing was what remained written in the head. They brought flour, rice, oil and sugar. The only medicine against black market, commented the philosopher in the corner, is abundance.

I have expanded a little on what was happening in a Ferramonti cabin; but cabin 19 (35) was unlike all other cabins (camerata). It was also popular among "enlightened" people,

old, ideologically far from us. They all loved the youthful spirit, the cheerfulness even in hard times, and the readiness to harness together for the good of the public if it was necessary. There were always guests who wished to live in this cabin, whose residents wholly believed that all this would end quickly and salvation would come upon the People of Israel.

Summer 1943

During this period we felt that these were the crucial months for us, and almost nobody had any doubt in we were nearing our liberation. Our intuition was clear and we absorbed every hint in the atmosphere between the Italians and us that turned more and more liberal. We were detached from the outside world and yet we knew that historical days were passing over us. We even placed some "spies", resembling lazy guys, near the camp's treasurer home, where they could hear the news from the radio.

The older and the more experienced among us, our friends Landau and some other fake statesmen, "determined" the time of the British invasion of Italy several times, but had to repeatedly defer that date. We, the Zionist group, felt greater responsibility for the Jewish public. We knew that Tunisia was already freed, the Russians were chasing the Germans out at speed, and that the big invasion could not be far off.

In those days the German Foreign Minister, Ribbentrop, visited Rome. Father Calliste told us that the German minister demanded the extradition of the detained Jews, first and foremost – the Jews of Ferramonti. Prior to that, the heads of camp detainees prepared a memorandum on our situation in the camp, and with the help of the Vatican we asked to forward it to President Roosevelt. It is difficult to tell today whether the memorandum ever reached its destination, but the fact is that the Italians told the Germans: No!

We began to feel freer and the authorities' discipline dwindled a great deal too. We were allowed to go down to the river (Crati) to wash and sunbathe, in a certain order of course: people from one cabin or two together. We would leave the camp singing Hebrew songs, as the accompanying soldier beat his cane to the rhythm of our marching choruses. Prohibitions were not taken seriously anymore. In the camp area one could find forbidden products being openly sold: eggs, bread, cookies, cigarettes and even meat. We began planting vegetable gardens near our cabins. In other places chicken runs popped up – just like in a free civilian camp.

During this summer our internal relationships improved too. Competition between the representatives of the cabins' heads and the social institute (Hilfswerk) fizzled out altogether. The positions were allocated and their authorities were determined: the cabins' heads would deal with economic and security matters and the Hilfswerk would take care of social help and deal with immigration issues. We began discussing emergency steps if anarchy and chaos should fall upon us, because the authorities – if they remained in the camp at all – would have no time to take care of us. It was decided to hoard food supplies in the kitchens for the transition days. But, as usual, discussions outnumbered actions. We were not concerned.

Another subject worried us. Still before the Allies invaded southern Sicily we considered the possibility that Italy might turn into a battlefield. Who would protect us then? Just in case, we decided to create a camp protection squad. Indeed, we did not really know what duties we could perform with our negligible powers in case the enemy acted against us. Shall we disarm the guardsmen? That would not be too difficult, but what would a few lousy Italian rifles be against one German tank? Nonetheless, we created a "defence council" in which all minorities were represented. The French delegate was their old General. We had grave doubts about his experience and effectiveness in our situation. Besides, the young internees did not support him and certainly were not at his disposal. Representatives of the Yugoslavs (actual representatives, as they sent a different person to every meeting) took part too; Misu Adler, who was a Captain in the Czech Legion, the Betar commissioner (who represented the majority of the younger internees in the camp, trained them for sacrifices) and several "experts", complemented the committee.

We knew well – as Jews and as Zionists – that in times of danger we could only trust in our own forces. We also knew that when a crisis arrives, every group would be engaged with its own matters. The big, crucial days were nearing. The Italians too sensed the change in the political weather. In those days we were visited by Dr. Kalk from Milan and we held a celebration for the camp's children. This was the first time during our stay in the camp that a militia captain took part in our festivities and his children even competed with our children in games.

There was another visit that turned into an important event, both to us and to all the Italian neighbourhood residents. This was the visit of the Pope's delegate, Cardinal Borgoncini Duca, who was received with honour by all the camp residents of all sections, and of course by the governors' delegates, who all appeared to welcome him.

For us, this visit had a special meaning. The Cardinal came accompanied by the entire Italian ensemble to the Jewish synagogue, where he was welcomed by Rabbi Dr. Adler and by the cantor, both covered in prayer shawls, and the gentiles packed the synagogue with skullcaps or handkerchiefs on their heads. They were more astonished

than we were to hear the words of the Cardinal that were full of admiration for Israel and our bible. The Cardinal said, among other things:

- Many communities and people of various religions are living in this camp, but we all believe in one God. Your Bible is the foundation of Christianity. The chapters of Psalms are our prayers and your prayers. It is written in Psalms: When the Jews sat in Babylonian exile it was required that they sing the songs of Zion. The Jews answered tearfully: "How can we sing the song of God in a foreign land?". You do not have to cry, because your prayer was heard and soon you will be granted to return to your fatherland. (Summer 1943).

This was, of course, a big day for the whole camp and especially for us, who were on our way home. We were happy to hear the words of Mr. Landau, the Capo dei Capi (the elected head of the detainees), who spoke of our wish to receive recognition of the world for national independence, as befits an ancient nation. The People of Israel, too, wanted to have a piece of land, their own corner on this planet – in their old homeland. Much as we were proud of Landau's speech, we were disgraced by the shameful behaviour of some other little Jews. In a single case, when a unit of German soldiers happened to enter our place, we had to put up guards in order to prevent these disgraceful Jews from befriending the hangers of our nation. When the Germans washed in the shower rooms, these disgraceful Jews approached them and asked them various questions. One woman even asked them for bread for her little son.

The visit of the German soldiers, although marginal and meaningless, almost ended with a tragic disaster. One young Yugoslav doctor was taking a shower when the Germans opened the door and entered the shower room too. The guy was shocked, and he was muted by the sudden fright. The doctor's friends claimed that he did not lose his talking abilities because of the shock, but because he vowed never to utter a sound until he sees the first Allied soldier. This other version was apparently correct, because after liberation he was "cured".

Around us, history was storming. There was commotion everywhere, yet we continued our life's routine. Despite the daily emerging problems, many behaved as if they had no idea what was about to happen, maybe in the very next days. As if nothing interested them. Maybe this is human's nature, denying any troubling factors, hiding any inconvenient matter under the threshold of consciousness. One said: "what would I give to fall into a deep sleep while this storm is raging, and wake up when it is all over..." A completely wrong view of life, because there is no winning with no effort and practice. The events of 1943 occurred practically right in front of our eyes. We lived to see the materialization of a whole generation's dream.

It was the night of July 12th. The people of the camp slept a deep sleep. Someone entered our cabin and woke me up, still whispering with excitement:

- Get up quickly! Mussolini has resigned! Badoglio has taken over the rule!

[King Victor Emmanuel's pressed Mussolini to resign as no country would sign an armistice agreement with him, and selected Pietro Badoglio as the prime minister].

None of us doubted that this was the end of the war. Some were kissing and began dancing with themselves. The way to freedom was broken through. We accepted the message as if it was expected and obvious. People from different nationalities received the events, some with happiness and some with hesitant restraint. The French General limped from one cabin to another and his face wore an expression of self-importance when he called people to get up, get dressed and keep cool. He did not reach our cabin. He knew us and he knew we could manage without him. In any case, our cabin enjoyed respect by all gentiles in the camp. We were not too excited, did not get dressed and did not worry. One who had just woken up even murmured:

- What? Mussolini has resigned? So why are you so thrilled? We can now sleep safely...

The Yugoslav neighbours behaved totally differently. They were young, new in the camp and their cabin head, a young Jew, instituted a military rule there. They all got dressed, set a guard in front of the cabin and began packing their belongings. At dawn they were already ready for transport. When they saw a morning in which the whole camp was quiet, some of its residents still sleeping, they returned to their cabin and dismantled both their packets and their enthusiasm.

How did the Italians accept the change over? This is what we were interested in the next morning, and there was a very good reason for our curiosity. Here came the first change: the Police agent came alone to the roll call, without a militia soldier, and on his coat flap the fascist badge was missing. He entered our cabin, sat down near Landau (who in the meantime moved in to live with us out of loving our brothers and revulsion from the assimilants in his former cabin), and the head of the Jewish group congratulated the Italian for the happy occasion, as the noble Italian nation was saved from the chains of tyranny. The police agent agreed with him and declared, as a self-understood fact, that he had always treated us with sympathy and now, too, he wished us that we would reach our desired destination soon.

A real idyll. But what's the point in continuing the war? Even a blind man could see that further struggles would only entail more victims both in men's lives and in material. While we are talking, a rumour already arrived about the dismantling of the Fascist

Party, and in our minds Badoglio was already holding negotiations about peace, or about a cease fire.

We should have noticed the other side of the coin too: the Germans did not sit still and we saw German armoured units speeding towards the south. Day and night, nonstop, the German reinforcement was flowing. The chained driven vehicles and the armoured units shook our hearts. What would our destiny be? It seemed that the Germans were determined to prevent the Allies from landing in Reggio Calabria (a coastal town at the tip of the Italian boot opposite Messina in Sicily). But Sicily was almost completely liberated and the landing of the British forces was a question of only days away. And then? What will happen when the German masses retreat right next to us on the main road passing adjacent to the camp? Will they find time to "take care" of us?

On the other hand, actions of the Allied air forces increased. The American bombers passed above us in daylight, albeit at high altitude, and bombed Italian bases and towns. We were certain that every single pilot knew about us, and surely received instructions not to hit Ferramonti camp. No, nothing bad will happen to us. And again there was pleasure in the camp when the echoes of far-away explosions reached us. Here, they are already coming, already approaching. Soon we will be freed. The peak point of our stay in the concentration camp was coming near. Everything was blazing, boiling and roaring around us. The invasion force of the Allies might land any minute on the land of Italy!

Ferramonti



A model of Camp Ferramonti



The largest concentration camp in Italy: Ferramonti di Tarsia



One of the Women's cabins in Ferramonti



The dormitory (camerata) of Pentcho's women from Rhodes in Ferramonti



**Cabin No. 19 (35) with the head of the Jewish camp detainees
(Capo dei Capi) Herbert Landau**



**Zvi (Ewald) Weiss (right), the author, Ossi Drechsler
and the half-burnt cabin number 19**



Baking matzoth for Passover, spring 1943



The wedding of Shosha and Citi in the synagogue yard, August 1943



Moshe Shertok (Sharet) with the members of cooperatives
After the liberation, 1944



Young Betar and its instructors in Ferramonti, 1943



**Visit of the Rabbi of the Genova Jewish congregation, Italy,
Professore Riccardo Pacifici in Ferramonti, 1943**



A reception to the Pope's emissary, Cardinal Borgoncini Duca, 1943



A reception during the visit of the Pope's emissary, Cardinal Borgoncini Duca



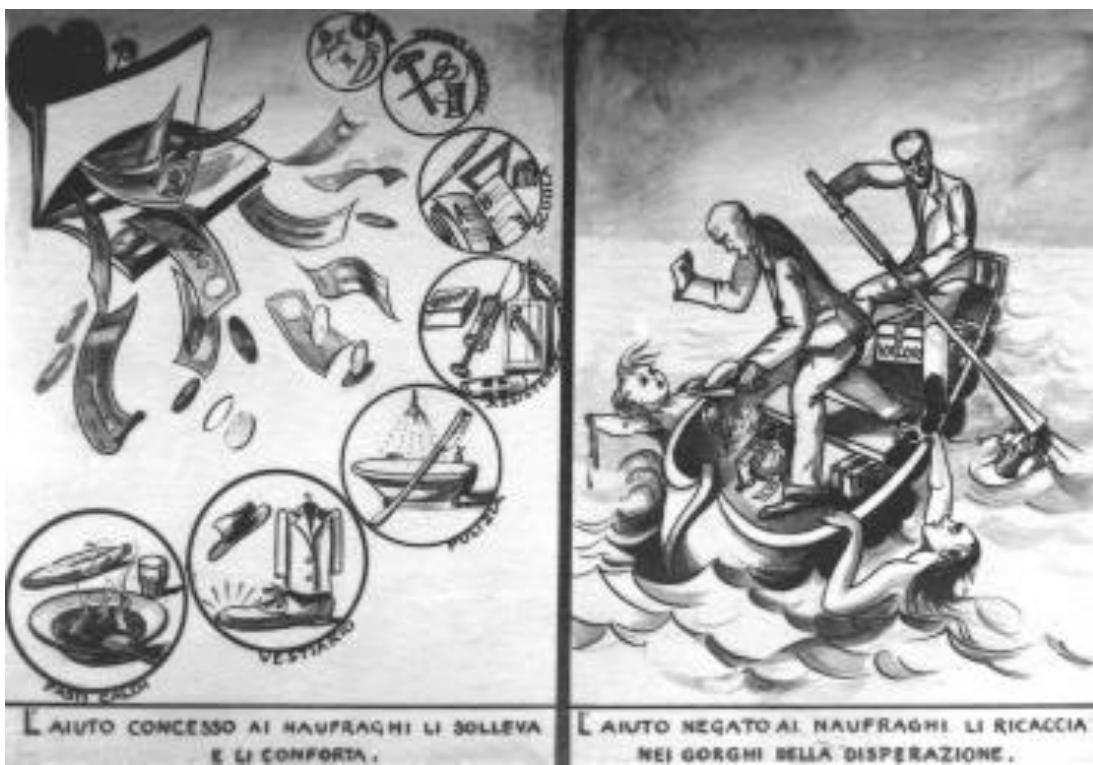
The Italian command with Reverend Peter Calliste:
The Direttore, the Maresciallo, the secretary and the treasurer



Rhodes football team versus Ferramonti football team, 1943



Lester (of "Poland" team) kicking penalty in the camp's center court, 1942



Drawings in magazines of Dr. Israele Kalk, "Mensa di Bambini"



A concert by the Jews' choir for the benefit of war casualties in the district town Cosenza, conducted by Prof. Lev Mirski in a city cinema



Soldiers of the Jewish Units with their truck entering Ferramonti, autumn 1943



The “Land of Israel” office in Ferramonti



"Ferramonti" hotel and restaurant near the former detention camp

Black Friday

The date was August 27th. Friday. A stuffy day, like any day of this season in Calabria. By the rear fence, the black market deals, or barterings, were being conducted with the Italian farmers with no disturbance, even in the presence of soldiers (who only changed their black shirts). On the western side, a few meters from the fence, on the main road, the first German tanks were already retreating towards Tarsia. We were standing there, a number of friends, watching the German convoys passing in front of us, deliberating. How can we blow up, in the right time and place, the only road standing at the Germans' disposal? How can we gravely sabotage their retreat? With all this mental effort we, the amateur partisans, forgot that we did not possess even a gram of dynamite.

This did not deter us from continuing to plan some blow to the retreating German forces. We felt that the practical possibility of our plot was minimal and time would not allow us to begin preparations for it. But still we tried to buy weapons and ammunition from the Italians. By the information we had, there was one Italian willing to supply the goods. When he heard our proposition he quickly ran away in horror. He would not even hear of it. So, we woke up from our dreams and dedicated our next moments to another pleasure: the sight of the bombing of the important Sybaris road junction in our neighbourhood. The aerial distance of the cross section from us was not too large, so

that we could clearly see not only the airplanes, but the falling bombs too. And suddenly – a huge explosion terrified the neighbourhood. We heard that an ammunition train exploded and blew up into the air.

The time was 3pm. After their bombings, the airplanes return southward; this is how it was this day too. They flew at high altitude and we only counted twenty of them. We noticed two German fighter planes chasing “our” airplanes. The air battle took place in the skies right on top of our camp, at the detainees’ amusement. The French even waved their handkerchiefs and the Yugoslavs rubbed their hands together with glee. And we, the Jews, hardly found the correct expression for our happiness. On one hand, we were very sorry about the suffering of the Italian population, but on the other hand we were worried if there was any doubt that the pilots would notice, at their high altitude, that this was a concentration camp.

Only yesterday I wrote in my diary about the air attacks, that they were “a wonderful sight”. But the airplanes turned this day, August 27th, into a black day. When our two unforgettable comrades drowned in the sea of Rhodes during their failed attempted escape, the other people in the camp did not face any danger. But bombs dropped from the air cannot distinguish between good people and bad people, whether they fall purposely or by mistake. One of the planes, probably American, lagged behind its squadron, flew low and passed at a very low altitude by the eastern fence of the camp. We thought he wanted to perform a forced landing, but suddenly fire blew out of its guns, we heard a strong rattle and a big noise and we were afraid it might fall down. The onlookers instinctively lay on the ground and looked for cover. At first we thought the airplane went on fire, but this was not the case. It passed over us and disappeared very quickly towards the south, its body almost touching the cabins’ roofs.

What has happened here? A prank or an attempted attack? We saw residents of the northern cabins running with fear. And suddenly we were scared too – who was being carried there on a bed?!

The first impression in our minds was a malicious attack of a civilian camp. Many saw the star on the airplane, but we were all convinced that this was a German airplane, maybe disguised as an American. In the end we found out it was a Canadian plane and the pilot made a tragic error. He noticed the guard posts around the camp, thought it was a military base and decided that as he dropped his bombs in Sybari, at least he would release two volleys from his machine gun. He then noticed the rushing around in the camp and saw women and children, but this was too late and he ran away.

It was a day of disasters and also of miracles in Ferramonti. Miracles? The Frenchmen’s cabin caught fire, but nobody was hurt. Bullets penetrated through four or five walls in the families’ cabins, but miraculously nobody was in their track. Armour piercing bullets

got stuck in beds on which people were sleeping only minutes before. A mother and her daughter hid under a bed and the bullet hit the bed only. In one place the bullet passed through two walls, entered the dining room, hit a table and split into two. Two friends of ours were standing on the way the bullet passed, but only heard the two parts falling and nothing more.

The Canadian pilot's error cost us four dead and sixteen wounded. Erwin Guen, an educated, modest man (he edited "Pentcho Newspaper" on the ship and worked in the ship's engine room) was standing at the door of his cabin, together with his wife and friend, looked at the planes and suddenly collapsed. A bullet hit his lungs and he died on the spot. Chaviva Rosinger-Weiss sat on her bed sewing when two bullets pierced through the wall and wounded her in the stomach. I was with her until they took her to hospital; she suffered terrible pains and I tried, in vain, to calm her down and comfort her. The third dead man was Olek, a young man from a Slovenian village. The fourth one was an elderly Yugoslav, shells amputated both his legs and he died on the way to hospital.

By coincidence, an Italian General, commander of the southern front, arrived at the camp at that time. He was very moved and hard to believe – he shed tears! The General apologized and emphasized that the attacker was not from the Axis Powers (the "axis" was broken in the meantime). In his company was a German speaking officer who thought that, indeed, the plane was German but the pilot was surely English...

With these emotions inside us we had a tough talk with the General. We presented many demands to him. First of all, get rid of the fence around the camp so that we could run to the mountains in case of another attack. We also demanded that they built shelters for us, because the cabins could not stop even simple bullets. Also, we asked them to install alarm points and to mark the place in a prominent way with a Red Cross sign. We also demanded to light the camp at nights and to make steps to move Ferramonti residents to farther villages, because after this attack we felt that Ferramonti was not a safe place for us anymore.

The shock and the pain for the victims made us ignore the recognition that there was no safer place in all Italy. The war reached towns and houses. The land was bleeding. Even burying our dead could only be done under life risking conditions. Guards of honour, comprising young people from all Zionist movements, stood all night by the two dead from the Rhodes group. We bid goodbye to our dead at 6am, in the synagogue yard. Only ten people could accompany them to the cemetery in Tarsia. There was very busy traffic in the road because of the retreating German forces, and taking part in a funeral was a life threat. It hurt us to lose such two faithful Zionists on the verge of liberation.

The next day we held a mourning ceremonial in a square among the cabins with hundreds of our and other people present. The big choir sang mourning songs. One of the camp's veterans, Mr. Lehmann, wrote a prayer especially for this occasion. The camp manager and the secretary arrived too, but they only managed to hear the prayer "God Full of Mercy" and the singing of "Hatikva" ("The Hope").

Our Last Detention Days

We returned to the regular daily schedule in the camp, hoping that by the time salvation arrived, destiny would not demand more sacrifices from us. The hours of weeping and anxiety were gone, but events were proliferating in the world. Nerves were tense and there was unending restlessness. In such days everyone was more concerned about his family and less for himself. People were selling whatever they could; farmers bought all and stockpiled some stock too. The local mountains population was afraid too of food confiscation when the Allies arrived, as happened when the Germans invaded.

There were no visits to Cosenza at that time, the town suffered badly from bombings and many houses were destroyed. Most of the population ran away and dead bodies and amputated body parts were rolling around in the streets. The rattle of airplanes continued; we heard the echoes of the bombs and all this played on our nerves too.

The authorities were still trying to maintain some order in the camp, but none of them really imagined that things would ever be the same as before. The camp guards, soldiers as well as policemen, took off their uniforms and put on civilian clothes. They sat together with us "to analyse the situation" and calculate the end, that is – when would the British arrive here? The days were full of excitement and anticipation for the good things to come. And the hours crawled by.

September 4th – our most crucial days were just around the corner and we felt that we were entering a corridor leading to a period of global history. Rumours were being spread, then more rumours. People said that the Anglo-American marines had already reached the port of Paola, south-west of Ferramonti, on the coast. The "Direttore" travelled, together with Landau, to Tarsia to listen to battery powered radios (powerhouses went out of control as a result of the massive bombings, unforgettable for me because they happened on my wedding night). In Tarsia too, the citizens were weeping and packing up. They surely could go to their relatives in the mountains. One soldier asked our boys for civilian clothes and promised that in return he would take them to his nearby parents' house.

There was a water problem too. The Crati River was dry. There was a brook flowing near us, but the stream was slow and weak. In spite of this, people were queueing up there and brought water for drinking, after boiling it, of course. The camp was relatively quiet. We went out with Landau, the Italian engineer and two more Jews, to the mountains. We were looking for a suitable area to move the detainees to temporarily. Indeed there was room, but man cannot live on room alone. We found a small, nicely sheltered (not from the air) valley, but there was not enough water there for hundreds of people and more. The weather promised rain, and in the valley selected for the evacuation, one could sunbathe or rest, but not sleep under the sky on a wet ground.

Evacuation soon became our main topic. Quick entrepreneurs began taking care of it in an “organized” fashion. They considered self-evacuation. They began preparing lists and asked the camp residents where they would like to be evacuated to. Everyone should write his preferred region. The most practical this time too were our camp’s young ones from Pentcho. They wrote down: evacuate to the Tel Aviv region...

September 5th – this was a Sunday. The rear gate was open but for some reason the guard was still there. Many were already dragging their bundles, even police and militia ex agents. In fact – we were free! But this was not how we imagined our liberation.

Inside the camp the kitchens were still operating. One could get food from the farmers, but it was only served for cash. The Jews, whose number reduced every day, sat and argued. They decided that security outside the camp was not higher than inside it.

The main entrance gate to the camp was closed. A few meters from there, German tanks were practicing the rules of a flexible front, i.e., retreat. We had 50,000 Lire in our box, received from DELASEM, but this was confiscated by the Italian manager saying that without money he could not get food. He got some food. The “Czechoslovak” minority (we) organized rangers going out in different directions, beyond the “borders” too. We wanted to see if the retreating flow was weakening. Other groups were doing nothing, but in front of our common enemy we did not argue today, not even with the stubborn assimilants.

We found out more information – when the Allies entered the town of Catanzaro and the population threw flowers at them. Where can we get flowers from? At the moment we were more worried about the people of low means who had to eat, and we had to care for them. We did. The rich bought them meals too.

September 6th – German cars were speeding southwards, empty, and returning fully packed with commodities and items stolen from the inhabitants. Once in a while a car like this entered the camp. The German soldiers drank water hastily, asked nothing and hurried northwards. When the message arrived that the Allies were already nearby, in

the port of Paola, the police agents ran off in the night but returned the next day saying that it was just a rumour.

The barter of food for goods was at its peak. Those without cash found a way to enjoy life from a few reserves: they sold blankets, mattresses, beddings and even beds – property of the camp. Local folk came in with carts to transport the immigrants to the mountains for agreed travel fees.

September 7th – the camp was buzzing like a disturbed beehive. Everything was moving nervously. The people still left in the camp argued and discussed all the subjects that were uppermost in their minds. They were trying to calm each other down and this was not too difficult, because the nervous ones were already in the residents' dwellings on the neighbouring hillsides. Despite all this we were nervous. If someone slammed a door – the others were shaken. The manager was still in place. He summoned the heads of cabins that still remained here and announced that he was going to leave tonight, with Landau, to Rome, to the ministry of internal affairs, to discuss with them our status in the newly formed situation.

As we were discussing and listening to plans, thirty six American bombers appeared over the camp skies. The assembly quickly dispersed, because German field cannons began firing on these airplanes. Luckily for us, they did not respond, as if these were mosquitos bothering them. The troubles of the day were not over yet. In the afternoon, seventy Allied airplanes appeared and we wished them luck: "Leave out in peace and come back in peace".

September 8th – the "Exodus" continued. Acquaintances and neighbours were suddenly disappearing without saying where they were heading. Others spent the night on the bank of the river and returned to the camp in the morning. One local expert explained that it was safer near the river, because the bombs mostly fell into the water.

In a short tour among the cabins we determined that about 70% of the camp's residents had already left with their belongings. Members of the Yugoslav group, mostly non-Jews, left in an organized way. They wore short trousers and backpacks and disappeared in the mountains heading north-east. We never saw them again.

The Italians too were not guarding us anymore, and the disappearance of soldiers from their shift did not raise any concerns. An Alpine soldier happened to pass through the camp and he insisted that south of Cosenza they did not see even one German soldier. The Italians were tired.

This must be the end! No radio, no electricity, no water, no guard, no management, no kitchen, no mail and no resistance. So why, blast it, are they holding back? Why? Yesterday, the Direttore still forbade us to leave the camp. The Captain stood at the

rear gate with an armed gun. Who paid attention to them? The farmers' carts with donkeys appeared, got paid 300-500 lire for one trip. Gone for good was the period of "vinceremo" (we shall win), "resistiamo" (we will resist), "ritorneremo" (we shall return) etc. A new period had arrived, its buzzword would be – "noi ci arrendiamo", we give up.

And on that evening, September 8th 1943, we began to see the first signs of the end of the war. In any case, for us it was, because we had not finished our journey yet.

The Italian Surrender

We were having dinner when they called us. Outside, a vigorous debate was in progress:

- Look! Look! There! There! Towers of fire... and not just one, many!
- What are you talking about? Those are rockets.
- Nonsense! Cosenza has been burning for several days now! Probably the woods nearby went up in flames!
- In my opinion, these are phosphor bombs that the Americans dropped to help find their targets at night...
- And are those the English who dropped the Phosphor packages?
- Stop it! Do you think the English can't see at night? Don't you notice that there are lights on all the hills?! Here, in Tarsia too!

It was not hard to understand that these were bonfires lit on the mountains and were quickly moving our way. We stood by the south-eastern fence and watched this "natural phenomenon" that undoubtedly had something to do with the war. The time was 8pm, September 8th. Within a few minutes fire spots began spreading in all directions. The small trough in which our Ferramonti lay was surrounded with bonfires. We did not have to wait long until the reason for it became clear. An Italian soldier arrived, riding a motorcycle, hot and tired. He entered the camp and delivered us the simple explanation: The animosity between Italy and the Allies had come to an end. Italy surrendered unconditionally.

We were eight people, drinking my last glass of wine. The Italian population listened to the radio and this was the way to spread the news to all citizens on the mountains. Perhaps these were joyful bonfires. It was clear to us that the Italians too were yearning

for the end of this war. Now, are we free? Is there no need to fear bombs and German soldiers entering the camp? The stormy days turned us into doubters and many of us were sceptical about the truth of the message. Whoever did not actually hear the soldier was shaking with fear from the mysterious bonfires. For example, the great Czechoslovak patriot among the Pentcho men, Fedor Bényei, shouted to me while running to the mountains with his belongings on his back:

- "Well, sir, now I am leaving you. Good bye!" And disappeared in the darkness. Following him and running, breathing heavily was Mr. Hofstadter, who agreed with his judgment, saying: "not many stayed in the camp anyway..."

And we, who did stay in the camp, felt that this sudden peace might cost us many victims and we must do something. We naturally could not sleep. In order to quieten our minds, we placed guards near the camp entrance. With the help of the engineer, Koda, we opened the cement store doors and made two "barricades" out of cement bags. We positioned a machine gun by one of the barriers, but we knew that the Italian soldiers, who manned the post in the meantime, would abandon it if a single German soldier approached them. The Italians themselves were tired and desperate too. They must have regretted their entering the war siding with the Nazis. But it was too late.

The Calabria sun rose on the first day of "peace", but it did not bring peace. Since the early hours of dawn the windows were shaking from the bombs' echoes. The German set all their ammunition stores on fire. Then we heard the rattle of machine guns on the road. German soldiers stopped their brothers in arms from yesterday, the Italians, forced them to get out of their cars, stole their belongings, even the personal ones and with rude laughter left the place. Sometimes they left dead people after them too – victims of their robberies. One German tank got stuck not far from us and would not move. The Germans blew it up so that it wouldn't fall into the hands of their enemy.

Have we been left isolated? Although we were disconnected from the outside world, rumours did find their way to us, or were produced by us. Here is what the reports told us: Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary withdrew from the war. Even Japan ordered their naval units to sail to Russian or to American ports and surrender. Italian naval units too were instructed to enter one of the Allies' seaports, or sink the ships and sabotage them so that they would not fall into the hands of the Germans. Indeed we heard explosions and thought they came from Sybaris. Poor Italy had suffered and would probably suffer more from this war.

Who can we send for guard shifts? The camp was getting empty, the last guardsman was standing by the camp entrance behind a tall tree and there was nobody to replace him. Only the Allies could help. In the meantime he was watching the road, counting how many armoured vehicles and how many cars passed by on the road in one hour.

According to rumours coming from Italian soldiers, only one weak infantry brigade was situated to the south of Ferramonti. There were no SS units on this front, and this comforted us. So, maybe it was worth remaining in the camp?

The explosions continued all day long. This peace was shattering our nerves... we were never so on edge as we were from the moment peace broke out. Not far from us, a German anti-aircraft battery was barking onto the shaken Ferramonti peace. Those left behind dragged mattresses and blankets and went out to sleep under the trees. As another explosion woke us up too, we (the ones left in the camp) went out as well, to sleep or just lie down under a tree till morning came. Only elderly people remained in the camp, or people who were not able to carry heavy loads and move around, or did not want to take upon themselves the hardships of "partisan" life on the hills.

In the morning (September 10th) farmers brought us leaflets printed in German, dropped around here by British aircraft. The leaflets were aimed at two armoured German divisions, numbers 26 and 29; they were calling upon the German soldiers to surrender, and promised them a decent treatment and food at the level a British soldier receives. The leaflet was nicely phrased, but it was doubtful if it would help. One sentence was aimed at us: "through captivity will freedom come". Will the British grant us too what they promised to the enemies of the cultural world?

Rumours were spreading about the Germans digging in near Tarsia and also close to Ferramonti. We did not hesitate and went out to the road to see for ourselves. I was on duty between 12pm and 2pm. During the first hour I counted 20 cars and tanks and 5 motorcycles, and during the next 20 minutes there were 24 cars and 4 motorcycles. At night we heard the shelling of cannons, sound of airplanes, anti-aircraft batteries and we assumed that all this came from the direction of Paola. This orchestra did not quieten down all night.

Mountains are usually beautiful, especially when they are green. Calabrian mountains are beautiful too. But you could not find any abandoned shack in the entire neighbourhood, not even a shed or a meagre clay hut in which no Jew would be found. Even pigsties and cowsheds were filled with "emigrants". The hosts were not asking for money from the new residents. They preferred presents such as clothing items, and these too were branded as "souvenirs". Some even admitted that they were hoping for better attitude from the English when they realize that they were giving shelter to persecuted Jews. Good, naïve Calabrian people! They did not know that on these very same days the Germans were more favourable for the British than Jews were...

Did we say that all the kitchens in the camp closed down? No. three of them were working until the end of the "Dekada". One could not, therefore, blame Jews for an inability to function under emergency. Here, peace broke up, we were supposedly

staying in a country that was left alone and had no idea what the next day would bring. We were watching the retreat track of the Germans from a distance of ten meters – and the Jewish kitchens were operating and were delivering the food to their friends. Well done, cooks and managers of the kitchens!

At night we, some devoted friends, went out to check on the conditions of our families on the mountains. They slept in a sheep kennel (pretty clean though) that belonged to a former militia man. Not only did he not take any money from us, he offered us wine, grapes, milk and figs. We began receiving hair-raising news from the camp. An “eye witness” told us that the entire camp moved out tonight to the Crati river. They returned, but had to leave again. The camp only received echoes of explosions. Or: the Germans tried to enter the camp but the militiamen operated the machine gun, the Germans returned fire but nobody was hurt. They did not realize that I did know that the machine gun was taken away a long time ago and was not there in the camp any more. The “witnesses” also told us that the Germans entered the camp and began shooting with pistols. All these pieces of news were found to be grossly exaggerated...

But – responsibility is binding. I therefore went out towards the camp on my own. On the way I met pedestrians and carts. They were dragging all their belongings and said to me, scared: “Do not go any further! The Germans are there! I saw them with my own eyes!”. I innocently thought that as long as I was meeting Jews I could walk on too. Ferramonti was indeed dead, but not its people! We pulled down the guard poles still yesterday, so that it did not look like a military camp. The Germans did not walk into the camp, although near the camp there was a quarrel between Germans and Italians over a car that the Italians refused to abandon. Two Germans and five Italians were killed.

I was looking for Tibi Laufer and found him where I did not expect to: in the synagogue. There, as usual, Mr. Steiner was praying. In the camp offices they began delivering the passports. I did not check how many people were still staying in the camp, because these too were packing and leaving. We had “lunch”; Laufer brought bread and Gabi Lustig – a watermelon. Having received our passports, we went to the fields to collect tomatoes. We collected some “certified reports” too: Adolf the Foe attacked the Italians in his speech for their treason; the Germans conquered Rome and other Italian cities; the English were holding the western coast and moved up onto the shores in the ports of Catanzaro, Brindisi, Bari, Salerno and Taranto. Today, not a single German soldier was seen near the camp.

What was true among the rumours: still on Saturday (September 11th) a German car entered the camp. They were only looking for cars and, of course, found none. By the way they asked who the residents of the camp were. When they found out it was a detainees’ camp, they handed cigarettes to several people around them and left, because they were short of time. They had to “proceed” to Salerno. The behaviour of

the Germans was not surprising when we found out they were Austrian reserves people who were not interested in civilians in their retreat.

The Interim Period until Complete Liberation

The clear turning point occurred during the days September 12th-13th. We understood that if we did not see German soldiers and vehicles on the road any more, then naturally the English and Americans would follow them. Nerves calmed down. We were only “angry” at the Allies who were delaying their historical appearance. There was a rumour that the liberators had already reached the town of Cosenza and that General Camillo Mercalli, the commander of the Italian corps in the south, was waiting in San Marco together with his staff to welcome the victors. Other rumours said that German paratroopers released captive Mussolini and took him to Germany. It does happen that sometimes a rumour is later found to be true.

The enemies had left and the friends had not yet arrived. It was quiet around us. The hopes for the future got brighter. The militiamen, too, returned to the camp with their machine gun. They preferred to stay in and surrender to the British. We did not want the interim period to last too long; the allies too must be keen to pursue the enemy and overpower it as quickly as possible, so we thought. In the meantime, even the camp residents who moved to the mountains did not hurry to come back. The Calabrian mountains still remained “conquered” by Jews, but they had to know too that there was a limit to hospitality. But up there, deep in nature, the horizon was wider. After so many years in secured camps, with so many restrictions, one could feel freedom at last. We must not forget that in the mountain huts one could sleep on straw, something you could not do in the camp because many had sold or burned their mattresses.

So, where was the British army? We sent “spies” southwards, brave guys such as Anci Antmann and Tibi Laufer. They returned from Santa Sofia d'Epiro, about eight kilometres south-east from us, and reported that indeed they noticed there the first English explorers. The Italian administrators remained in the camp after they distributed the personal documents to everybody, and looked sad and angry when they saw the havoc wreaked by the Jews in the store rooms and in the cabins. They kept quiet. After all, the saying “Vae Victis” (woe to the vanquished) was originally expressed in Latin (then – Italian). Our boys found tropical hats with the Fascist symbol in the store room. It was not difficult to remove these symbols and draw Stars of David instead. We were not sure the English would enjoy it, but we did and that was the main thing.

The interim kingdom (Interregnum) ended at noon on Tuesday, September 14th. The first British armoured vehicle arrived at the camp and in it was an officer who announced that the eighth unit would begin moving northwards in 20-36 hours. He also promised that we would receive everything we needed. Indeed, we enthusiastically congratulated the liberators, but the truth was that we imagined the moment of liberation in a different way. It was simple and too dull for people who were tense with expectations for the greatest moment a detainee could imagine. When the visitor left, we decided to launch a mission to the nearby Allies command and request quick treatment of our matters. We wanted independence, but not in Calabria.

We were, in the meantime, left with our problems. There was no food in the camp, and therefore advised our mountain tourists to remain there for a while. Others left for nearby villages to get food. There were the impatient ones too, who were leaving on their way southward with the slogan "if the liberators are not coming to us – we will go to them". Another view: the way to the Land of Israel goes through Sicily and North Africa.

The formal liberation came on September 16th, four days after the last German left the camp's district. A British officer in the service of AMGOT (Allied Military Government for Occupied Territories), accompanied by a Jewish translator, turned up and officially announced that for the time being we would receive 6,000 food servings. We expected to hear some news from the motherland, from the Jewish soldier, but only received promises before they left. Our innovative people continued to visit the villages. The costs were not going down, but there were no hungry people in the camp any more.

The wonderful liberation bore grey days, despite the fact that a prisoner of war, or a jailed prisoner, or any other person deprived from personal freedom, imagines through his entire suffering period the moment he will win full freedom. He will be detached from his chains, the unsure tomorrow will not threaten him and he will not tremble from more severe dangers any more. If it was not for the difference between reality and dreaming, people would have been forever immersed in deep dreams.

This did not mean a disappointment, because we should not have forgotten that days of cruel war were still passing over the entire world. A great gain fell in our hands: we were the first Jews in Europe to be liberated! We did not know yet any details about the enormous massacres of our brethren, an extermination that began intensively only at the end of 1943. We did not know for certain what was going on in Poland, although three friends who came from there gave us some details. But we did receive horrifying rumours about what was happening in Northern Italy. When the Germans conquered all of Italy as they were retreating from the south, the Gestapo ordered the Jews of all districts to appear in front of them within 24 hours. Whoever infringed this order was risking his life. Many of our friends and acquaintances moved happily and freely out of Ferramonti to the "Confino Libero" – free confinement – found their death in the northern

half of the Italian boot. Still, many more streamed northwards when the situation in the camp was unclear.

On September 17th Colonel Nickles, AMGOT's manager in the occupied areas, arrived. He disarmed the policemen and appointed Prof. Lev Mirski as camp manager; he indeed was very good in conducting the camp choir, but he did not know that well how to manage Ferramonti. I prepared, together with Dominitz, telegrams to the Jewish institutions. We asked the Colonel to take care of our matters and indeed we received – promises. He delivered a speech in front of the camp management:

- We should treat the Ferramonti people not like detainees, because they are free people. We will solve all their problems and take care of food supplies too, just like for Allies soldiers. But the Major from Intelligence, who ran a survey in the camp about our needs, specifically said that supplies for the camp are problematic, because even the army does not get everything regularly, and we must not forget that they conquered areas where hunger prevails.

Very quickly we did recognize the value of British promises and compared them to the Balfour Declaration: you promise something clear, and then you remove bit after bit from these promises. But, to our happiness, among the Allied armies you could find not only English who treated us with coldness and indifference, but Americans too. The Americans were genuinely interested in the Jewish refugees' manners and even expressed empathy for them. They did not disappoint us.

It seemed that it was very easy to get used to freedom. The environment too began to get used and acclimatized to the new spirit of the body ruling us. All our people returned from the mountains; the roads, damaged during the retreat, were repaired; they began operating the trains and after not-too-long a time, electricity too was restored.

When the barbed wires disappeared, the ex-detainees spread around Calabria. They wanted to "scout" or just hitch hike and travel. With freedom, the black trade broke up too, a usual post-war phenomenon. Rubbernecks and adventurers went out for discovery expeditions. At first we realized that the Italians were better than Jews in running businesses and trade, but despite it they blamed the Jews, as usual, for swerving the acceptable. The behaviour of few brought disappointment to the Italian population who knew us so far as high ranking humans, more intelligent than them. After all, who were held in a concentration camp, but harsh enemies of the regime?

Many Italians too were wandering on the roads, along the canals. By the roads, the poor soldiers were marching, hungry, torn clothes, dead tired. Many of them were barefoot, as their shoes were worn out during the strenuous marching. The fire of life in their eyes faded, they were apathetic, hair grown and unshaved. A beaten army. They were eating the sour fruits of grandiosity that their leader Mussolini planted in their hearts. A young

officer, who received a cigarette from an American Jewish soldier, said with tears shining in his eyes: "My God in the skies! We could have lived happily in our beautiful Italy! We were forced to enter a war against the people's will!"

The Ferramonti Republic

The administration was moving into Jewish hands. The police agents and the Maresciallo left, and instead came twenty carabinieri standing at the command of our camp manager. Mirski did possess some dictatorial tendencies, but the regime was democratic. Our republic contained many minorities who did not make it easy to conduct proper management in the camp. The problem was that the army authorities preferred this division among the Ferramonti residents. Independence did not bring us positive phenomena only. Among the one thousand and five hundred Jews were some "negative elements" that increased the population's concern about us. They did not like the traders who affected price increases and sometimes cheated the simple men. Commerce had moved into the hands of some suspicious types.

In the camp there were Czechoslovak, Yugoslav, Polish, Austrian and German minorities, but not a minority of Jews. The authorities refused to recognize Jews as a national group. We appealed in the name of 900 Zionists to AMGOT and demanded secret ballots, because we did not agree to be included in the framework of different European "nationalities", with which we disconnected all so-called ethnic connections. At most we were left with some sympathy for those democratic nations within which we lived our lives until we reached the corridor of the European hell.

When our appeal was not granted, we were left with no other option but to incur the authorities' wrath for condemning our Zionist perseverance. We could not accept compromises, especially not in respect of our main topic – immigration. Representatives of the military authorities kept being substituted in "Ferramonti state", and we once were lucky to have an honest, good hearted commander like the American Professor Captain Nolan. But he too refused to accept our requests.

We were sorry about that, but did not give up our Zionist principles. We have no other immigration land except the Land of Israel!

Supplies were, indeed, not orderly, but several times we received shipments of tin cans in substantial quantities, and these were a source for a "big" trade. In addition, there were many income sources for our members when various international committees

were formed and our members could serve in so-called government positions, civilian employees in military units, translators and more.

Still, many dealt in commerce. The most demanded products were cigarettes and, naturally, food. Times changed. Our black market suppliers during the Italian regime, the neighbouring farmers, turned into consumers of our people and came to the camp to buy food. Prices of food in liberated Italy shot up and it was hard to get food, even for inflated prices. In some of the cabins, whose inhabitants left them, stores were opened: textiles, fabrics, delicate sewing equipment, grocery and butchery (licenced) whose owners produced sausages, smoked meat and more. We did not know what to do with the abundance of preserved food we were flooded with by the authorities.

The management increased our daily allowance – of course, at the Italians' expense. Our incomes increased and we needed to think about increasing our expenses. Café houses popped up like mushrooms after the rain, with all kinds of names, such as Sofriko, Bolero, Carlton, Beograd, Café Sport, Café Wii and even "Café of the Blonde Cow". Bands and orchestras got organized too. Parties were held, dancing and celebrating the year's last night (1943), the Sylvester night, as befits good Jews. Many soldiers came to the camp and they, especially the Americans, knew how to let their hair down. There was plenty of drinking and no shortage of pretty girls too. The entire neighbourhood knew that one could find anything at the Jews in Ferramonti town.

This free and even "intimate" atmosphere was duplicated, to our sorrow, outside the camp. The former detainees invaded the most elegant café house in Cosenza - Albergo Imperiale, and took it over. In that café were the headquarters of the trade giants – cigarettes wholesalers and gold smugglers. The black market tycoons and first class crooks competed among them in staining the good name of the Jews of Italy. Others got rich and planted the seeds of antisemitism in Calabria, a region where this concept was never known before.

Trains transport service reopened. The former detainees were equipped with suitable documents in English, confirming that they did not need to pay travel fare. Such as, "We suffered enough from you in the concentration camp, you won't see a penny from us!". At first the Italians respected the foreign language documents, because they did not understand their contents. Later, the documents did not help either. We were ready to admit that the people of Pentcho never suffered from the Italians and forever will remain thankful to them.

There is no reason to think that all these phenomena were negative only. Far from it. For example, the camp choir, conducted by Prof. Mirski with the participation of our excellent soloists, appeared in a ceremonial concert in the "Cinema Italia" hall in Cosenza, for the benefit of people injured in the war in this Italian town. The train

stopped at Ferramonti to carry the choir and waited two hours for it. After the concert, we received a special train that transported us back to Ferramonti.

We did not enjoy our internal civilian authority. Its people thought they were the army representatives and did nothing for the interests of the camp residents. Mr. Landau, who travelled to Rome together with the then camp manager, got stuck in Rome on liberation day and managed to return only by sea. He returned from the north after an adventurous and dangerous trip, left Ferramonti because of internal disputes and moved to Cosenza. Now, sitting in Cosenza, he did not mess around. He edited and published the first volume – which happened to be the last one too – of the detainees English language newspaper named The Harbinger, but the military authority prohibited any continuation in publishing the paper claiming that freedom of the press did not apply to English language periodicals...

We were not pleased with Mirski's deputy, the anti-Zionist Czech Ian Hermann, who never considered any demand or request not coming from the "Landmanschafts" (mutual aid societies). Even during the Italian Fascist regime we had enjoyed a higher degree of internal rule in the camp. We could freely elect our representative, the Capo dei Capi, but now the manager was appointed according to the authorities' moods – from above. The new military commander too ruled on us with new and hard decrees, until he turned out to be hated by us all. When he became more acquainted with us, and better understood us and our problems, being an honest and good hearted American Quaker, we discovered his nobility and we even got friendly with him so much that it was during in his tenure that the process of dismantling the camp began and ended.

Drafting Volunteers to Foreign Armies

The various diaspora governments saw in us a new raw material for their armies and they fell on the camp as if discovering precious loot. There certainly were no problems with the Christian Yugoslavs. They were the first to draft and soon we saw them among us in uniforms with red stars on their caps. Their front was so near to Italy that they left us the day after being drafted, and went straight to their units. Also, the two British Air Force officers who were staying with us put their uniforms back on and returned to their forces.

The youth of the other ethnic groups were almost all Jews. Calling them today to the war on Hitler was not difficult at all. We were interested in the Czechoslovak military delegation that worked among us with great gusto. They got results; of our group, some

55-60 people joined the Czechoslovak army. The Jews gratefully remembered the days of the Masaryk Republic.

A few weeks after liberation, rumours were spreading among us that all Czechoslovak subjects were bound to be recruited. They must stand by the flag, otherwise would be considered deserters. Other Jews, platter lickers, helped the officers' delegation and snitched on the National-Zionist youth that they refused to be recruited. A recruitment assembly was held at the camp's centre. A Czech captain made a speech there, declaring that whoever did not know his duty for his country and denied his Czech nationality would receive the appropriate treatment. I could not hold back, got up from my place and with my rusty Czech language, I said in the names of my friends:

- My respected gentlemen, please, let us put our cards on the table; we have nothing to hide and certainly nothing to be ashamed of. Four years ago we left Čzechia and Slovakia in order never to return there. By the Czechoslovak constitution of that time, we could have defined ourselves as belonging to the Jewish minority nationality. We are convinced now more than ever that a Jew cannot have any other nationality but Jewish. We sympathize with your country, respect your army, but we will never join any units whatsoever but the Israeli Jewish units of the British army. It is there where we are ready to go to right away.

Towards the end of October, a British recruitment officer too appeared in the camp and made a speech in front of us, declaring that he wanted to establish a labour platoon from the camp's youth. The one who was the most talented would be appointed as its officer (his translator hinted to me that he meant me...). Again I responded in the name of my colleagues, declaring that we were ready to enlist right away, but only to the Hebrew units of the soldiers of the Land of Israel and to no other place. The camp manager threatened us in his office that he would send a full report about what was happening here, about the good life in the camp, about what had happened in Cosenza (he meant the tricky businessmen). Therefore, it was crazy to enlist if they were sending so much food and money to the camp. All this did not help him. We stated to the camp management too: we want to be soldiers, not plain labourers.

The days passed and nothing happened. Many got despaired from lack of hope for a quick solution and enlisted, as said, to the Czechoslovak army. Several weeks before our sailing home, they were moved to Africa... they spent four years on the way to the Land of Israel, only to be eventually sent to a French front. There, three of them fell dead on a foreign land, for foreign goals. One of them said, still in Ferramonti: "I am sure that as detainees in a former concentration camp they will not place me in a combat unit". He was wrong. Even his brothers in arms who finally reached their former

homeland as liberators were received with coldness and contempt (I am talking about Pentcho passengers, former residents of Slovakia).

We should mention that a Polish officers' delegation too arrived at the camp. To their credit, they were not keen at all for Jewish volunteers. On the other hand, the English could not care less who would replace them in the labour platoon and for this they sent a German speaking officer to persuade us. Only one Jewish man, from Yugoslavia, was impressed with the offer and tried to talk us into volunteering for this work too because we must feel thankful to the English for their readiness to help in this war. This again made me jump, the representative of the national youth, and I said:

- Who but we could be happier if we could fight with arms in our hands against the annihilators of our nation! But we did not sit in camps for four years so that now we would hold the hoe and not the lance. We do not want to remain on foreign land. We want to return to our land and the British are not helping us with this. On the contrary. We declare again that two hundreds of us have already enlisted for front service, but only in the framework of the Israel Land units! Here, sir, is the list of enlisted. Will he tell his senders: we are ready for any sacrifice, but not as English labourers, but as Hebrew soldiers!

Soldiers who are Residents of Israel

We have to correct the dates of our liberation. In fact, we were only liberated on October 10th. This was the real liberation. Suddenly, with no prior notice, a simple military car entered the camp. Yes, it was a simple car, but on its door there was a symbol: the Star of David, and its passengers were Hebrew soldiers from the Land of Israel! We welcomed the Hebrew warriors, our faces glowing with exhilaration, with tears of joy. They were our true liberators. We found them in the office of Mirski and his deputy, Hermann, who lectured about the needs of the camp. They were Captain Moskowitz, Lieutenant Ben-Nachum and Sergeant Salomon. We immediately pulled them out of the assimilants' hands and set up a Jewish-Hebrew itinerary with them. They were not less excited by the fact that they found the first Hebrew group in free-setting Europe.

We held a people's assembly at the centre of the camp and Captain Moskowitz brought us the blessing of the people of the Land of Israel. In the evening, by a bonfire, we listened to officer Ben-Nachum. He spoke to the young ones: do not ask me which party we belong to. We all belong to the army! This is how the soldiers of the Hebrew units treated their sacred task. I must emphasize that since their appearance in the camp, we coordinated all our moves and all our plans with them. In Ferramonti camp, the national

unity between all divisions of Zionism was established, and this Zionist unity lasted together with our war for our immigration to our land, hand in hand with the Hebrew soldiers.

It is hard to imagine such a picture in the Land of Israel, or in free countries where Zionist youth movements were still operating. This atmosphere warmed the hearts of the guests from the Land of Israel who took the Jews of Ferramonti under their auspices. There were many soldiers who wanted to spend their vacation days with us. They sent us their messengers and their neutrality lit in us the wish to be like them. We established a joint youth club where people with energetic activities were from Betar, the Zionist Youth and The Young Guard, whose number was small but equality prevailed among us.

On the walls of the youth club we could see pictures of Herzl, Jabotinsky and Weitzman. In ceremonial orders that were frequently done for high rank visitors, they were first singing Betar hymn, then "Stand Up", and ended with "The Hope". For the sake of Zionist education, the youth of all divisions operated with full cooperation. We established in Ferramonti an "Immigration Office" too, headed by the veteran Zionist Eliyahu Grünslag and his deputy was Betar commissioner from the Pentcho immigrants. We never had any more political disputes. We accepted a common rule that [this](#) difficult period dictated us – after the terrible holocaust hitting our people on all its positions, opinions and parties, every Jew had a part in the Land of Israel.

The Israeli settlements' soldiers served as a great moral and material boost for the released detainees heading for the Land of Israel. As soon as a new Hebrew unit reached Italy, its commanders were already in Ferramonti learning about our problems and offering their help. Here, unit 178 arrived in Taranto and its commander, major Aharon, came almost directly to our camp. Thanks to their activity, something moved in our immigration issues and in a joint meeting, agreed by the Jewish Agency, a High Committee was established to take care of our immigration: Professor Rabbi Ephraim Orbach, the military rabbi of the Jewish units in Italy, Major Ezekiel Sakharov (Sachar) and Staff Sergeant Joseph Bankover.

A central committee, caring for problems of liberated Jews, was established too, with the representation of all the units fighting in Italy. The committee secretary was Zvi Leimann, who ran the Hebrew Soldiers club in Bari. They helped us establish training. All these soldiers acted without pay and with no benefits whatsoever. We will never forget their devotion and encouragement that came in their own time, forces and money. All did it willingly. If only this atmosphere had lasted in Israel when we got here, the new immigrants' mood and attitude towards the long existing settlements would have been much more positive.

We saw the faces of the converts when the Israeli soldiers visited the camp. It was not too difficult to imagine what went on in their hearts or bellies. We cannot talk about the assimilants, after all, they remained Jews and even wanted to receive their share from the "Zionist soldiers". They even presented a written complaint, saying: shame and disgrace that presents of the soldiers from Palestine were distributed only among those who registered for emigration to Israel. Our response was published on a large notice in a similar wording: shame and disgrace that there are Jews today who do not want to emigrate to the Land of Israel.

Ferramonti received the status of a local authority. Beside the camp manager and his deputy, a camp council was established with ten members, 2-2 from every ethnic group, and for the "historical" order we will immortalize their names: Czechoslovakia was represented by Fedor Bényei (non-Zionist) and Yehoshua Citron; representatives of Yugoslavia were Prof. Marinkievitz and Dr. Baruch (both communists); the "Poles" – Issachar Weiss and Dr. Bess (both Zionists); we had "Germans" too: Kutner and Neuberger; and the "Austrians" were not forgotten either: Dr. Travitz and Schmidt. As an advisory opinion, one Chinese was also present in the meetings. The head of the committee rotated every month among these group representatives. The authorities of this committee were really numerous, but no time was left to make use of them.

We return to our soldiers who devotedly took care of us. The committee of the Hebrew units decided to send messenger-soldiers to us. They left their units and lived with us in the camp for a period of time. They taught us Zionism, homeland geography and Hebrew. They too, despite being people of parties, kibbutz members, rose above the narrow party political levels. Their neutral position and their Zionist activity added to the honour and appreciation we felt for them. Both sides were very pleased with the achievements.

We managed to know only three messengers, each of whom came from a different unit. The first was Zvi Ankori from unit 178, member of Kibbutz Hanita, who managed the education system in the camp. He turned into one of us and it was difficult for us to bid goodbye to him. (He returned to Israel, was one of the commanders of youth's Battalions in Jerusalem, and then was a Professor of History in universities in Israel and in the USA). After him came a popular messenger, from unit 179, a man from Kibbutz Cabri, David Bromberger. He did not give many lectures, but did a lot. He founded cooperatives and trainings for both youth and adults. The last of the messengers did not stay long in his position because by then, our time came for immigration. He was the oldest of the messengers, Moshe Gershon.

We had wonderful young people in the camp and the training prevented them from breaking apart. The various handymen united into cooperatives and a large part of them did a lot for raising our value among the Jews, but also among the Italian population,

because their products established high reputation. If they could have produced ten times as much, they would have found markets for their products. Here, the bookbinding "Amal Group" was known to glory (Fritzi Cohen and Shlomo Weiss) among the liberated Italian Jews. Willy Klopfer turned money coins into symbols and even marked them by orders; Kari Prinz received many orders for the pretty lighters he made out of available "raw material".

The soldiers helped us a lot in making connections with the wide world and especially with our relatives and friends in the Land of Israel. There were sad and happy scenes: one of the camp people received a letter from his son saying he was coming to Italy as a soldier, but instead of his son, terrible news arrived: the ship he was sailing on, sank. On a different note, a Jewish soldier, born in Vienna, entered the camp and took a walk with his rifle on his shoulder. He suddenly noticed an old man holding a bottle, filling it up with water from the tap. The soldier burst shouting: "Father! Father!", one arm holding the rifle and the other hugging his father whom he never dreamed to see among the living anymore.

Camp Residents are Begin to Disperse

Former detainees, who had expected their release when they were in captivity, did not know yet how to handle freedom when it finally came. After the first months of being liberated, many who had not yet decided considered how and where they would begin their new lives. Rumours about the dispersing of the camp residents to various places were found to be untrue. There were some who had grown accustomed to the lethargic lifestyle and were quite prepared to continue getting free food and residence. Others, who wished to be working, dispersed in various military units or found employment in nearby towns.

They were feeling in the dark, or got in touch with overseas institutes and relatives and tried any option of immigration. The only committing option after all these years, the simple and natural option for Jews, immigrating to the Land of Israel, was not considered by them. Only the Zionists had one clear aim and they did not need to hesitate. We knew our time arrived and our Aliyah (immigration) would arrive too.

AMGOT distributed identification cards among us, and even conducted a poll among the residents of our "town", to get an idea about their orientations. The questionnaire had a "goal" section, that is, the destination, with two columns: final destination and interim destination. Whoever did not know their final destination might have been confused. For instance, one of the Yugoslavs wrote as a final destination, naturally,

Yugoslavia; interim: Egypt. Or, a diaspora Jew did not hesitate to write down Germany as his final destination, and as an interim destination: America. The national youth had no difficulties answering these questions. The answer was very simple and consistent: final destination – Land of Israel; interim destination – Palestine. People in the know told us later that the questionnaires, or their copies, were sent to the British Intelligence.

We already mentioned translators and others in the liberation army's service. The Hebrew units decided to employ several workers from Ferramonti in every unit. The plan was executed to the satisfaction of both sides. The centre of "employment" was in Major Sakharov's unit that was still camping in Bari, where the Hebrew Soldiers Club was situated too. The workers in the units got used not only to the Hebrew language, but to the Land of Israel atmosphere, until the front moved northwards.

Only a few of the people who were dispersing away from the camp were of the adventurers and profiteers who treated life light headedly. Some of them were greedy and were fed up with the black market too, and their final goal was Italy, of all places. During the chaotic post-liberation times it was not difficult for the more talented ones to find lucrative jobs locally, and some forgot themselves in Italy until those days.

Again, people who had homelands were leaving the camp: the Frenchmen from Corsica were first to disappear. We already knew about the two English pilots and the Reverend from Canada. We later found out that among the Yugoslav partisans was our Jewish friend Buci, an outstanding footballer, and he was killed in battles in Dalmatia. Weeks later all the Yugoslav Jews, together with Mirski, the camp manager, were transferred to Santa Maria al Bagno, a landless people's camp at the heel of Italy's boot.

Life in the camp was paralyzed. We can say that boredom took everything over. But the Jewish soldiers eased the coldness in the rainy winter. Unit 179 sent us a choir of 30 soldiers for Hanukkah, to please the residents of Ferramonti with Hebrew songs. With the help of the Hebrew soldiers we established training that was very active until our Aliyah. The first and most beautiful of them was the "Firsts" training, a paradise for our children. This training was situated in an Italian mansion near Bari that was taken over by the soldiers. The children studied and worked under the supervision of their instructors and forgot the exile and wandering life. The atmosphere of the Land of Israel and the Hebrew language dominated the training. Visitors there, journalists and soldiers too from various units, were impressed with the achievements and took care of it that the children would be short of nothing. They also told us that Major Sakharov, the Hebrew units' "foreign minister", used the positive material distributed about the training in order to raise support for our immigration among the gentiles.

This was our period of pre-immigration. All efforts, all connections and all activities were focused in the direction of claiming immigration permits for the Zionist Ferramonti

residents, and this campaign was conducted with full cooperation between the delegates of the liberated ones and the soldiers of the liberating Hebrew units.

Towards the End of the Wandering Affair

The Jewish solidarity between Ferramonti people and our nation's people still under Nazi occupation did not end. Two young Jews came from the north and told us that about one hundred children were hidden with farmers and also in a Catholic monastery in the township of Nonantola, near the city of Modena, urgently seeking our help. These children were orphans. Three young men volunteered to carry the support to them. We collected some 10,000 lire in the camp, and another 30,000 lire more in Bari, and the help was sent to them.

We must not forget that as the soldiers of the Israel units arrived in Italy, they held a collection among themselves for the benefit of Ferramonti and handed 100,000 lire over to our social committee, a huge sum in those days. Additional sums were given to training units and to the youth movements in Ferramonti.

The new course ending our move to independence was the Jewish Agency and the British Mandate government. As officers from "our" units said, there were enough immigration permits. We just had to press on and make use of the continuation of the war for receiving permits for the liberated people. Our Israeli office represented all the liberated areas in Italy; but our registration was done in Ferramonti, and we could only represent members of the Zionist movements who were known to us and registered with us for immigration to the Land of Israel.

No, nothing came easily. And then the head of the political department of the Jewish Agency, Mr. Moshe Shertok (Sharett), arrived at the camp with the news that we were allocated 300 immigration certificates to all Jews of liberated Italy, no more, of which 50 certificates would be deducted for people who had relatives in the Land of Israel and therefore would receive their certificates without queueing. We began to prepare the list of recommended ones, because Shertok told us that the 300 permits were for singles only. Even a double number would not have satisfied our needs!

We received another “high ranking” visit. Sir Clifford Heathcote-Smith, a delegate of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, tried to dash our appetite for immigration. He did his best to stall our immigration applications and put many obstacles in front of us. He was especially particular about the number of young military service aged, to be made as small as possible. In the clash between our vital interests and the British hypocritical ones, our hand won. We managed to assemble a group of immigrants with excellent human qualities, one we could be proud of. In one of the assemblies, when the noble knight exposed his cruelty and his white teeth again, talking about the difficulties expecting us in our land, he infuriated the audience so much that the response to his words came from an unexpected place – from Dr. Perles, a neutral Jew, not a Zionist, having an anti-Zionist personality.

Dr. Perles got up and reminded the British delegate that many of these detainees had been living refugees’ lives for eleven years. They had to endure many troubles and hardship during this dark period. In these sombre years, one thing kept their spirits up: the hope for liberation. He continued: “We were waiting for the English as if waiting for the Messiah, and when you finally arrived, your deeds caused frustration and despair!”

When Sir Clifford responded rudely and sarcastically, to our great surprise we noticed Ian Hermann, the manager of the second camp, a radical assimilant, got up and said:

- Before the Second World War, in 1938, some Jewish families managed to escape Nazi Germany and arrived in England, to Croydon airport. The British authorities sent them back to Germany, to certain death! This is your English democracy, and we will never forget this to you!

Sir Clifford blushed, turned red as a turkey’s head, rose up from his seat and left the hall. The audience got to their feet and sang “Hatikva”. This was a clear warning and a crushing blow, the result of cooperative work and a sign of farewell to exile. Only a few days after this assembly we were on our way, this time – to our final destination.

The paratrooper Enzo Sereni came over to calm us down, and said that Shertok had got the numbers wrong. The travel permits were for families and not just for 300 single people. Sereni also took part (together with me) in a critical meeting of the Israel Land office in Bari, where we sat for many hours, trying to decide who would go and who would remain. We could not claim that the final list was the best, because each group delegate tried to get his people on the list, and not only the Zionist background mattered. Eventually, the job was more or less done, and Enzo Sereni took the list to London. When he returned, he went out on a mission, parachuted behind the enemy lines in northern Italy, where he was captured by the Germans who transferred him to the Dachau concentration camp in Germany. This was his tragic end. The man was indeed a hero.

Until we left, we were still taking part in managing the camp. The civilians of Ferramonti were rushing around all the liberated areas, usually helped by military soldiers' hitchhikes. Our official delegations visited the Hebrew units in their camps and strengthened the links with them. The camp got a new military commander, full of understanding and good will towards our affairs. He was Captain Corn, an American who became very close to us. Many couples married in Ferramonti and travelled to Cosenza to receive a civil confirmation of their marriages.

In the meantime we slipped unremarkably into 1944 and remembered Direttore Salvatore, who foresaw a year ago that in one year we might be the managers and he the detainee. Delegations of soldiers kept arriving in the camp, and they never arrived empty handed. They usually gave the social committee managers serious sums of money, brought presents, chocolate and toys for the children, clothes and hygiene items for adults too.

I had three or four "official" talks with Enzo Sereni and a private one too, when we went to take a rest in the soldiers' club in Bari. I noted in my diary that this man probably had some confidential military mission, but we did not talk about this. Enzo offered me the option to remain one more year in Italy and organize the rest of the people for immigration. What convinced him most of all was when I told him I was on my way to fatherhood and I wanted my son to be a "sabra" (born in Israel). He also reassured us that the 53 certificates of relatives were not included among the 300, and said that he had a letter from Shertok saying that more certificates were "already in his pocket".

This was our third Passover celebrated in a camp. This time we had no doubt it was our last holiday in exile. David Bromberger returned from Bari with plenty of plans for occupying all our friends with something productive and began organising the cooperatives, but all our attention was given to the critical meeting of the "PALAMAT" in Bari and to determine the time, and ship of course, for our immigration. I allow myself to quote from my personal diary, page 380 from April 21st, 1944:

"And now for the most important matter: the first convention of the Israel Land central office took place about the certificates allocation. In the opening meeting there were Moshe Shertok, the Zionist Organization's foreign minister; Enzo Sereni, delegate of the Jewish Agency; Major Aron and Major Sakharov, and more – Lieutenant Berst, Joseph Bankover, Zvi Leimann and directors of the trainings. Shertok gave a political speech, no need to detail it here because I heard it ten years ago – from Jabotinsky... But what I do not know is – how many years have passed since Mister Shertok sat at a table with a Betar member?"

The guests had left and we remained to argue about each and every immigration candidate: communal workers, pioneers, young people with high work capabilities, and

despite pressure put by Grünslag and especially by the Yugoslavs, we succeeded in including most of our youth in the list. We took care of young couples – after all, they are immigrating together, with a single certificate for both. Well, we do have certificates, we do have a list (Enzo flew to London with it) – now we need a ship!

The days between the approval of the list and our departure from Ferramonti were not too pleasant. We had to overcome complaints and pleas of those who were not included in the first group of immigrants, and this was not easy. (Years later I found out that one of our most promising young guys, who worked in a far-away British military camp and I did not know about him, said that as I did not take him with me – he was moving to Australia... he died there many years ago). Another personal item: I suddenly received a letter from Rabbi Orbach with the personal number of my eldest brother, Frankie, who was in Italy, being a U.S. Army soldier. I therefore rushed to Bari, luckily hitched a ride with the Czechoslovak military delegation, Colonel Svoboda and Major Kuries, directly to our friend Captain Corn and asked him for a car to drive to Naples and see my brother, whom I had not seen since 1929. The answer was:

- Alright, my friend, you will get the car right away. But you first have to go to Bitonto, near Bari, and collect the kids who are training there and are on your list. Tomorrow you are leaving for Palestine!

And again our joy was mixed with sadness: leaving behind some of the brothers in destiny, who had gone through the last, fateful four years with us. Indeed we were promised that the rest would follow soon, and Dominitz remained in Italy to get the second group organized, but bidding goodbye to them was not pleasant. There were some who began, with their rising exasperation, to measure their Zionist rights in centimetres and weigh them in grams.

The Way Home

Preparations for the journey were made quickly – and full of hitches. Everybody was fighting. We set up a new Israel Land Office too. There were no farewell parties this time, except for a gathering in the synagogue where Dr. Adler and Dr. Perles bid the travellers farewell. Most of those present did not belong to the departing group. The honourable task of allotting people to twelve cargo train cars fell, somehow, onto my shoulders. We were informed that the packages, and there were many of them (who knows where people got so much property from), would be delivered by the train to Mongrassano, a township to the south-west of Ferramonti. It was the 25th of May, 1944, almost precisely four years since our departure from Bratislava.

The train should have arrived in the morning, but it was 10:30pm before we managed to set off. As the organisation of the journey was done hastily, six immigrants remained on the platform and we needed to send them by special taxi to Sibari. In addition, there was a list of "reservists" who travelled with us on their own responsibility. We reached the port city of Taranto at noon the next day, 26th of May. At the train station we were loaded onto military trucks that took us, together with our many chattels, to a transit camp. This was in fact a badly neglected brick factory that made a terrible impression on us. People naturally began to grumble and were annoyed with the authorities that dared put us, cultured people, in a place unfit to serve even as a pigsty. And indeed, six hundred Jews were rolling in one big hall in dust, dirt, on a straw floor.

Our official chaperon was Captain Corn. He directed us (Shosha and I) to edit and print the passengers' list. The final balance: The 300 certificates carried 571 Jews to the Land of Israel. Our ship was Battori that flew a Polish flag. It was a 17,000 tonnes ship and carried, apart from Jews from Italy, about 3,000 soldiers to the Middle East, among them Indian soldiers heading for a home leave. Supplies, organization and attitude were pretty good. A large hall in the ship was divided into cabins and the three of us – Shosha, Yehuda (Poldi, her brother, aged 14) and me – received a well arranged cabin.

Captain Corn asked me to be his assistant, that is, responsible for the "transport". I "regretfully" refused because I simply had grown weary of dealing with this community and all I wanted was a peaceful trip with Shoshana who was pregnant. His assistant then was Della Levi who, together with the other Yugoslav chiefs – not all of them – later left Israel to get a job in his homeland Yugoslavia. I was sorry too that Prof. Mirski, who became, in time, the conductor of the Israel Opera, also left for Yugoslavia and died there in 1961.

How did this song go? "The tearful sowers will harvest with joy..." the Pentcho immigration ended its long journey in what would have been considered a luxury ship in those days. In our convoy there were four destroyers and one mine sweeper too.

The ship itself was comfortable and the sea too treated us kindly. Only a few among us suffered from sea sickness. We went on deck every day for a practice alarm drill. There was a canteen on board where we could buy various items cheaply. After we left the shores of Sicily and Malta, we began rejoicing when we saw, on the far horizon, the shores of Africa. We sailed along these shores for a few days and eventually, on Thursday, the 1st of June, we entered the port of Alexandria. We did not undergo any inspection there and without delay were moved to a special train that was waiting for us there.

Before we left the ship, we were welcomed by a representative of the Jewish Agency, Ms. Ruth Kliger, who blessed us heartily. The Zionists of Alexandria provided us with

refreshing drinks and chocolate. At 11am the train moved without our luggage. Captain Corn promised that our packages would be sent on to us as soon as they were off-loaded from the ship. The train began to move on and we had our first opportunity to get to know our brothers, or cousins, the Arabs. The impression was depressing. It seemed to us that wherever we looked we saw underdevelopment and a low standard of living. We were none too pleased about this.

We stopped at a station on the way: Ismailia. There we were joined by 200 brothers, Jews from Yemen, and together we continued our journey towards our homeland. Near Ismailia, a more pleasant surprise was waiting for us: here was the camp of the Jewish Brigade's first battalion. They let us use their canteen with its generous supply of candies. We found acquaintances among soldiers too. I was sorry when I heard that Eliyahu Gallezer, the organizer and first manager of the Pentcho immigration, was on observation duty some fifteen kilometres away. We said to ourselves that if they spoil us at home the way we got spoilt so far on our way home, this would be almost too much to cope with. The soldiers of the Jewish Brigade brought us back down to earth: there was no love lost there...

On the 2nd of June, at noon, on a clear and warm day, a train with 757 Jews, first immigrants from Europe and immigrants from Yemen, arrived in Lydda. There were two blue-and-white flags on the train locomotive, the cars were decorated with Hebrew captions, faces radiating with delight were looking out of the windows. A delegation was waiting for us: Moshe Shertok, Moshe Shapira and the first relatives who already arrived here. We sang, danced hora and were happy: we reached h o m e !

The Second World War was still raving;

The smoke had not vanished yet from the accursed chimneys of the Nazis

When a first group of Jews from liberated Europe arrived at the Land of Israel.

At Home

It was afternoon; the train was speeding northwards towards Atlit. The sun was shining, the heat was choking. On our way we saw the first Arabs clenching their fists at us. Our national flag infuriated them. The first Jewish town, green fields and blossoming orchards; first Khamsin (transition period's very hot weather), first glass of juice. How many such small "pleasures" can a new immigrant expect?

The first Jew to enter our railroad car brought no joy to its passengers. We were aware this might happen, so therefore we were not surprised; but so soon after our arrival? On our first hours in the country? He entered and we imagined he would ask us how was the trip, what our first impression from the fields of Gedera were, would discuss our plans with us and might have some advice for the new immigrants, such as, how does one get an apartment, which part of the country we should go to; but no. The first question of the first Israeli Jew we met in this land was:

- Which party do you belong to?...

We kicked him out of the car; there were no secrets among us. We all knew each other's souls and opinions, but already on the first moment, before we even got out to step a foot on the soil of the land? We regarded this question as rudeness, lack of consideration. Recently there was complete cooperation among us that made us forget party political affiliations, especially among the youth. It was the first "legal" immigration that left still-burning Europe, that was not constructed by political typesets. Youth, burning with the love of Zion, were sitting here, and veterans too who grew old during their sacred work for their joint aspiration. Together they selected the best candidates worthy of being among the first immigrants.

There was something inherent in the Pentcho immigration. The common destiny united us. The common enemy of all the People of Israel tightened our friendly connections even more. We will continue in this way and teach the others too that the best and most effective weapon against the threats of a common enemy is internal unity.

Let's hope that one day the public too will learn this lesson. On the first Sabbath of our stay in Atlit we received good news about the invasion of Normandy and the liberation of Rome. Our friends who remained in Italy moved their centre to the Capital City and got ready for the second round of our immigration. In the meantime, President Roosevelt too did something for the Jews: he granted entry permit for one thousand "emigrants" until the end of the war. Passengers of Pentcho too were represented in this group, about half (26 people) of those who joined the Czechoslovak army. But Sir Clifford, our "friend", did not keep quiet and collected the Ferramonti residents who were still there, waiting for immigration. In the meeting he pulled out a handkerchief and

explained that the Land of Israel was as small as “this handkerchief”. No use. We taught the geography of the Land of Israel on a bedsheet, not on a handkerchief...

In April 1945 the second wave of our Pentcho immigration arrived. With them were the best of us, the idealist core, already in the country. We hoped that our friends who had joined foreign armies would also immigrate to our country after the war. This hope was indeed fulfilled, but not completely. The first experiences disappointed us? Never mind. We will get used to the climate in this country and be like all the other citizens; and we did indeed get used to it. You can find a positive side in disappointment, because you can learn from it too. Within a short time there was nobody of the ex-Pentcho travellers who was not getting along in the country. Not only did we get along, we remained loyal to the ideals of our youth too. Things are not written here just for ending the story of our immigration on a positive note. In reality there was not a failed or bitter person among us, looking for the sea so that he could escape. Whoever passed through four years of his life in danger and hope and came to Israel directly after detainment, whoever still suffered abroad for the Land of Israel, must be happy and glad for his share. We received a practical lesson from life in order to appreciate the past and what we have in the present.

In June 1944 we not only arrived at our country, but, with no ornate words – **HOME!**

We shall therefore end with our version of a song by Jacob Orland, sung by us on our first gathering after arriving in Israel (in 1945, in Nathanya), and in our gatherings thereafter too, and we believe it with all our hearts:

**“We wandered away from foreign lands,
In poverty, with not a thing,
We saved glory only for you – homeland and mother”**

At Home



The first meeting of the Pentcho family in Nathanya, 1945



At the same meeting in Nathanya, 1945



A meeting of the Pentcho immigrants at the Savoy Hotel, Tel Aviv, 1953



A meeting with Dr. Kalk and a delegation of partisans from Italy, 1970



Role holders during the Pentcho journey, 1985 meeting, Tel Aviv



A meeting of the Pentcho immigrants in the WIZO halls, Tel Aviv, 1994



The New York Branch of Pentcho, 1999



**Backtracking Pentcho, back for a visit on Kamilonisi
with Mamuka and with Zoltan Schalk, 1985**



**A gratitude and blessing speech for the Italian people in the
Regional Parliament of South Italy, Cosenza, 1985**



Back to the beginning: the management of the planned journey

Remember

Our brothers and our sisters, members of the Pentcho family, who passed away on the verge of liberation and the conclusion of our immigration. We will remember them, those whose graves are scattered in foreign lands, on the sea bed or in camps. They did not win their homecoming. We will never, never forget them!

Died in the war of Independence:	Shmuel Kopolovitz Bela Sterlinger
Died in Rhodes:	Jisrael Dukes Marzell Porjes Richard Goldstein Simcha Hauser Israel landshut Hersch Metzger
Drowned in the sea off Rhodes while attempting an escape:	Jicchac Mittelmann Jeshajahu Rosenfeld
Died in Ferramonti:	Eugen Fellner Aranka Fischer-Halpern Erwin Guen Magda Neumann-Sterlinger Chaviva Rosinger-Weiss Schachne Wald Paula Weil Samuel Weissberger Josef Ungar Jicchak Gross (in "Confino Libero") Albert Freund (in "Confino Libero")
Were killed in the holocaust in Auschwitz:	Rashke Fahn-Sonnenfeld Her son: Alexander Fahn
Killed in the Czechoslovak army in France:	Hugo Glasner Shimon Lorber Eugen Schwartz

Nor shall we forget these people:

Only a few people were responsible for organizing the illegal immigrations in Slovakia, and generally in Czechoslovakia too. We will mention the prominent ones among them, because it is an honour for us to commemorate their activities:

Eliyahu Galezer – the initiator, the organizer, the edict pioneer, commissioner of Betar in Czechoslovakia and manager of the immigration office in Prague. The first immigration journeys, from Bratislava too, sailed out with his help and guidance. The Pentcho immigration was born after the Nazis stopped Eliyahu's activities.

Joseph Katznelson – (Yes, Berl's brother) was the “Immigration Minister” of the global New Zionist movement in London. At the beginning of the German occupation he was in Poland and fell ill there. Abandoned and ill he ended his life in exile.

Shlomo Jacobi – dealt with immigration issues in the global management of the New Zionist in London. He also visited Bratislava in order to advance our immigration. Jabotinsky sent him especially to Bucharest to look after our group and make sure that we got our ship.

Arthur Janovitz – managed the transport office in Bratislava from January 1940. A man of conscience, full of love for his work. His health and his food sources were broken due to his strong work efforts for Pentcho's journey. He was a victim of the Nazi murderers.

Zoltan Schalk – or, sealed-in “Zolo”. He always operated on the ground and helped a lot to arrange the “Transfer” agreement that allowed us to move Pentcho Passengers' funds out of Slovakia. He was a brave man, volunteered on rescue missions. The “Foreign Minister” of the Pentcho immigration.

Herbert Landau – head of the Jewish group of Ferramonti's detainees. A true friend of Pentcho immigrants who took a great interest in matters of public and cultural living in the big camp. He moved to the Pentcho youth cabin in the camp. He expressed great honour to us and we will respect his memory.

Curiosities – Anecdotes from the Journey's Diary

It may be hard to believe, but there are Jews, even among the Czech Jews known for their higher education levels, that had never read a newspaper or knew which century they were living in. Despite their ignorance they were doing well in life, sometimes better than certified intellectuals. Such a character approached the cabin chief one morning (in Rhodes) complaining that they started “pulling his leg” again, saying:

- Guess what this Hellinger is trying to push into my head. He says there are ships that are diving and sailing under the water surface. Have you ever heard such nonsense? This is all fictitious, isn't it?

He named the submarine “Podvodník” in Slovak (instead of ponorka), which can be literally translated as “underwater”, but the word’s meaning is “crook”. Our friend Ibrahim (he claimed that his Hebrew name was “Bamnahem” – Menachem – which was why we called him Ibrahim) deliberated for days on this topic, and eventually joined the Czechoslovak army, but he never wanted to believe in submarines until he saw one...

* * *

As we were disembarking from Pentcho on the island of Kamilonisi, nobody was in the mood for jokes, or had time for laughter either. But later we did write down about the way some passengers disembarked. Here, one tall “Yekkeh” (a nickname for German Jew) went down with his pyjamas on, with a hat on his head. His friend, who was with him, was wrapped in a thick winter coat but was barefoot. Bözsi Rosenbaum held Sanyika with a potty in her hand. Mrs. Nathanson grabbed her suitcase despite the prohibition. Several young guys saved their rubber mattresses. The first to come out was, of course, Grünstein, engulfed with hydrophobia. Wearing a thin gown, he ran to the highest point on the island, shivering from cold, until someone covered him with a blanket. He got better the following day.

* * *

The three musketeers (Feri, Ossi and Ewald) were very hungry. They therefore sneaked out of the camp and looked for a Jewish family in Rhodes city. But they were wrong and knocked on the door of a Greek family. To the family’s question about their intentions, they answered undeniably that they were hungry and thought this was a Jewish family, but then they noticed a photo of Mussolini on the wall and turned around to walk out. The Greek calmed them down. They were not Fascist – on the contrary. They sat them around the table and gave them a special meal they had cooked for themselves and gave them some for the road too, telling them honestly: come again whenever you can.

* * *

Appello (rollcall) is held in cabin 20. The “Khapper” (police agent) is on his way to our cabin and the duty resident warns the guys. Suddenly – electricity cuts out. We lit two candles and two of our young ones marched in front of the two Italians. We suddenly remembered the holiday of Simchat Torah and everybody started singing by the traditional tune: “Please Lord, Save Us Please...”, and then “Helper of the Poor, Please Salvage Us”. The Italians were marching behind the guys and laughed. It was not for nothing that we placed the word “concentration” in the camp’s title in inverted commas.

* * *

The ship Kalimno that sailed the first group from Rhodes to Italy experienced many hazards on the way. Fearing British submarines, they stalled near a small island and the passengers trembled from both cold and fear. There are many people who tend, during dangerous times, to go nearer God and get born-again. This is why they took with them a box with the Bible in it.

Opening the box – empty! Nothing in it. In their haste and hurry they forgot to place the bible in the specially prepared box. Passengers were overcome with panic, because they regarded this as a bad omen and did not want to continue with the sailing. But of course it was not up to them. God of Pentcho stood this time too by the side of the downtrodden and they reached home at last – to the Land of Israel – with the bible books in their hands.

* * *

We had a tiny hospital in Ferramonti. Patients requiring more serious treatments were moved to the hospital in Cosenza. The nurses there were nuns who could not grasp that cultural human beings, that even in their outward looks were not different from the Italians, were not Christian! Their zeal was a result of innocence and all means were proper for converting their patients to their religion. Persuasions, threatening that whoever was not Christian had no room in the after-world, and even starving their patients did not work out.

One morning the head nurse faced an intelligent rival who was speaking Italian. She told the nurse she was Jewish, which is why she did not pray Christian prayers.

- Well, good... we are Italians and you are Jews, but we are all Catholics – are we not?

* * *

It did happen once in a while in Ferramonti that policemen, or militia soldiers, caught an offender red handed in black market deals. The prisoner was brought to trial and then to the district prison in Sibari.

The judge was a good-hearted Italian and he sent the prisoners free, saying:

- Black market is an offence and the offenders are worthy of punishment. But what do you want from these poor prisoners? You shut them behind barbed wires. If he was already doomed to sit in prison, let him sit among his friends...

* * *

After the fall of Mussolini and his arrest, the authorities banned any mass assemblies in southern Italy. In August 1943 the General, the Commander of the Badoglio forces in southern Italy, visited the camp. He heard that practice training held in the football ground was cancelled because of his visit. He summoned the head of the Jewish sports society who stood speechless when the General handed him 2000 lire and said:

- I wanted to watch a football match in the camp. Of this sum I handed you, the winner will receive 1200 Lire and the loser – 800, because losers always get less, if any at all...

* * *

Cabin 20 again. A young man named Georg Friedman was moved there. Nobody knew him, but one of the cabin's residents who worked in the camp secretariat said this guy was a squealer and the Italians could not stand him either. Direttore Salvatore himself came to the cabin in the evening and, as was his way, gave a speech:

- Nobody dare hurt him! I have already given him a beating on your behalf! You are responsible for his safety and his security.

Too bad, the guys thought, we already had a plan for him. The next day, our assertive director came again to the cabin to make sure his order was obeyed. We saw he was very disappointed to find his protégé, the informer, safe and sound. Our boys could not stand their "beloved director" so sad, and took care of it that the squealer would learn a lesson. Georg Friedman was saved from the hands of the cabin people. Beaten and weak, he was moved the same day to another camp.

* * *

After the liberation, a real Lord visited the camp, a British General on behalf of AMGOT. He spoke to representatives of the former detainees and listened to their request. The religious people's spokesman was our Dominitz who asked, in bad English and with his typical shyness, that the General would be kind and see to it that they send us a Lulav (palm branch) from Sicily.

Rabbi Dr. Adler heard this request and was terrified. Dominitz had to rush back to the General who was about to leave and asked to correct his request:

- Please be kind and order the Lulav from the Land of Israel and quickly as possible, because the holiday of Tabernacles is coming soon. The Lulav from Sicily is not strictly kosher! Let them send the Lulav by air...

* * *

This happened already in Israel, several years after our immigration. It is known that a part of the population is always in opposition to the government. Sometimes roles were exchanged, but opponents always criticized the government. This happened on our second meeting in Israel. One of the friends, who was always complaining (by the way, he never lacked anything!), poured his anger on the regime and on the situation and thought loudly in front of his friend:

- Do you remember the good days on the Pentcho and in Rhodes? If this situation here continues and austerity will rule the land, we will soon renew our old days: will wash our clothes without soap, will only be able to eat cabbage; butter? I saw it yesterday in a photograph, there is no existence without Vitamin N (nepotism), the meat portions are not bigger than what we scraped from the sheep heads in Rhodes. Only Goldberger and Kürti are still missing, the first one for purchases and supplies and the other – to cook hormones soup. They still do not need any vouchers...

Epilogue (1999)

The first edition of this book was published in 1951, before the upcoming third meeting of the Pentcho immigrants in Israel. We tried then to do a collective-social-economic-personal assessment and we related to the short period of six years that passed since our immigration home. With the second edition of this book, at the very end of the 20th century, we could already take pride in fifty five years of life in the Land of Israel and nearly sixty years since we left Bratislava.

In the meantime we ceased to be new immigrants and we cannot “settle accounts” with our many friends, members of our immigration, because age, destiny, health and the human habit not to exceed the age of one hundred, depleted the number of members of the Pentcho family in such large rates, that it is doubtful if we have more than 20% of the original list who are still alive... In addition to that, some of our people turned into Wandering Jews and they dispersed throughout the world. Occasionally, we receive sad news from Venezuela, the United States, Australia or any other desolate place on the passing away of one of us; sometimes someone we did not know if he was dead or alive. This doubt is gnawing away at us because their destiny, or a note about their death, was not always confirmed by eye or ear witnesses.

We wanted to plant in the brains of our brothers in Israel the insight that the Pentcho immigration is a unique natural symbol of the rescue-immigration during the war for Israel's resurrection, without doubting the privileges of other immigrations. But the indifference of the Jewish public, first and foremost by a part of the news media, stubbornly prevent any interference with their limited considerations, that interests are the flag waving above the pile of sacks determining the documented history. We believe, with honesty and with relative objectivity, that there is no other illegal immigration among the eighty or so ships that its chronicles could compete with our four years. Our pride, contentment and satisfaction are the fact that there are not many tragedies in our journey. Although we had some shaky moments, the general verdict of all our fateful examination is – wholesome and calm.

We emphasized, more than once while describing our lives in our four crucial years, the part of the Italian nation in saving our lives. We emphasize this point each time the subject of saving Jews arises to public discussion. We shall emphasize this again and again, despite the obstinate disregard by the media, especially the newspapers, to our request. We are talking about the attitude of the Italian people to the members of our immigration and to Jews in general in the years 1940 – 1944. Facts, details and examples were brought in the book, but we never managed to emphasize this fact in the Israeli news media. From time to time the topic of saving European Jews rises in regard to several nations that treated our brothers humanely. What happened with us and to us in the Italian “concentration” camps is not just a fact; it is history! All passengers of

Pentcho, whatever their world opinions are, are always ready to repeatedly emphasize that this nation – despite its government alliance with the Nazi animal, despite its formal acceptance of the Nuremberg laws – the Italian nation treated the Jews, even in the few detainees camps, humanely and even heartily, not less than any other democratic nation in Europe. Moreover: the Italian nation, even under the damned Fascist regime, saved more Jews in Europe than His Majesty's British government did!

We, the Pentcho survivors, a part of more than two thousand Jews who were in the Ferramonti concentration camp, hereby declare in front of every nation and community: we are filled with feelings of gratitude to the nation of Italy. The people of this nation saved our lives – really saved – at least four times. We are living witnesses of this.

In one of the fifteen meetings we had so far, we were sitting and dreaming: maybe one of our friends who have no inheritors will wish to perpetuate his name and his family by donating his modest apartment for the organization of Pentcho family members. We could establish a modest museum there and mass all the material in it – documents, correspondences, photographs, handwork etc., and leave our grandchildren, great grandchildren and the following generations with the effort of maintaining their roots. A small part of the historical material, including the three flags brought from Bratislava, is in the Jabotinsky Institute in Tel Aviv. We also know that many of our sisters and brothers of fate are holding souvenirs, letters and similar items with public value that belong to a museum that has not been founded yet. Realization of this dream is doubtful, because the anonymous donor is non-existent, and the next generations will be only left with publications, photographs of grandparents and the books written about this special and unforgettable immigration.

As far as I am aware, there is no other illegal immigration whose passengers' list was kept and published too. We are making use of this book here again to immortalize the members of the Pentcho family. We shall leave for the incoming generations, descendants of the immigrants, the names of their great grandmother or grandfather's grandmother who really dedicated four difficult years, during fateful days in the world, to a sacred purpose: reach the Land of Israel and live there, create new generations for salvation and independent lives; in short – to materialize the Zionism, with no quotation marks. It is possible that only few of the inheritors will know about this "immortalization" because dozens of friends from the transport preferred to settle down in other safe places around the world, and thus remain anonymous.

If I am lucky and the second edition of "Homeward" will really be issued, then my thanks and your thanks, people of Pentcho, are given to the originators of this operation – my daughter Ofra and my son Avner who encouraged me to repeat this work from new. But the main work, corrections and editing, was made by my daughter Ofra Yaniv and her job was harder than my typing.

Well, I am finished. I shall now bid goodbye to all my friends from the Pentcho family hoping that the book will still find a circle of readers. If not – the manuscript will join the other dreams in the Pentcho museum.

Looking at the calendar – there may be a chance that for our next (historical) meeting celebrating 60 years since our departure from Bratislava port, we will surprise the people coming to this meeting in 2001... the continuation of our dreams will be discussed with our younger generation, that got older too. And then you will all sing together the well-known Pentcho hymn:

“Pentcho – the most beautiful ship in the world...”

A list of the passengers of Pentcho
By alphabetical order
Including children born on the journey

Zoltan Abramovits	Wiliam Belf	Markus Bromberger
Regina Adler	Paul Benau	Johan Brichta
Theodor Adler	Fedor Bényei	Heinrich Bern
Mendel Anhang	Avraham Benedikt	Karl Bern
Paula Anhang	Eduard Benedikt	Alfred Brandtwein
Lilli Antmann	Betty Benedikt	Edith Brenner
Zwi Antmann	Renee Benedikt	Fritz Brenner
Rosa Antmann	Alice Braun	Avraham (Freyd) Bernstein
Yakov Arfa	Alexander (Cibi) Braun	Bruno Bernstein
Wiliam Bauer	Stefan Braun	Charlotte Bernstein
Eugen Baumgarten	Lea Braun-Neugröschl	Jicchak Cyter
Bondi Franz	Alfred Brauner	Baruch Dagen
Leo Buxbaum	Richard Brauner	Cila Dagen
Jechiel Bukspan	Liesl Bergman	Moshe Dagen
Margot Bukspan	Wiliam Belf	Ing. Bruno Damm
Feiga Bukspan	Paul Benau	Chana Danziger
Wiliam Blau	Fedor Bényei	Szlamek Danziger
Joli Blau	Vali Brodi	Jehudit Davidovits
Ernest Bloch	Margit Brodi	Moshe Davidovits
Piroska Bloch-Kramer	Ilus Breuer	Shoshana Davidovits (Neumann)
Alice Blumenfeld	Jehudit Breuer	Aranka Dénes-Glück
Chaviva Blumenfeld	Eduard Breuer	Theodor Diamant
Josef Blumenfeld	Ilse Breuer	Asher Dominitz
Malvina Blumenfeld	Johanna Breuer	Jisrael Dukes
Emanuel Blumenfeld	Josef Breuer	Alexander Ehrlich
Lewek Blitzer	Liesl Breuer	Smarjahu (Ossi) Drechsler
Chaja Blechman	Liana Breuer	Ignacy Dromlewicz

Beny Ehrlich	Frida Ferdinand-Lichtner	Dr. Lilly Frischer
Berta Ehrlich	Avraham Fertig	Dr. Mikulas Frischer
Avraham Ehrlich-Orly	Arnon Finger	Erwin Fürst
Grete Ehrenfeld	Elias Finger	Eugen Gerö
Josef Ehrenfeld	Livia Finger	Lilly Gerö-Kohen
Rosa Ehrenfeld	Oskar Finger	Magda Gescheidt
Eliezer Eisen	Ernest Fischer	Martin Gescheidt
Oskar Elbert	Bernard Fischman	Pinchas Gewürz
Siegfried Elsner	Alexander Fixler	Hugo Glasner
Viktor Elias	Bezalel Fixler	Mendel Glass
Fritz Engel	Elza Freiwirth	Chaim Glücksman
Shmuel Engländer	Leopold Freiwirth	Ljusa Glücksman
Alexander Fahn	Albert Freund	Mirijam Glücksman
Reshka Fahn-Sonnenfeld	Eugen Freyberger	Shlomo Glücksman
Rudolf Fahn	Hugo Fried	Alexander (Sanyi) Goldberger
Sydney Fahn	Ahron (Arpi) Friedmann	Emil (Mendel) Goldberger
Adolf Farkas	Alexander Friedmann	Grete Goldberger
Amalia Farkas	Anna Friedmann	Hans Goldberger
Gizella (Mamuka) Farkas	Charlotte Friedmann	Jicchak Goldberger
Chaim (Karcı) Farkas	Eliezer Friedmann-Mirovsky	Jolana Goldberger
Ludwig Feldhahn	Marcell Friedmann (Bar-Giora)	Else Goldstein
Pinchas Feldmann	Margit Friedmann	Irene Goldstein
Eugen Fellner	Pali Friedmann	Richard Goldstein
Stefanie Fellner	Rachel (Iren) Friedmann	Felicia Goldfinger
Paul Felsner	Sulamit Friedmann	Jehoshua Goldfinger
Avraham Ferdinand	Willy Friedmann	Josephine Goldfinger
Mikulas Ferdinand	Jehudit Frischer	Meir Goldfinger

Shlomo Goldfinger	Martin Hans	Regina Kahana
Shmuel Grajman	Bronka Hauser	Joel Kaufmann
Elijah Gross	Lia Hauser	Feiga Kessler
Emil Gross	Simcha Hauser	Malka Kestenbaum
Dr. Erwin Gross	Kalman Heffner	Chaim Kirsch
Jaakov (Eugen) Gross	Mirjam Heitlinger-Hahn	Jechezkiel Kirsch
Jaakov-Shalom Gross	Dr. Paul Heller	Lea Kirsch
Jicchak Gross	Aharon Hellinger	Wolff Kirsch
Marci Gross	Shoshana Hellinger-Blüe	Daniel Klein
Margit Gross	Herman Herskovits	Jermijahu Klein
Serena Gross	Dr. Josef Herz	Ladislav Klein
William Gross	Jehuda Herzka	Lenke Klein (Altmann)
Meir Grünbaum-Granit	Julius Hilwerth	Zoltan Klein
David Grünberg	Emil Hirschler	Adolf Kleinberger
Martin Grünberger	Desider Hoffman	Shmuel Klinger
Frida Grünfeld	Karli Hoffman	Jochewed Klopfer (Löffler)
Alfred Grünsfeld	Ludwig Hofstadter	Zeew (Willy) Klopfer
Josef Grünstein	Alfred Höning	Markus Knöpfler
Isidor Grünwald	Moritz Höning	Dr. Eliezer Kohen
Julius Haas	Otto Horowitz	Erna Kohen
Mikulas Haas	Tibor Horvath	Julius Kohn
Malvina Hahn	Ruth Horvath-Glück	Shalhevet (Žuka) Kohn
Jehoshua Halevy (Citron)	Dr. Ladislav Ickovits	Sraga (Fritzi) Kohn
Shoshana Halevy (Spiegel)	Franz Jakubovits	Stefan Kohn
Aranka Halpern (Fischer)	Zoltan Jakubovits	Shmuel Kopolovits
Dr. Shmuel Halpern	Josef Jung	Andrej Kornfeld
Daniel hamburger	Lea Jung-Heitlinger	Oskar Kraut
Philip Hammershlag	Moritz Kahana	Frida Kreilisheim

Hans (Johnny) Kreilisheim	Fritz Lederer	Bella Malinovsky
Helena Kreilisheim	Emanuel (Mendel) Lefkovits	Tatjana (Miriam) Malinovsky
Peter Kreilisheim	Bruno Lehner	Eta Mandel
Shmuel Kreilisheim	Jakov Lehner	Josef Mandel
Max Kritzler	Ludmila Lehner	Leopold Markel
Josef Künstlinger	Andrej Leinerovits	Erika Martonovits
Noemi Künstlinger-Ronen	Hirsch Lewin	Cilly Melzer
Dr. Ladislav Kürti (Kurtis)	Emerich (Immi) Lichtenfeld (Sdeh-Or)	Fruma Metzger
Chaim Kutten	Leopold Lichtenfeld	Hani Metzger
Ruth Kutten	Aranka Lichtschein	Hersch Metzger
Zeev Kutten	David Lichtschein	Mirjam Metzger
Dvora Landshut	Perla Lichtschein	Jicchak Mittelmann
Jisrael Landshut	Sirgfried Liebreich	Rosa Mordkovits
Ferdinand Lanes	Tibor Lilienthal	Avraham Morgenstern
Aladar Lanzet	Ester Löffler	Zwi Motyovits
Chaim (Döngö) László	Shimon Lorber	Wolff Mühlrad
Aladar Laufer	Paul (Pruntyi) Lörinc	Shimon Müller
Hillel (Tibi) Laufer	Bözsi Lövinger	Zoltan Müller
Jan Laufer	Emma Löw	Dora Natanson
Olga Laufer	Samias Löw	Eugen Neubauer
Rozsi Laufer	Walter Löwenthal	Eva Neubauer-Fürst
Tommy Laufer	Elijah Lustig	Jakov Neugebauer
Jakov Lautermann	Gabriel Lustig	Desider Neumann
Asher Lebovits	Magda Lustig (Nagel)	Efraim (Feri) Neumann
Ernest Lebovits	Rosa Lustig	Ernest Neumann
Eugen Lebovits	Rudolf Lustig	Jankel Neumann
Levi Lebovits	Zwi Lustig	Jicchak Neumann
Mirjam Lebovits	Aladar Mahrer	Ladislav (Punzl) Neumann

Magda Neumann	Walter Quittner	Geza Rosner
Zwi (Turo) Neumann	Hersch Rappel	Alexander Roth
Siegmund Nieder	Recha Rappel	Jehudit Roth
Shimon Nussbaum	Markus Rebuhn	Livia Roth
Dr. Alexander Ornstein	Eliezer Reich	Menhard Roth
Eugen Pártos	Edith Reichenthal	Bedrich Rotter
Alexander Perl	Jicchak Reichenthal	Eisik Rottman
Alice Perl	Robert Reichenthal	Leib Rubinfeld
Eliezer Perl	Robi Reichenthal	Markus Ruttner
Siegmund Perl	Mirjam Reiter	Jicchak Safran
Adele Perlman	Zwi Reiter	Jecheskiel Salomon
Jisrael Perlman	Jenko Reismann	Emerich Salzberger
Oskar Pick	Ferdinan Reitmann	Ludwig Samuel
Beila Pinkwasser	Herman Ring	Siegfried Schachne
Oskar Pistreich	Lieber Ringer	Jicchak-Baruch Schächter
Ernest Politzer	Alexander (Sanyika) Rosenbaum	Tibor Schalk
Marzell Porjes	Elisabeth (Bözsi) Rosenbaum	Zoltan Schalk
Walter Preiss	Gizella Rosenbaum	Max Schein
Edith Pressburger	Luigi Rosenbaum	Ernst Schillinger
Janka Pressburger	Miki Rosenbaum	Jomtow Schlesinger (Bareli)
Valeria Pressburger	Miri Rosenbaum-Barak	Susi Schlesinger-Baumann
Dr. Jael Presser-Künstlinger	Alexander Rosenberg	Michael Schneller
Shlomo Prisant	Josef Rosenberg	Moshe Schönfeld
Chanoch (Kari) Prinz	Josef Rosenberger	Ladislav Schreiber
Eta Prinz-Böhm	Jeshajahu Rosenfeld	Akiva (Karli) Schwartz
Josef Prinz	Chaim Rosenzweig	Berl Schwetz
Moshe (Bela) Prinz	Ladislav Rosinger	Elvira Schwartz (Huppert)
Ladislav Quastler	Chaviva Rosinger-Weiss	Emerich Schwartz

Eugen Schwartz	Katica Steiner	Alice Weinberger
Jakov Schwartz	Siegmund Steiner	Chajim Weinberger
Ladislav Schwartz	Simcha Steiner	Emilia Weinberger
Zvi Schwartz	Meir Steinmetz	Erika Weinberger
Jicchak Seinwell	Anna Sterlinger	Dr. Jicchak Weinberger
Avraham (Lumek) Seinwell	Bela Sterlinger	Josef Weinberger
Arieh (Leibek) Seinwell	Stefan Sterlinger	Josef-Chaim Weinberger
Ing. Efraim Shapira	Ladislav Tauber	Aladar (Sidor) Weiner
Manci Shapira (Steinitz)	Magda Tauber (Meisels)	Dr. Ladislav Weiner (Strauss)
Elimelech Sichermann	Ferdinand Tauss	Rosa Weiner
Shalom (Lexi) Sichermann	Oskar Teichman	Chava Weingarten
Irma Silberstein	Hugo Tramer	Jechiel Weingarten
Josef Silberman	Jakov Trintzer	Pepi Weingarten
Konrad Silberstein	Ladislav Uher	Regina Weingarten
Moshe Simkovits	Shimon Ullreich	Zeev Weingarten
Jicchak Singer	Josef Ungar (from Trnava)	Shlomo Weiser
Laura Singer	Josef Ungar (from Piešťany)	Aladar Weiss
Lea Singer-Szücs	Shmuel Volicky	Arpad Weiss
Leib Smietanka	Piri Wald (Holländer)	Georg Weiss
Desider Sonnenfeld	Schachne Wald	Hedwig Weiss
Otto Spear	Simcha Wald	Isabella Weiss
Eliezer Alexander (Onki) Spiegel	Zvi Wald	Max Weiss
Jehuda Leopold (Poldi) Spiegel	Adolf Waldner	Miso Weiss
Moshe (Moko) Spiegel	Martin Weidman	Oskar Weiss Oskar Weiss
Sara (Klari) Spiegel (Braun)	Aharon Weil	Renée Weiss
David Spiro	August Weil	Shlomo Weiss
Jicchak Steinberg	Paula Weil	Zwi (Ewald) Weiss
Erich Steiner	Peter Weil	Shmuel Weissberger

Theresa Weissberger	Eugen Wiesner	Berta Wulkan
Geza Welles	Benjamin Willinger	Jaakov Wulkan
Lotte Welles	Cila Winkler (Hofstädter)	Lea Wulkan (Neugröschl)
Tommy Welles	Eliezer (Sassi) Winkler	Walter Wulkan
Bernhard Werner	Georg Winkler	Eva Zelmanovits
Pepi Werner	Heinz Wisla	Sara Zelmanovits (Bonitzer)
Hermina Wesel	Zelma Wittenberg	Shlomo Zelmanovits
Josef Wesel	Erwin Wosner	Max Zwilling
Oskar Wesel		