

Palestinian POWs In German Captivity

by

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Over 1,500 Jewish Volunteers from Palestine who served with the British armed forces were taken as Prisoners of War, the overwhelming majority in the campaigns in Greece and Crete during the spring of 1941 – and spent the remaining year of the war in POW camps and labor detachments in Germany.*

A small number were taken prisoner in the Western Desert and their period of captivity in the POW camps in Libya or Italy was shorter. Many attempted escape. The *Yishuv* – the Jewish community in Palestine – was deeply distressed by this affair which also became a test of its ability to ensure the well-being and security of the volunteers. These POWs came close to the actual scene of the Holocaust and thus at the onset of their captivity they feared that they would share the fate of their European Brethren. For the Palestinian POWs and for their comrades-in-arms alike, the period spent in

A discussion of the subject necessitates research of German, British and Hebrew sources. The German documents were captured by the American forces at the end of the war and transferred to the Alexandria Archives. Today this material can be found in the German Military Archive at Freiburg, Bundesarchiv, Militärarchiv (hereafter – BA-MA).

The British material is found in different sections of the War Office (W.O.) in the British Public Record Office (PRO) notably in section W.O. 224. Diaries, internal newsheets, etc., written by the prisoners themselves, were hidden in the ground of the Lamsdorf camp prior to its evacuation and were lost. Prisoners' letters underwent careful censorship and therefore can only serve as a limited source. Several files of the political department of the Jewish Agency (S-25) in the Central Zionist Archives (hereafter – CZA) contain the correspondence of the Jewish Agency on the subject. The correspondence file of the Mandatory Government on the subject of the captives is found in the Israel State Archives (hereafter – ISA). Most of the material on the Jewish side can be found in reports of the captives, in memoirs and in the 1950-1960 files of the Reparations Committee (hereafter – RC), which dealt with restitution paid by the German Government. Additional depositories referred to are: Labor Party Archives (LPA) and Hagana Archives (HA).

captivity was a test of the relationship between themselves and other nationals.

Temporary Camps in Greece

Surrender and capture were both degrading and depressing for the thousands of troops who were left during the night between April 28-29, 1941, on the Calamata shore in the southern Peloponnus.¹ Despite the fact that the balance of forces there indicated British superiority and many hours were to pass before any substantial German reinforcements arrived at the area, it was hurriedly decided to surrender. The majority of troops on the shore were non-combatant; many of them had neither weapons nor ammunition and most were almost untrained. There were no supplies and many of the soldiers were already quite hungry. Disintegration had begun on the previous day when officers and soldiers alike had sought their own ways of escape – in small craft or on foot along the shore.² It was felt that another day in that area, exposed as it was to bombing, would only abet the demoralization process, without increasing the prospects of evacuation.³ Weariness, feelings of frustration and weak leadership were additional factors which facilitated the inclination to capitulate. There were officers who appealed against the decision to surrender, maintaining that it was possible – even given that morning's difficult conditions – to fight another day, either in the hope of evacuating the following night, or of providing cover for those attempting to escape.⁴ Brigadier Parrington, in command of the shore, stood by his decision, and ordered those refusing to surrender to leave Calamata

¹ On Palestinian soldiers in the Greek and Crete campaign see Y. Gelber, *Sefer Toldot ha-Hitnadvut*, Vol. A. Volunteering and its Role in Zionist Policy 1939-1942, Jerusalem, 1979, pp. 366-405.

² See for example the diary of Captain Karney, entry of April 28, 1941, PRO, W.O., 217\34; report of Y. Schiff on the evacuation from Greece written in Egypt, June 21-23, 1941, Archives of the Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad (hereafter – KMA) files of the security committee 12\A.

³ Y. Yaacobi, *Mi-Eretz Israel ha-Germani*, M.A., thesis, Tel Aviv University, 1976, pp. 105-107 (hereafter – Yaacobi).

⁴ Interrogation of Colonel Renton, Commanding Officer of the Pioneer Corps in Greece who escaped from Calamata and reached Egypt, W.O., 201\7246; also Major E.H. Rhodes-Woods, *War History of the Royal Pioneer Corps*, Aldershot, 1960, p. 104.

immediately, so as not to endanger the remaining troops.⁵ Hundreds of officers and other ranks left the Calamata area and tried to escape by land and sea before the Germans should gain total control of the Peloponnesus. Included among those were scores of Palestinian soldiers who tried their luck alone or in groups. One group moved southward along the shore in the hope of taking over small fishing boats to sail to Crete; in the hope of taking over small fishing boats to sail to Crete; others hid out in the hills and later made their way over land or by boat among the Aegean islands until they reached the Turkish border.⁶ Many of those who escaped from Calamata were later caught by German soldiers and were added to the thousands of POWs taken in Calamata proper.⁷ Others were shot and killed by German troops.⁸

Among the thousands of soldiers stranded on shore, relatively few succeeded in escaping. Some of the Palestinian commanders on the spot (Ben-Aharon, Shimon Hacoheh and Gershoni) sought to discourage ideas of escape; among the considerations was the fear of the German attitude towards Jewish POWs. The officers thought that the Jewish soldiers would be safer being captured together with the British, and feared that individuals caught while attempting to escape would fare worse.⁹ Only one officer tried to escape. Three others decided, apparently independently, that they were duty-bound to remain with their men and to share their fate. Already on April 28, Gershoni told his men that if they could not all be evacuated that evening, he would stay on.¹⁰ On the brink of surrender the next morning, Ben-Aharon answered when urged to flee: "If the Jewish units are doomed to be taken captive, I will not leave them".¹¹ The British officers felt otherwise; most of them advised

⁵ Yaacobi, pp. 96-98.

⁶ C. Buckley, *Greece and Crete 1941*, Official History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Series, London, 1952, p. 136; G. Long, *Australia in the War*, Vol. II, *Greece, Crete and Syria*, Canberra, 1953, pp. 185-190.

⁷ F. Yordan, *Brihati min ha-Shevi*, Ein Harod, 1945, pp. 60-63.

⁸ Official condolence letter to the family of Sergeant Goldman, ISA, D\32\44. Goldman was captured and killed on April 29, 1941.

⁹ Interrogation of S. Secher and E. Asir, June 18, 1941 CZA S-25\9263.

¹⁰ Report of Shiff, op. cit.

¹¹ S. Slodash, *Be-Kavley ha-Shevi*, Tel Aviv, 1946, p. 53.

and encouraged the Palestinians to escape, and several even suggested that they make the attempt with them. The British officer who had decided to remain and be taken captive still, however, kept their distance. Ben-Aharon explains this as resulting from the fear that if they should fall into German hands together with the Jewish soldiers they would be allotted the same treatment; the German attitude to Jews was well known even before the war.¹² Although such thoughts must have occurred, it was the relationships in the Palestinian companies during the months preceding the campaign for Greece that had brought about this separation – relationships marked by distance and estrangement between British and Jews and between professional soldiers and volunteers alike. At this difficult time, British non-commissioned officers preferred to be among their own countrymen.¹³

During the few hours which passed between the sailing of the evacuation ships and the arrival of the first German soldiers, total anarchy reigned in Calamata and the surrounding area. There were those who hurried to release their tensions from those last terrible days,¹⁴ others attempted to commit suicide. A large group of Palestinian soldiers clustered around Ben-Aharon:

I was the only officer and around me a stormy, noisy sea-people whose mood verged on insanity, and I did not know what to do or what would happen to us. I looked at the nearby British units to see what they were doing, for I had no experience of being taken captive... I ordered the men to prepare for the coming surrender... We shaved, cleaned up, and destroyed our arms. While we were thus occupied, the representatives of 400 Arab soldiers approached us to request permission to join us since they too had remained without any commander... I called the sergeants and ordered them to divide the men into ranks of thirty and march... to surrender... At first, the Jews proceeded in despair and fear, and I who led the column assumed all these fears and my heart turned to water. I saluted the German commander... reported precisely

¹² Y. Ben-Aharon, *Mihtavim le-Bni, Ein Harod*, 1946, p. 20.

¹³ Gelber, *op. cit.*, pp. 401-404.

¹⁴ A. Yerushalmi, *Shlosha she-Barhu*, Tel Aviv, 1957, p. 29.

on our numbers and informed him that henceforward the responsibility for these people was in his hands.¹⁵

Other Palestinians soldiers grouped around Gershoni related:

Many of our boys wanted to commit suicide. Gershoni, our officer, deserves a medal. He encouraged the men, spoke to each one in turn and saved many from death. His words brought solace even to those who had already despaired totally...¹⁶

The initial destination of the thousands of POWs was a temporary detention camp in the port area of Calamata. Meanwhile, German units began a sweep of the ridges above the city and the shore and discovered several groups of escapees.¹⁷ The fear of Jewish prisoner meeting German captor turned out in the meantime to be unfounded. The troops of the fighting echelon did not bother themselves unduly with interrogations¹⁸ and thus did not uncover the fact that hundreds of Jews were among their prisoners, including former classmates.¹⁹

The Fifth German Panzer Division, which was assigned responsibility for the POW detention camp in the late morning hours on April 29 was in charge for one day only. From the testimonies of Palestinian soldiers it appears that no interrogations took place there. Nevertheless, the intelligence officer did run a general check, possibly through conversations with senior officers among the captives, and reported:

Interrogation of personnel in Calamata had yielded these initial results:

Precise determination of the unit groupings has not been possible since almost all personnel have refused to reveal the number of their regiments or divisions.

¹⁵ Y. Ben-Aharon, "Be Shevi ha-Nazim" in *Sefer ha-Hitnadvut*, edited by Z. Shefer, Jerusalem, 1949, p. 650.

¹⁶ Interrogation of the escapee Ben-Gershon, 20.8.41, LPA, file 1101, p. 1.

¹⁷ Report of Ben-Gershon; Ben Nadav, "Be-Nedudei ha-Shevi ve-haBriha" *Sefer ha-Hitnadvut*, p. 584. About another group of British, Australian and Palestinians who were captured on the same day see Yordan, pp. 60-68.

¹⁸ According to a questionnaire presented by Yaacobi (see p. 104) to Lieutenant Jädtke of the German force in Calamata on April 28-29, 1941.

¹⁹ Slodash, p. 56.

The total number of prisoners is estimated at over 8,000 and is made up roughly as follows:

2,000 English from the Isles, with a limited number of fighting troops, the great majority from the signal corps, along with engineers, technicians, animal handlers, etc. (with 113 officers).

1,300 Australians and New Zealanders (fighting troops, with 55 officers).

1,200 Pioneers from Cyprus, among them 3 officers.

1,350 Palestinians, equally divided among Jews and Arabs, with 2 officers.²⁰

On the same day, responsibility for the POWs in Calamata was transferred from Division to Corps. A new detention camp was set up in a Greek Army camp on the outskirts of the town where all prisoners, including “new” prisoners caught in the hills and on the shore, were penned in the square in front of the harbor.²¹ This was, in actual fact, a fenced-off plaza with several huts. Approximately 10,000 POWs were crowded there, without facilities for sleeping, sanitation, food or water adequate for even a much smaller number. The most pressing problem was hunger, since many POWs had been without food for several days. The shock caused by the surrender and captivity repressed for a while the distress of hunger, but it emerged when the men got used to their situation.²²

When the German guards permitted Greek peddlers of food and drink to crowd at the fences, the starving and thirsty captives rushed to obtain supplies; the guards panicked and some opened fire, killing several captives.²³ During the first three days of captivity the Germans operated random distribution of tea or a soup-like liquid, in one distribution point which served all the ten thousand prisoners. This distribution point was the site of quarrels between the British and the Jews about queuing and priorities.²⁴ These incidents, the attempts of several German-speaking POWs to fraternize with or to flatter their guards, and rumors (apparently unbased) of German

²⁰ Intelligence Officer of the Fifth Panzer Division to the 40th Corps Intelligence Department, 29.4.1941, BA-MA, AOK 12, 75091\3.

²¹ Yordan, p. 68; Testimony (anonymous) of an escape, HA, 33\3, pp. 3-4.

²² Slodash, p. 58.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 59; Yordan, pp. 69-70; testimony in HA, 33\3, p. 4.

²⁴ Yordan, p. 70.

agents among the captives – led some Jewish POWs already at this early stage of captivity to think about the means to secure their standing in this ordeal:

We did not know exactly how to steel ourselves or what to do, but deep within we knew what not to do; we would not flatter these haters of our people, nor make contact with them or beg for privileges; we would not converse with them or speak German. These were the basic negatives, passed on to each individual and group.²⁵

The Palestinian officers were held separately from the other ranks and it was impossible to promulgate this code of behavior by means of the military hierarchy. The only way to ensure respectable behavior among the prisoners was through general agreement and social pressure brought to bear on those who diverged from it. The internal tensions typical of the Palestinian companies since the beginning of their service – an outcome of their social composition – put many obstacles in the process of crystallizing a united front of the prisoners.

As of the first of May groups of captives from Calamata were transferred at the rate of 1,000 men each day to a new camp in the city of Corinth. This was a temporary detention camp set up on April 25, to accommodate several hundred British POWs taken on that day.²⁶ The Corinth camp regulations were harsh:

To the Prisoner of War camp shall be sent only English [viz, `all nationals of the Empire` as opposed to Greeks and Yugoslavs]. English prisoners, notably officers, must be treated as their personal weapons. Escape of prisoners must be prevented by any means possible.

The English prisoners must be put immediately in work detachments. They must rebuilt all that they have destroyed [roads, bridges, etc].²⁷

This order was not carried out literally. The transfer of prisoners commenced earlier than planned and, in addition, 1,600 Yugoslav prisoners were sent to

²⁵ Ibid., p. 69; Slodash, p. 55.

²⁶ Yerushalmi, p. 34.

²⁷ Order of the 40th Corps Headquarters on the subject of collecting and guarding booty and the concentration of captives 1.5.1941, BA-MA, XLAK, 11652.

Corinth. The organization of work detachments was held up as were food supplies for the prisoners. On May 2, 198 officers and 5,923 other ranks of the British prisoners were already at Corinth.²⁸ Prisoners from Calamata and other areas of the Peloponnesus continued to stream towards Corinth. The harsh “reception” was dictated by the German non-commissioned officers on duty.²⁹ Living conditions were very poor and rations were: “One Italian biscuit per day... around ten olives, a piece of laquerda, at times polenta, rice for preparing soup, one portion per hundred men”.³⁰ Starvation prevailed in the camp and with it loss of self-control.³¹ Given such pressures, relationships between Jews and others and the British became strained on national grounds, relations which had not been of the best even before captivity.³² Eventually the Germans authorized the opening of a market and captives with Greek currency were permitted to purchase grains and occasionally fruit from Greek peddlers. British officers apportioned money among the soldiers and supervised the trade.³³ Sanitary facilities in the camp were bad and epidemics of dysentery and malaria rapidly took hold.³⁴ The prisoners lived in huts built from aluminium slabs and scrap metal found discarded in the neighborhood, or in hollows which they dug in the sand. The attitude of the German guards to the POWs was, in general, not bad, and there was no discriminatory treatment of Jews, but there were sentries who rushed to pull the trigger when it seemed to them that the rules regarding escape were violated.³⁵

In all, 11,110 POWs were concentrated at the camp of Corinth. The division into secondary groups (“hundreds”) was based on national origin. According to the German census there were 1,907 Palestinian soldiers and 2 officers in

²⁸ Ibid., report on the number of captives in Corinth, 2.5.1941.

²⁹ Slodash, p. 61; Yordan, p. 73; Interrogation of Ben-Gershon, p. 2; Yerushalmi, p. 34.

³⁰ Slodash, p. 62; Yordan, pp. 73-74; Yerushalmi, pp. 35-36.

³¹ Yerushalmi, pp. 37-38; Slodash, pp. 63-64.

³² Ben-Aharon in Sefer ha-Hitnadvut, p. 651.

³³ Yordan, pp. 74-75; Yerushalmi, p. 39; Slodash, p. 64.

³⁴ Yordan, p. 77; Yerushalmi, p. 38; Interrogation of Ben-Gershon, p. 3.

³⁵ See above note 21.

the camp.³⁶ This figure included the Arab POWs as well; the Germans had no separate statistics for Jews and Arabs, probably because they had difficulties in differentiating between the Arabs and oriental Jews.

A temporary respite from the difficult conditions in the camp was found by several prisoners in volunteering for work. This was not the usual slave labor as known in Germany, but rather service in various German army installations in Greece such as hospital kitchens, salvage depots, loading and unloading at supply depots, and so forth. Prisoners were also employed in the removal of the bombs and dud shells scattered in the area. Military hierarchy was strictly preserved: officers did not go out to work, sergeants were in charge of the work detachments, and it was the regular soldier who actually worked. The Palestinians welcomed this task: "Work occasionally brought food and clothing, and gave a hope of escaping".³⁷

After several days of harassing, the Germans began a thorough interrogation of the POWs. Interrogation of the Palestinian POWs was perfunctory, although at times the Germans abused the captives, especially those originally from Germany.³⁸ Interrogation of the officers was a more lengthy process, accompanied by insults and jokes.³⁹ In most cases the soldier was asked his place of birth and how long he had lived in Palestine. Those speaking German were asked additional questions. Several prisoners originally from Germany served as interpreters and their behavior led other prisoners to charge them with attempting to pander to the Germans.⁴⁰ The onset of interrogations was, the Palestinian prisoners believed, related to "Himmler's visit to the camp."⁴¹ "Himmler" seems in reality to have been

³⁶ Report of an inspection tour of the Corinth camp by the commander of "Feldkommandantur" 569", 17.5.1941, BA-MA, AOK, 12, 75091\3.

³⁷ Yordan, pp. 76-80; Interrogation of Ben-Gershon, p. 4.

³⁸ Yordan, pp. 88-89; Slodash, pp. 64-66. Not all captives were interrogated; Yerushalmi in his memoirs mentions no interrogation.

³⁹ Ben-Aharon, Mihtavim le-Bni, pp. 26-27.

⁴⁰ Testimony, HA, 33\3, pp. 7-8.

⁴¹ Slodash, pp. 64-65. According to Y. Karlenboim (Almogi) he appeared on the third day and spoke to the British brigadier who answered "Himmler" with impudence. Immediately after this a wave of harassment began, no physical but psychological. Sefer ha-Hitnadvut, p. 628.

Oberstleutenant Hanstein from the Headquarters of the German Twelfth Army' who visited the camp in Corinth on May 18. German and neutral journalists accompanied him, interviewed the POWs and published their impressions in the German press. The variety of visitors and the tumult around them caused the POWs to think that they were being visited by a very high-ranking personality.

Hanstein found that "the administration of the camp was satisfactory". He also reported that "the state of health of the prisoners is definitely satisfactory (augesprochen gut)," and forbade the commandant to "show any softness, consideration or compromise towards the prisoners" who, he said, were ungrateful.⁴²

The next day, the interrogations began. The German interrogators sought to learn about life in Palestine – Jewish colonization, economic conditions, relationships between the English, Jews and Arabs. They tried to discover why men volunteered for the British Pioneer Corps, and asked about service conditions in it, about the personnel, the relationships with Arabs and with the British command in the mixed companies, and the attitude of the British POWs to these units.⁴³ A few of those who later escaped from captivity emphasized in their testimonies that the answers given were prompt and proud. Another escapee claimed, on the contrary, that, "We convinced the Germans that we were forced to join the army. We explained that in Palestine there was a deep economic crisis, and we were all unemployed."⁴⁴ It seems that the Germans were convinced by those who took the latter approach rather than those who said patriotic motives let them to volunteer, as a summarizing report shows:

Difficult economic conditions are the reason which caused the Jews to join the British work companies. They received excellent rations and salary (700

⁴² Report of Oberstleutenant Hanstein on his trip to Corinth, 18.5.1941, BA-MA, AOK, 12, 75091\3.

⁴³ Report of the Intelligence Dept. of the 12th Army to the Supreme Commandant of the German Land Forces (OKH), 7.5.1941 AOK, 12, 75091\2; see also the interrogation of the prisoner Haim Leshtz in the report on the capture and interrogation of scores of captives on the Isle of Kithaera. These captives were also sent afterwards to Corinth, Ibid., 75091\3.

⁴⁴ Report of Ben-Gershon, 20.8.1941, LPA, file 1101, p. 3.

drachmas per week). In addition, married personnel received a family allowance of 6 pounds per month. Supernumerary policemen were also forced to enlist, since the disturbances in Palestine had terminated.⁴⁵

The military information the German interrogations managed to extract from the Palestinian POWs was of minor significance. The soldiers who “talked” were few, and the information in their possession usually pertained solely to their own units. The interrogators gathered that feelings harbored towards the British were not positive ones.⁴⁶

The captors were understandably interested in Jews of German extraction. At first these POWs feared that the Germans might not recognize their status as Prisoners of War, and regard them as traitors to their country. The Attorney of the German Twelfth Army investigated this point with a view to finding a juridical basis for branding them as traitors. During interrogation these POWs claimed that they had been granted Palestinian citizenship and were therefore no longer German citizens. Since British army documents (most of which were destroyed) specified only the parents’ nationality, and since the German authorities did not keep lists of German nationals forfeiting citizenship through obtaining foreign citizenship, the German lawyer realized the impossibility of proving treason. He therefore sought an alternative legal means of harassing Palestinian POWs of German origin. One possible solution that presented itself was to prove that individuals had fled Germany in the midst of legal proceedings against them; it might thus be possible to treat them as “fugitives from justice” rather than as Prisoners of War; he did not, however, consider this as sufficient indictment for court-martial.

The German authorities thus attempted to dredge up from these individuals’ past any legal proceedings in which they had been involved before leaving Germany.⁴⁷ Several prisoners who had given particulars about their past in Germany were segregated from the other prisoners until investigation results came through and a decision was made about how to treat them. These

⁴⁵ Report of the 12th Army Intelligence Dept. to the Interlligence Dept. of the OKH on “The interrogation of captives from Palestine”, 19.5.1941, BA-MA, AOK 12, 75091\2.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 5.6.1941, “A summary of the results of the interrogations.”

⁴⁷ The legal adviser (Oberkriegsgerichtsrat) of the 12th Army to the legal department of OKH (Gruppe Rechtswesen) 19.5.1945, *ibid.*

prisoners were eventually sent with the others to the permanent camp in Germany, and were never again questioned regarding their past. After hearing of this incident, the British ordered the deletion of nationality and place of birth from the documents of Palestinian volunteers which henceforth read “Palestinian” only, in order to prevent the enemy from discriminating against British soldiers of German or Austrian origin taken prisoner of war.⁴⁸

Both German and neutral journalists showed great interest in the POWs in Greece. Swedish newspapermen visiting Corinth with a Red Cross delegation spoke of “at least 1,000 Palestinian POWs, some of whom had once been in Germany”. They published personal stories of POWs born in Berlin, Leipzig and other German cities; on the other hand, they quoted Arab POWs who stated that they did not want war, that this was the war of the English and the Jews and that they, the Arabs, had been brought to Greece against their will.⁴⁹ A German journalist reported a discussion with a group of Jewish POWs who unsuccessfully tried to convince him that the Palestinian Jews was different from his European brother, and did their best to enlighten him on Zionism and the White Paper, of which he had never heard.⁵⁰

During the last ten days in May, the days of the campaign for Crete, the attitude of the Germans to the POWs in Corinth deteriorated, ostensibly in the wake of rumor about the harsh treatment meted out by the British in Crete to German paratroopers who had fallen their hands. The POWs movements within the camp were restricted, the “market” was closed and bathing in the sea was forbidden as was smoking during night hours. Punishment for infringement of these new rules was harsh and several British POWs were shot on various pretexts.⁵¹

During the early days of June, additional POWs who had been taken captive by the Germans along the north shore of Crete began to reach the camp. Most the POWs fell into German hands in and around Sphakia, the main

⁴⁸ A circular of the British Headquarters in Palestine to its recruiting officers, 5.7.1941, CZA, S-25\4720.

⁴⁹ “Britten, Juden, Neger...,” *Der Führer*, Karlsruhe, 21.5.1941.

⁵⁰ Article of a German military reporter on the captives in the Corinth camp, 13.7.1941, *Das Reich*, in a collection of newspapers clippings, BA-MA, RH 53-18.

⁵¹ Slodash, p. 67; Yordan, pp. 81-82.

evacuation port on the southern shore of the island. As in Calamata, thousands of parched and starving soldiers were taken captive by a handful of German paratroopers. Among these POWs were 120 Palestinian soldiers. Most of them, about 110, belonged to Pioneer Corps Company 606 which had been evacuated from Greece with the first troops taken off. These Palestinians were stranded on the island of Milos after their ship capsized, and were taken off to Crete on May 1st by British destroyers. The remaining ten belonged to other Pioneer Companies and had succeeded in escaping from Calamata on the eve of surrender. Some POWs concealed their Palestinian identity, claiming some other nationality.⁵² On June 3rd the POWs from Sphakia were brought to the detention camp near the village of Galatas, on the seashore not far from Canea. The detention camp had been hurriedly erected in an open field, and conditions were severe. To the 6,000 POWs taken at Sphakia were added several thousand POWs captured at other places on the island, most of them from the garrison of Heraklion. The prisoners were segregated according to nationality, and a special section allotted to the 300 officers among them. In an adjoining camp Greek POWs were interned – soldiers who had escaped from Greece and had fought hand in hand with the British in Crete. Until the beginning of 1942, no Red Cross delegates visited the temporary camp at Galatas, mail and parcels were not received, and the POWs were totally isolated from the world, permitting the Germans to treat the prisoners with greater harshness than was considered acceptable in Greece or in permanent camps in Germany.⁵³ The few testimonies about the camp at Galatas make no mention of interrogation of the Palestinian POWs; German reports mention only British fighting units, and it seems that the interrogators contented themselves with identifying their prisoners and the battles in which they took part prior to reaching Crete.⁵⁴ Through agents in the camp posing as prisoners, the Germans learned of

⁵² Testimony of A. Katz in *Sefer ha-Hitnadvut*, p. 602 ff.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 607-611.

⁵⁴ Telegram of the Abwehr liaison officer in Greece to the head office in Berlin, 23.6.1941, BA-MA, AOK 12, 75091\2.

camp morale, of the relationship between the British and the other prisoners, and of the prisoners' opinion of the Germans.

After the first groups of prisoners had been moved to Corinth at the beginning of June 1941, 6,500 POWs from the surviving forces, including all the Palestinians, still remained in Crete. At the beginning of July, 2,300 of them were transferred by ship to Salonica on their first lap to Germany and 1,900 were sent one week later; a polio epidemic which developed in the Canea camp halted these transports for the next few months.⁵⁵ The Palestinians, with the exception of a few, were among the first to be transferred to Germany.⁵⁶ 1,700 POWs remained at the camp of Galatas,⁵⁷ the harsh treatment to which the remaining prisoners were subjected there, the difficult conditions, and the rapid organization of a local underground movement, led to numerous escape attempts, many successful. At the beginning of October the transfer of POWs to Germany was renewed. 800 British and 4,500 Greek prisoners now remained on Crete; in the face of the wave of escapes the German command hurriedly transferred the English to the mainland.⁵⁸ The transports followed each other in close order during the fall of 1941, and by the end of that year only 100 prisoners remained on the island. The last Palestinian prisoner escaped from the camp on the eve of his transfer to Germany at the end of December, and in the spring of 1942 reached Palestine.⁵⁹

In June 1941 dismantling of the camp at Corinth and transfer of the POWs from Greece to Germany began. Problems of sea transport necessitated transfer of prisoners overland to Salonica, so the Germans had to wait until the Twelfth Army had left Greece and transportation routes and railways again became available. It seems, although there is no definite proof, that the

⁵⁵ Report of a 12th Army Intelligence officer on Crete 7.7.1941, BA-MA, BOX 253\569.

⁵⁶ Testimony of Katz, p. 612.

⁵⁷ Letter of complaint by the senior British officer in the camp to the commander of the camp, 24.7.1941, BA-MA, RW 4\320.

⁵⁸ Information following the visit of one of the command officers from Crete 12.10.1941, *ibid.*, BOX 253\569.

⁵⁹ Testimony of Katz, pp. 623-627.

transfer of Greece from German to Italian occupation hastened the decision to dismantle the camp and evacuate the prisoners to German-controlled territory. Internment in Germany would distinctly curtail possibilities of a successful escape. The prisoners perceived this and the number of those who prior to the transfer attempted to escape and fade into the local population, grew. Others planned to escape in the course of the journey to Germany. The Italians were the first to be moved from the camp at Corinth and returned to their army, then the Yugoslavs. Afterwards the British officers were sent to Germany by way of Salonica. Several days later transfer of the remaining POWs began according to national groups.⁶⁰ They were marched to the railway station, and crowded into cattle wagons which were then sealed. The trains ran to Athens, and from there to Salonica,⁶¹ where the prisoners were held in a temporary camp for close to three weeks; this camp also held the prisoners who had been transferred from Crete. For the first time a systematic search was made of their possessions which were often confiscated. Afterwards, the prisoners were housed in crowded huts in a Greek army camp. Discipline at this transit camp, stricter than that which had prevailed in Corinth, was the result of a wave of escapes on the way from Athens whose magnitude only became apparent to the Germans upon reaching Salonica. In Salonica, the Germans did not permit the Palestinians to work outside the camp. They apparently feared that the prisoners, many of who had been born in that city (members of the Port Operating Company) would succeed in escaping, and merge with the local population. Thus the Germans strictly prohibited any contact with the locals. The citizens of Salonica, who had already felt the strong arm of the occupation regime, were more reserved than the population of Corinth and Athens, who treated the prisoners with demonstrative sympathy.⁶²

Several days after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, at the end of June 1941, the prisoners left Salonica on their way to Germany, 50 men to each sealed cattle car. The harsh treatment, overcrowding, hunger, thirst, and

⁶⁰ Yordan, p. 90 relates how he was evacuated on June 9th in the last group which left Corinth; Yerushalmi, p. 44 relates that the Palestinian left the camp on June 11 and were not the last group to be evacuated.

⁶¹ Yordan, pp. 90-94; Yerushalmi, pp. 44-47.

⁶² Slodash, pp. 69-72.

lack of sanitary facilities made the journey, which lasted five and a half days, a living hell. The journey ended on the Yugoslav-Austrian border on July 3, 1941. Here the Palestinian group was divided between two temporary camps: Wolfsberg and Marburg. In these camps the Palestinians as a group encountered, for the first time, the problem of their Jewishness and a different treatment specifically meted out to them as Jews. Their fear was great, mainly because their official Red Cross listing as prisoners of War had not yet been carried out.

In the Wolfsberg camp the Jews were segregated from the other prisoners and were again divided up among themselves. The Jews of German or Austrian origin were forbidden to go out to work; they were separated from the other Jewish POWs who were sent on work-detachments to various places in the neighborhood. In Marburg, too, the 600 Jews were segregated from the other prisoners and it was rumored that they would be obliged to wear a special badge;⁶³ it seems that these rumors were not without grounds. It was on the eve of the enactment of the law (September 1941) requiring Jews in Germany to wear the yellow star and the camp commanders wondered, in the absence of any clear-cut directive, how to treat the Jewish prisoners in this respect. The uncertainty was finally resolved only at the beginning of 1942 when the department in charge of POW affairs in German High Command (OKW) instructed commandants of Prisoner of War camps that in regard to Jewish prisoners from all armies:

The marking of Jews in the Reich with a star is a German Government step to facilitate the identification of Jews in the streets, shops, etc. Jewish Prisoners of War are exempted from wearing any Jewish star; they are, however, to be segregated as far as possible from the other prisoners.⁶⁴

The relatively courteous reception accorded the prisoners at Marburg did not hint at what awaited them there. "Lice were here a more pernicious plague than in any other camp", wrote one of them in his memoirs. Most of the time was spent in queuing for food, and "we were treated not as POWs but as

⁶³ H. Glovinsky, "Arba Shanim", in *Sefer ha-Hitnadvut*, p. 659.

⁶⁴ Order number 11 of the Prisoners of War Main Office (Chef des Kriegsgefangenenwesen), OKW, 11/3/1942, BA-MA, RW6\V 270.

criminal prisoners". Searches and interrogations took place, personal possessions were confiscated, and lists of prisoners drawn up according to their country of origin. At the end of July, the period of temporary and transit camps came to an end and the prisoners proceeded on their final journey by rail to the permanent camp at Lamsdorf in Silesia.⁶⁵

With this ended the first, and probably the most painful chapter of the Odyssey of captivity. The period between capture and reaching a permanent Prisoner of War camp subject to Red Cross supervision and international treaties, was marked by apprehension, uncertainty, lack of rights, and isolation. In addition there were hunger, bad sanitation, lack of medical treatment, harsh discipline and punishment. This was the lot shared by all the prisoners: English, Australian, New Zealander, Cypriot, Indian and Yugoslav. The Jewish prisoners had in addition specific fears of their own, stemming from uncertainty over the treatment they would receive at the hands of the of the Germans. This feeling of isolation created a growing sense of comradeship and common fate during the first few weeks in Greece and in the camps in Austria and was to consolidate later during the years of captivity in Lamsdorf and in the labor detachments.

Prisoner of War Camps In Germany

The first to reach the permanent camps were the officers transferred from Greece at the end of June. The three Palestinian officers were segregated from the remaining prisoners and sent along with the British officer to Oflag V,a. Prisoner of War camp for officers in Bieberach in southern Germany.

In the autumn of 1941, two attempts at digging escape tunnels were uncovered in the Bieberach camp and the majority of the prisoners, numbering some 3,500, were transferred to the Warburg camp in Westphalia. Following a successful escape operation, approximately half of the POW officers were sent to a new camp, Eichstadt, in Bavaria where the three

⁶⁵ Slodash, pp. 76-82.

Palestinian officers remained for a year and a quarter. Early in 1944 they were transferred to another camp, in Rotenburg.⁶⁶

The Arab prisoners from Palestine were segregated upon their arrival in Germany and sent to Stalag III D where they were subjected to intensive propaganda from Arab collaborators whose guiding spirit was the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. In the winter of 1941-42, Hajj' Amin al-Husseini's emissaries visited the camp in the attempt to enlist volunteers for the Arab Legion mustered with a view to participating in the liberation of the Middle East. About a hundred Arab POWs volunteered forthwith. Those who refused to do so were transferred to Lamsdorf where they joined the remaining prisoners: "In our camp they usually were well behaved, happily and actively participated in all our activities, and successfully learned Hebrew".⁶⁷

At the beginning of August 1941, 1,160 Palestinian POWs in two groups arrived at Lamsdorf camp in Silesia (Stalag VIII B) where they joined 12,000 British prisoners and 7,000 prisoners of other nationalities – Frenchmen, Belgians, Poles and Yugoslavs.⁶⁸

Already in 1940, during the French campaign, the Germans had ruled out setting up separate camps for Jewish POWs. They preferred to have the French prisoners demand such segregation and removal of the Jewish POWs to work outside of the camp. At that time they were still weighing the possibility of marking the Jewish POWs with a distinctive badge.⁶⁹ The Germans thought that the British would separate themselves from the Palestinians in a similar manner, but soon discovered their error. From the beginning, representatives of the British POWs in Lamsdorf made it clear that this would not happen there, and via diplomatic channels it was hinted that the British Government, too, would insist that the Jewish POWs receive equal treatment. A German officer informed the newcomers to Lamsdorf that they would be treated as British POWs. The veteran prisoners, taken in Dunkirk,

⁶⁶ For life in the POW camp see S. Hacoheh, *Min ha-Shevi ha-Germani*, 1973; album of sketches on German captivity *Constrating Shadows*, Haifa, 1972; Ben-Aharon in a meeting of the Actions Committee of the Histadrut, 13.6.1945, pp. 16-20.

⁶⁷ Survey of Karlenboim, p. 40.

⁶⁸ Swiss Embassy report of visit to Stalag VIII B; August 1941, W.O. 224\27, pp. 4-5.

⁶⁹ Bulletin No. 1 of the Department of Prisoners of War in OKH, BA-MA, RW 6\270.

told them, on the other hand, that the German staff was perplexed and had no idea how to deal with them. Thus, for example, the Germans decided that the Palestinians would not share in the distribution of Red Cross parcels sent from Britain. The British Man of Confidence in the Stalag, R.S.M. Sherrif, declared that in such a case the British too would refuse to get their parcels. The Germans were alarmed, and the parcels were distributed among all the prisoners.⁷⁰

The Palestinians Man of Confidence, C.S.M. Schusterman, discussed this problem with an inspection team from the Swiss Embassy. Sherrif's assistant, who also represented the Red Cross in the camp, informed the new prisoners of the Geneva Treaty rules and emphasized the rule permitting non-commissioned officer the right to refuse to work. The Germans were sensitive to this problem of NCO work, since the prisoners regarded work as a contribution to the German war effort, and did their best to avoid it. Four-way talks between the embassy delegate, R.S.M. Sherrif, Schusterman and the camp commandant ensued. It was agreed that the treatment of the Palestinians would be precisely that accorded to the British: they would receive their share of parcels; the NCOs would be permitted to decide for themselves if they wished to work or not, bearing in mind that only prisoners who worked received payment.⁷¹

After a week or two of adaptation, the prisoners began to be sent to work outside the camp.⁷² Most of the prisoners (15,800) were divided into 300 labor detachments which worked in various enterprises. Around 4,000 prisoners remained at the Lamsdorf camp, among them 148 Jewish POWs who lived in separate quarters. A Red Cross delegation which visited one of the small Jewish labor detachments in December 1941, reported that the treatment of the Jews was identical to the treatment given to all prisoners and

⁷⁰ Slodash, pp. 86-90; Report of Glovinsky in a meeting of the Actions Committee of the Histadrut, 13.6.1945, p. 25.

⁷¹ See note 68.

⁷² Letter of E. Zelberg to his parents, 2.9.1941, CZA, S-25\4720/

the Jewish prisoners testified that similar conditions prevailed in the other labor detachments as well.⁷³

From now onwards, members of the labor detachments underwent a long process of battle against the ravages of winter, of standing up for their rights against German guards and overseers, of struggles over working conditions and food supplies, and of internal crystallization, all the while dealing with those who ingratiated themselves, informed or stole. A continuous effort was made to halt the commerce existing both between the prisoners and their guards and among the prisoners themselves.

In several of the better organized groups of the labor camps parcels were shared, as was the general food preparation. Cultural activities slowly developed: teaching Hebrew to new immigrants, putting out a leaflet and organization of courses on various subjects.⁷⁴ Through these efforts, the prisoners periodically came into direct conflict with those in charge of the camps. These clashes took place partly on matters of principle; others were the result of nerviness and personal confrontations. Clashes such as these on matters of discipline were not typical of the Jewish prisoners. They often took place between British prisoners and their German guards and more than once ended tragically when German guards killed British soldiers and justified this by claiming that the latter had attempted to escape. Clashes even occurred between Arab prisoners and German guards despite the efforts of the Nazis to draw the Arab prisoners to their side in order for them to be inducted into the Arab Legion created by the Mufti.⁷⁵

The prisoners in Germany were, geographically and mentally closer than any group of members of the Yishuv to the Jews of Nazi-occupied Europe. Scattered among various labor detachments, they came into contact with forced labor groups made up of Polish Jews. The first meetings between the Palestinian POWs and members of such groups took place near the canal in Gleiwitz during the winter of 1942. The Hebrew spoken by several of the

⁷³ Red Cross report on visits to labor detachments E-253 and E-287 of Stalag VIII B, 13.12.1941, W.O., Ibid.

⁷⁴ Survey of Karlenboim, pp. 35-38; Slodash, pp. 100-121.

⁷⁵ Judgement of a German military court which imprisoned an Arab POW who attacked – according to the charge against him – a German sentry, 24.6.1942, copy in ISA, D\95\41 I.

prisoners was overheard by a number of Jews from Poland and thus the first contact was made. In the course of time, several tricks were devised to make more meetings possible. The Palestinians learned from the forced laborers of events in the ghettos in Poland. After bribing the guards, they smuggled food, cigarettes and medicines to the Polish Jews. This encounter lasted several weeks until the Jewish groups from Poland was transferred elsewhere, leaving no traces.⁷⁶

During the winter of 1942\43, certain prisoners were employed at various jobs in the nearby city of Gleiwicz. Here they met local Jews and even relatives. Here, too, they found ways of sharing with these Jews the commodities distributed by the “winter relief campaign” in which they were employed.⁷⁷ An additional meeting with Jews took place that winter in the Blächammer factory producing synthetic rubber, where a group of Jewish POWs worked side by side with Jewish and Russian forced laborers, including a group of Jewish youths from cities in western Galicia.⁷⁸

In the autumn of 1942 a change for the worse occurred in the German attitude towards the British prisoners, as a result of the abortive commando attack on Dieppe, where many Canadians fell into German hands along with captured documents, including a “no prisoners” directive.⁷⁹

The general crisis between Germany and the British Common wealth as regards POWs had a specific Palestinian aspect since the Palestinian prisoners were among those particularly harmed by the steps instituted by the Germans. During the summer of 1942, for the first time, German prisoners arrived at the POW camp in Latrun, on the road to Jerusalem. Soldiers of the “Bufs” company which guarded the prisoners in this camp somewhat maltreated the German prisoners who complained to the Spanish Consul, representing German interests in Palestine. The Consul reported to Berlin and the Germans reacted by taking steps against the Palestinian prisoners, 82 of

⁷⁶ Slodash, pp. 122-130; on a different meeting during the same period, see A. Glantz, *Ha-Ma'avak be-Kavley ha-Shevi*, Rehovot, 1966, pp. 116-120.

⁷⁷ Report of Globinsky, *ibid*, p. 28; Slodash, pp. 135-137.

⁷⁸ Slodash, pp. 140-144.

⁷⁹ See OKH order on this subject, 26.10.1942, BA-MA, RW6\270; also reports of the Swiss Embassy on a visit to Stalag VIII B, 28.11.1942 and 5.3.1943, W.O., *ibid*.

them, all non-commissioned officers, were transferred in August 1942 to Stalag 319, a special penal camp in Cholm near Lublin, along with 68 British prisoners. Treatment of the two groups, while identical, was exceptionally harsh.⁸⁰ The prisoners alluded to this in their letters and sought to urge the leadership in Palestine into action.⁸¹

The letters reached Palestine in January 1943 and instigated several families to put pressure on the Jewish Agency whose contacts with the Red Cross and the British authorities about the prisoners were unknown to the public.⁸²

Jewish Agency officials attempted to reassure prisoners' families in Palestine and promised them that "we are doing all that in our power to ease the bitter fate of our POWs".⁸³

In February 1943, the Germans permitted representatives of the Red Cross visit the penal camp in Cholm. The delegation summed up:

Camp 319 is a camp which was built as a retaliation; it cannot be compared to any regular camp. It is more shoddily constructed than the others. In addition to this, relations between the prisoners and their guards are not of the best.⁸⁴

At the beginning of March the Red Cross in Cairo reported to the Jewish Agency that "the Germans are prepared to evacuate the prisoners from Cholm and to dismantle the camp in the camp at Latrun should be closed down. We

⁸⁰ Swiss Embassy report, 5.3.1943, W.O.; Glanz, pp. 208-214 and also letter of P. Rosenblüth (Rosen) to Jewish Agency, 3.2.1943, CZA, S-25\4720. On the camp at Cholm see letter of the Red Cross in Cairo to the Jewish Agency, 9.3.1943, *ibid*.

⁸¹ Postcard from POW M. Mizrahi to his wife, 8.11.1942 CZA, *ibid*.

Dear Sarah,

Go to Mister Doar Hayom [newspaper] and send him our best regards... Regards to the entire family, to Dr. Buchman and his family. Our best wishes to Mister Makim Otanu [we are being hit]. Best wishes to Mister Yachas Ra [bad treatment]. Best wishes to Mister Arumim [naked] and Mister Bakor [in the cold]. Kisses to all the children...

⁸² Dr. J. Kelner to the Executive of the Jewish Agency, 24.1.1943 and Mrs. A. Mayorcheck, 8.4.1943, *ibid*.

⁸³ Mr. Simon of the Jewish Agency to Dr. Kelner, 3.2.1943, CZA. See letter of Simon to Mrs. Mayorcheck, 16.4.1943, *ibid*; the number of POWs who had relatives in Palestine was no more than 400 (out of 1,700). In May 1943 the Jewish Agency decided to send out a circular to POW relatives in Palestine giving instructions for sending letters and packages to them, 4.5.1943, *ibid*.

⁸⁴ Report of the Red Cross on a visit to Stalag 319, 12.2.1943, W.O. 224\27.

reported to Geneva that the German prisoners had been sent from Palestine to Egypt several months ago and that there are German prisoners at Latrun. We hope that the camp at Cholm will be dismantled shortly".⁸⁵

At the end of May the NCOs who were taken out of Cholm were transferred to a separate camp near Nürnberg where better conditions prevailed.

In the fall of 1942 one of the labor detachments returned to the rubber factory in Blächammer. This factory served, once again, as a meeting-place for Prisoners of War and Jewish forced laborers, including groups of Jewish women from Galicia. The Jewish prisoners now learned of Aktionen in various places but did not realize the connections between them and their being components of a systematic plan of destruction. Here, too, they encountered Jewish forced laborers deported from Western Europe, and saw how those too weak to work were sent away from the camp, without knowing that they were being sent to extermination camps. In covert talks the Jewish POWs managed to have with these unfortunate Jews, they heard of Judenräte, resistance organizations and Zionist underground cells.⁸⁶

Along with the Cholm camp incident, clashes between Jewish prisoners and their German guards increased in numbers during the end of 1942 and the beginning of 1943. Information reached Palestine through hints in the prisoners' letters home.⁸⁷ In response to the Jewish Agency's appeal, representatives of the Swiss Embassy visited three of the Jewish labor detachments in March 1943. The Swiss delegates reporting to the General Inspector of Prisoners of War at the OKW demanded an undertaking that treatment received by the other British prisoners.⁸⁸

The most serious incidents occurred in a large labor detachment composed of 365 prisoners who worked in the coal mines at Jawozno.⁸⁹ Two of the prisoners were shot in the mine by their guards. A German investigation

⁸⁵ The Red Cross in Cairo to the Jewish Agency, 9.3.1943, CZA, S-25\4720.

⁸⁶ Slodash, pp. 150-153.

⁸⁷ See for example, letter of the prisoner A. Salpeter, 31.5.1943, CZA, S-25\4720.

⁸⁸ Report of the Swiss Embassy on a visit to labor detachment E-456 in Kalkau, 6.3.1943; see also report on a visit to labor detachment E-479 in Tanowitz, 10.3.1943, W.O. 224\27.

⁸⁹ On the work in the mines and the relationships with the supervisors see Slodash, pp. 162-169.

committee, followed by committees from the Red Cross and the Swiss Embassy arrived at this camp.⁹⁰ The British Embassy in Switzerland, to whom the committee reports were rapidly submitted, reported to the Foreign Office about the maltreatment of the Jews in the labor detachments, and about the murder of the two prisoners.⁹¹ The Swiss, however, reported to the British that the beatings were handed out to the Jewish prisoners only in exceptional cases, and based on checks run in many camps in Germany, had arrived at the clear conclusion that the treatment of the Jewish prisoners was usually identical to that of non-Jews.⁹² Indeed, during the same period, seven Australian and seven British prisoners were shot and killed in mines in the same area and several British were shot in the wake of bids for escape.⁹³

In Jawozno, the Palestinian prisoners would pass Auschwitz on their way to work; they learned about what was going on there from one of the German foremen. Towards the end of the period of work at the mine, the Palestinians met with a group of Jewish prisoners who had been brought from Auschwitz; despite the strict supervision exercised over the Auschwitz inmates, they often succeeded in smuggling them some food and even talking with them. Among them they found some of their comrades, originally from Salonica, who had escaped from captivity in Greece, returned to their home town, and had been deported to Auschwitz together with Salonica's Jews. Despite representations to the Red Cross, they were held as civilians and not as POWs until 1945.⁹⁴ During the early months of 1944 most of the Jewish forced labor camps in Silesia were dismantled and the POWs contact with them ended. Only members of the labor group near Gleiwicz continued to maintain contact with

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 176-177.

⁹¹ Swiss Embassy report on a visit to labor detachment E-561 in Jawozno, 9.3.1943 and letters of the British Embassy in Berne to the Foreign Office in London, 19.4.1943 and 24.4.1943, W.O., *ibid.* The Germans attempted to convince the visitors that the POWs were undisciplined and two of them were even tried for trying to bribe guards. See letter from the Chief Secretary of the Mandatory Government to B. Joseph, 26.10.1943, CZA, S-25\4753.

⁹² The Swiss Foreign Ministry to the British Foreign Office, 22.4.1943, quoted in a letter of the Colonial Office to the Jewish Agency in London, 2.6.1943, CZA, S-25\4720.

⁹³ Slodash, p. 177.

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 182-184.

Jewish forced laborers from Western Europe, who were nearby. Their guards were bribed to allow twenty of the Jews to be sent daily to the POW camp, where they received food and clothing.

In Lamsdorf, aid consignments, including cigarettes, soap, clothing, canned food from Red Cross parcels and cash were sent to this labor detachment earmarked for the Jews. Non-Jewish prisoners also contributed their rations. The final consignment did not reach its goal – in mid-1944, the last of the Jewish workers were sent to their death.⁹⁵

The POWs taken in Greece and Crete constituted the major portion of the prisoners. However, from the beginning of 1942 onwards, information regarding additional Palestinian soldiers in various POW camps, taken captive in other places and circumstances, began to reach Palestine. 24 prisoners who fell into enemy hands in the Western Desert were transferred to a POW camp in Italy; they reported that camp conditions were satisfactory and that relations with POWs of other nationalities were good.⁹⁶ Several Palestinian soldiers who had served in British units and had fallen into German hands were not sent to Lamsdorf but to other POW camps in Germany where they were swallowed up among the multitudes of prisoners. The whereabouts of one of them, for example, was discovered by chance from an announcement stating that together with two of his British comrades he was to be tried for establishing contacts with German women laborers in a factory in the city of Nordhausen. These three prisoners were held in Stalag IX C.⁹⁷

Two years of captivity and isolation from family caused more than a few domestic difficulties. The prisoners were anxious about the fate of their wives left with no provider to care for the children, without knowing whether there

⁹⁵ Survey of Karlenboim, 13.6.1945, pp. 39-40; Slodash, pp. 215-216.

⁹⁶ Letter from B. Uziel to the Jewish Agency, 1.3.1942, CZA, S-25\4753; letter from S. Kahalani to the Editor of Davar, 5.4.1943, *ibid*.

⁹⁷ Swiss Foreign Ministry to the British Consulate in Berne, 20.4.1943, copy in CZA, S-25-4720.

was anyone who would come to their help.⁹⁸ Others were concerned about unreliable postal connections. Some were doubtful of their wives' fidelity.⁹⁹

By the end of 1943, 1,258 POWs were to be found in Lamsdorf; 218 of them in the central camp, and 1,040 in the labor detachments.¹⁰⁰ During the following weeks, several labor detachments were dispersed and an additional 200 prisoners were returned to the camp. Conditions had deteriorated since the camp populations had almost double with the arrival of prisoners from Italy transferred there on the eve of her surrender; the living quarters and installations, however, had not been extended. The work load, especially in the mines, had increased and Red Cross official considered it too great.¹⁰¹ In November 1943, with the continuing German retreat on the eastern front and in Italy, POW camps were transferred to the interior, and their general set-up reorganized. This included the Lamsdorf camp, which was divided up; its Teschen annex was now called Stalag VIII B and the main camp was to be known as Stalag 344.¹⁰² While the population was mainly British, many other nationalities were to be found who, with the exception of the Americans, had all been taken captive while serving in the British army and were regarded as British prisoners by the Germans.¹⁰³ The camp was now run by a POW cam unit which had been brought back from the Russian front and the organizational change rapidly brought about a deterioration in the attitude towards the prisoners. With news of the Red Army advance, the Germans became nervous and suspicious, tightened security and were quick to pull the trigger at any hint of an escape attempt. Two prisoners had indeed attempted

⁹⁸ Letter of POW A. Bergman to Shertok, 25.4.1943, and pacifying answer of M. Simon, 10.9.1943; also the correspondence between POW H. Komfort and Simon, CZA, S-25-4753.

⁹⁹ See for example information about a prisoner's family problem, 22.5.1944, CZA, S-25\4722.

¹⁰⁰ Report of a visit of representatives of the Swiss Embassy to Stalag VIII B, 29.6.1943, W.O. 224\27.

Stalag B, 29.6.1943, W.O., 224\27.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., report of a visit of the Red Cross to Stalag VIII B and to its labor detachments, 26.9.1943.

¹⁰² Organizational order No. 51 of the Main Office for POWs, OKW, 18.11.1943, BA-MA, RW6\273.

¹⁰³ Report of a visit of a representative of the Swiss Embassy to Stalag 344, 7-8.2.1944, W.O. 224\27.

to escape; they were discovered, hiding close to the camp where they worked, isolated from the other prisoners, and shot.¹⁰⁴ On the day the two were shot, several warning letters were sent to Palestine and to the Jewish Agency delegations in Constantinople, and the Red Cross was requested to investigate the incident.¹⁰⁵

Prisoners who had been exchanged described the incident in greater detail on reaching Palestine; the Jewish Agency in London was requested to take action with a view to having the German supervisor responsible for that labor detachment included in the list of war criminals.¹⁰⁶

During the summer of 1944, hundreds of Palestinian prisoners were removed from the Lamsdorf camp and the attached labor detachments as part of a preliminary exchange of prisoners or in preparation for such an exchange. Additional prisoners were sent to other camps following recapture after escapes or a stay in hospital or prison, whence they were scattered at random over all of Germany.¹⁰⁷ A total of 540 Jewish POWs remained in Stalag 344, 220 in the camp itself and 320 in the labor detachments.¹⁰⁸ The general overcrowding in the camp became worse, as was happening in other POW camps in the Reich. The German withdrawal led to the evacuation of numerous POW camps whose prisoners were transferred to camps in the interior of the Reich. The continuous Allied bombing of Germany necessitated relocating the camps. The expanding movement of prisoners from camp to camp and the tremendous overcrowding, together with a general feeling that the end of the war was near and with it the defeat of Germany, made escape

¹⁰⁴ Slodash, pp. 234-236.

¹⁰⁵ Letters of POW A. Shalit, 21.5.1944, CZA, S-25\4753 and letter of Cohen to Shertok, 28.6.1944, CZA, S-25-4720.

¹⁰⁶ Simon to Linton, 28.7.1944, CZA, S-25\4720.

¹⁰⁷ Glanz, p. 275 ff.

¹⁰⁸ Report of a visit of representatives of the Swiss Embassy to Stalag 344, 21. and 22.9.1944, W.O., *ibid.*

attempts more frequent. The Germans took steps to counteract this, including special marking of the prisoners' clothes for identification of escapees.¹⁰⁹

At the beginning of 1945, with the advance of the Red Army towards the Oder Line in the east and the disintegration of authority and the home front in Germany, the Germans began to evacuate the POW camps and the labor detachments westward. During the general disorder the prisoners were scattered all over the Reich. The lucky ones were rapidly liberated by the Red Army; the majority of them began to wander – on foot, by car and by train – through Germany. They were transferred from one camp to another, occasionally assigned to urgent work in clearing landslides and ruins and were harassed by their German guards until their liberation by the advancing Allied forces in small groups and in places far removed from each other. Most of them were held by the Germans until the surrender; some could not endure the final days of captivity and fell on the brink of liberation.

Escape from Captivity

An integral part of the story of captivity were the continuous attempts of POWs to escape to friendly or neutral territory in order to rejoin the Allied forces. Over 100 prisoners succeeded in escaping; many others attempted and failed. There were escapees who succeeded in reaching Turkey and from there, Palestine, other crossed the Mediterranean and reached Egypt. Several of them made their contribution to the war effort by joining the partisans in Yugoslavia and in Greece. These reached Palestine in later years after contact had been established with resistance movements, and planes and submarines could reach the shores and the improvised airfields of the Balkans and evacuate them. Those who escaped from captivity and returned to Palestine were the first source of information regarding capture and living conditions in captivity. Those who came later brought important information both in terms of military intelligence and the conditions of Jews in the Balkan countries.

¹⁰⁹ OKW to Regional Military Commands of the Reich, 5.9.1944 and 5.11.1944, BA-MA, RW6\273; OKW to the Minister of Housing, 4.12.1944 and the Military Department of Economics in OKW to the Main Office for POWs, 5.12.1944, *ibid.*, Arb 128\3, 4.

A great many of those who escaped from captivity in Greece had escaped while being transported to Germany during June 1941. This journey afforded various opportunities for jumping from the train during its slow progress through the hills, and especially while being marched through the area of Lamia in central Greece, where the bridges were destroyed and prisoners were taken off the train to proceed on foot. On the roadbends and during the encampments in the villages, scores of prisoners managed to escape. One of these was Corporal Ben-Gershon who reached Palestine via Turkey.¹¹⁰ Some traveled to Salonica, then south to Lamia or to the city of Volos, where the Jews of that city rushed to their assistance. The Greeks passed many escapees over to an underground network dealing with the transfer of escaped POWs to the Turkish shore and to Palestine.

Not in all cases did the Turks treat the escaped prisoners who reached their land with sympathy. One of the prisoners was arrested for several months on the charge of spying as he had been carrying maps and diagrams sent by the Greeks to British Intelligence. After two months he was released through the intervention of the British Embassy and sent to Palestine.¹¹¹ In another case, an escaped prisoner was sent back by the Turks across the border to Greece.¹¹² Another prisoner, Fritz Yordan, escaped during the journey to Germany and reached Salonica. He, too, like other escapees, attempted to seek aid from local Jews and met with reluctance – actually refusal – due to the fears of the Jews of Salonica with regard to their own fate. However he was greatly helped by Greeks – villagers and city dwellers – who hid him in their houses, gave him food, information and false documents and helped him and other to cross the Aegean by boat and reach the Turkish shore.¹¹³

During the summer of 1941, the Germans discovered the activities of the Greek underground which dealt with smuggling out Greek soldiers and officers who wished to join the Free Greek forces which had assembled in Egypt, and in this framework also smuggled out British prisoners. Several

¹¹⁰ Testimony of Corporal Ben-Gershon, 20.8.1941, LPA file 1101.

¹¹¹ Testimony of D. Eisenberg, RC, No. 1460.

¹¹² Testimony of Y. Ben-Yaakob, RC. No. 1273.

¹¹³ The route Yordan took returning to Palestine is described in his book *Brihati min ha-Shevi*.

escaped prisoners were helped by this network and upon their arrival in Palestine reported this to the institutions, requesting them to thank the Greeks who had helped them escape and repay them the cost of the journey and the boat.¹¹⁴ Not all who escaped from captivity in Greece continued on their way to Palestine. Many of them hid out in villages and a portion of them joined the partisan units who were massing in the hills. They found means of reporting that they were alive and of contacting their families in Palestine; letters were sent home through Greek soldiers who had escaped from Greece in order to join the Free Greek forces which had started to muster in the Kfar Yonah camp east of Netanya. There were escaped prisoners who remained in Greece for months and years. The Greek-speaking Salonians from the Port Operations Company settled and found jobs in Salonica and Athens. There were those who were taken by the Germans (at Greek citizens) and were sent to forced labor.¹¹⁵ Several of them were identified as escaped POWs by the Gestapo. A number of those arrested were sent to POW camps in Germany and others who could not prove their identity as soldiers were deported to Auschwitz with the Jews of Salonica in the summer of 1943.

The prisoners who did reach Palestine were interrogated by the Interrogation Office of "Shay" (Haganah Intelligence) in Haifa which collaborated with British Intelligence in questioning those coming from occupied Europe. They told of the situation in Greece, of the hunger there, of the deportations of Jews to Poland, of the retaliation tactics used by the Germans against the Greek Resistance Movement and of the escape routes from Greece and Turkey.¹¹⁶ During 1943-1944, the escape routes were perfected with the deployment of A Force, a service which engaged in smuggling out prisoners, mainly pilots. Several escaped POWs who were still in Greece at this time were smuggled

¹¹⁴ Report of the Military Attaché in the German Consulate in Greece, 6.9.1941, BA-MA, AOK 12, 75091\1; Barlas (then head of recruitment department of the Jewish Agency) to the political department, 14.12.1941, CZA, S-25\4720/

¹¹⁵ See for example testimony of H. Hagoel, RC, No. 1422; testimony of M. Chanuka, No. 1435 and of Y. Marsh, No. 1398.

¹¹⁶ Testimony of the POW escapee Menachem Itzhak, 15.8.1943, CZA, J-12\122, and Z. Haber, RC, No. 1395; see also testimony of another POE escapee, 28.9.1943, CZA, S-25\4720.

out, along with British and American pilots.¹¹⁷ In one case an escaped prisoner, Yitzhak Menachem, returned to Greece from Egypt in a submarine in order to evacuate additional escaped POWs. Testimonies of prisoners who escaped from Greece reveal that the local Jews were reluctant to aid them; however Greeks gave them considerable assistance by providing shelter, food, clothing, money, guides, false documents; and they smuggled them out by boat to the Turkish shore. Without this assistance, which overcame barriers of language and communication, it would not have been possible for the prisoners to travel along the shores or to set sail from them.¹¹⁸

Several of the prisoners who remained in Greece joined the partisan movements which were organized after the occupation. They fought with them until the liberation of Greece by the British army during the autumn of 1944. They wandered over Epirus and reached Albania. Some of the escaped POWs joined up with the British liaison mission sent by the SOE to the partisans.¹¹⁹ There were prisoners who, when passing through Yugoslavia, jumped from the trains proceeding to Germany. As in Greece, they initially received assistance from the local population. Their fate was subsequently placed in the hands of Yugoslav army officers from General Michailovitch's partisan army and these brought them to safety. They established contact between the partisans and a group of Jews who were thus transferred to the Italian occupied zone. The prisoners were caught up in the internal conflict between the Chetniks and the partisans. By good luck they managed to contact a British liaison mission and joined them. They trained local partisans and together they sabotaged railway tracks. When the British mission left the Chetniks, they took the Palestinians with them. After two and a half months with Tito's partisans, at the end of March 1944, they were flown to Italy, and from there to Palestine.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Testimony of A. Kolar, RC, No. 1454.

¹¹⁸ Testimony of Y. Bleifeder, RC, No. 1405, the only man who claimed he was expelled from a Greek village after being identified as a Jew, but was aided by a Jewish family in Salonica.

¹¹⁹ See for example testimony of B. Hamami, RC, No. 1463 and of Y. Cohen, No. 1404; also testimony of A. Yeshua, RC, No. 1434 and of S. Segal, No. 1440.

¹²⁰ Interrogation of a prisoner who returned from Yugoslavia by the Haifa Interrogation Bureau, CZA, S-25\10005; testimony of A. Opatowsky, RC, No. 1402.

Escape from the temporary camps in Greece or from the trains traveling to Germany was extemporaneous and unplanned. The last of these escapees jumped from the train in Austria, probably on the way from Wolfsberg to Lamsdorf. Anti-Nazis Austrians hid him and had him brought to Yugoslavia. With the aid of Yugoslav partisans, he wandered to the Greek border and from there he continued on his way to Palestine.¹²¹

Escape from the permanent camps and work groups in Silesia was more difficult. The distance to the Middle East was greater and the local population was usually hostile to POWs in general and to Jews in particular. An escaped prisoner required civilian clothes, false papers, German currency, maps and navigational aids or guides. Under these conditions there was no possibility of impromptu escape; only with careful planning in the camp and the help of the underground network run by the British in occupied Europe was escape possible. An escape committee in Lamsdorf supplying money, documents, tickets and means of forgery, decided on escape routes, had its network of helpers, and guided the escapees. It was this committee which also planned the digging of tunnels or other methods of escape.¹²²

The Palestinians in Lamsdorf were much in demand as escape partners mainly due to their command of European languages and, at times, because of their knowledge of the terrain along the escape route. One of them was usually attached to a small group of two or three British or Australians. Many of those who escaped were caught in Germany, in the territorial waters of Sweden, or in Hungary. Few were those who managed to reach Britain, the Middle East or a neutral country.

Already in the fall of 1942, several prisoners' letters to Palestine conveyed hints that there were prisoners who attempted or were planning to escape. The assumption was that these prisoners would not be able to reach the Middle East from Germany and would attempt to reach Britain, Switzerland or Vichy France. Shertok, then on his way to London, was therefore requested to ascertain if such prisoners had indeed reached safety. Four Palestinian

¹²¹ "A Palestinian soldier returned from German captivity in Austria", Haboker, 5.10.1941.

¹²² Slodash, pp. 226-227.

prisoners did succeed in escaping from Italy and reached Switzerland.¹²³

Another prisoner, A. Yerushalmi who had been among those who had escaped in Greece, reached Palestine via Yugoslavia and Turkey.¹²⁴

The exact number of escapees is unknown; estimates range from 150 (the number of attempts coming before the reparations committee at the end of the 1950's) to 300 (the maximum estimate made by prisoners who were liberated in the early exchanges at the end of 1944). Each and every escape attempt is an adventure story in itself, and the proportion of attempts on the part of Palestinians stands out. Even if we accept the minimum number – 150 – they still constitute some ten per cent of all Palestinian Jewish POWs. Almost all the POWs who managed to join up with the British forces continued to serve, and several of them even volunteered upon their return for special tracks in which they could make use of their recent experiences.¹²⁵

Liberation

Liberated POWs engaged the attention of the institutions in Palestine long before the end of the war. Close to 100 prisoners had been wounded during the battles in Greece or the bombing during the retreat and evacuation. Some additional POWs were wounded while interned and as they were unfit for labor it was hoped for their early exchange. Several of them died of illnesses or wounds in the hospitals of the POW camps. The Jewish Agency's political department cited a precedent from the First World War and requested transfer of the seriously injured to neutral territory, Switzerland for example.¹²⁶ The Germans refused, and the exchange of wounded was delayed until the autumn of 1943. However, wounded POWs who had fallen into Italian hands were returned to Palestine at the beginning of that same year,¹²⁷ and even the

¹²³ M. Yuval to M. Simon, 22.10.1942, CZA, S-25\4720; Shertok's minutes, 22.11.1942, CZA, S-25\6033; L. Kahani of the Jewish Agency in Geneva to L. Lauterbach, Jerusalem, 7.6.1944, CZA, S-25\4722.

¹²⁴ For details on the escape and escapades of Yerushalmi see his book *Shlosha she-Barhu*.

¹²⁵ Such as Yerushalmi and Hobar, mentioned above, and A. Opatowsky who after being transferred from Yugoslavia to Italy volunteered for a British paratrooper unit, RC, No. 1402, and Y. Elisha, No. 1315.

¹²⁶ Simon to the representative of the Red Cross in Cairo, 23.12.1941, CZA, S-25\4720.

¹²⁷ Testimony of Y. Reiss, 13.6.1943, CZA J\12\122.

slightly wounded were liberated relatively soon. Part of them, captured in June 1942 at Tobruk, were released at the end of that very year with the advance of the Eighth Army, and the remainder after the invasion of the Apennine Peninsula in September 1943.¹²⁸ a few POWs were sent northwards by the Germans and escaped later on when the Allied forces broke through the Gothic Line during the summer of 1944.¹²⁹ A few prisoners who remained in Greece were held at the Avaroff military prison in Athens, and were liberated by the British Army in November 1944.¹³⁰

At the end of October 1943, a preliminary exchange agreement of sick and wounded soldiers was drawn up in which Palestinian prisoners were included. The actual exchange took place in Barcelona, Spain and from there 52 of the Jewish POWs were sent to London, and nine to Egypt.¹³¹ In the wake of this negotiation, further exchanges could be carried out, and from time to time Swiss committees visited Lamsdorf in order to vet and confirm the candidates for exchange.

In May 1944, an additional exchange of sick and wounded prisoners took place. 698 Germans were returned for 100 Americans and 890 from various Commonwealth countries, among them 22 Palestinians. As agreed, bombing of railway lines was halted to secure the prisoners' transfer from the camps to the Franco-Spanish border. This cessation of bombing was one of the main motives prompting the German agreement to these exchanges.¹³²

In view of the rapid pace of the early exchanges and in anticipation of the mass liberation envisaged at the war's end, the British decided that Palestinian prisoners would be transferred to Britain for medical treatment and

¹²⁸ Officer in charge of records and payments to Palestinians to the Chief Secretariat 19 and 25.10.1943, and 24.11.1942, ISA, D\95\41 I; "Arba'ah Hodashim ba-Shevi", Igeret le-Hayalim ve-Hayalot, 6.2.1943, pp. 2-5.

¹²⁹ Testimony of L. Bendava, RC, No. 1412.

¹³⁰ Testimonies of M. Maabari and B. Morgenstern, RC, Nos. 622 and 752.

¹³¹ Exchange of telegrams between Simon and Linton, 31.10-1.11.1943, CZA, S-25\4753; report of the Officer in Charge of Records to the Chief Secretary, 1.11.1943, 8.11.1943, ISA, *ibid.*, II.

¹³² Memorandum of the War Office to the Chiefs of Staff Committee, 30.4.1944 and memorandum of the Subcommittee for Repatriation of Prisoners of War, 13.5.1944, W.O. 193\346.

interrogation, after which they would be repatriated to the Middle East. A special transit camp was erected for them, staffed with Palestinians.¹³³

As the war began to reach its end, the tempo of early release was speeded up. In September 1944, an additional 50 Palestinian POWs were released and reached the new transit camp in Newcastle in northern England.¹³⁴ A month later an additional group, bigger than the previous one, reached Britain, and included 200 liberated prisoners, most of them Palestinians and a few Cypriots.¹³⁵ In January 1945, the last exchange agreement between British and Germans was carried out, with 41 Palestinian Jewish prisoners and two non-Jewish ones reaching Switzerland. From there they proceeded via Marseilles to Britain.¹³⁶ The anticipation for an early liberation was mixed with more than a little fear of what would face the prisoners during the anarchy which would accompany – or so they thought – the downfall and retreat of the Germans. On January 5, Red Cross representatives visited the Lamsdorf camp for the last time. According to the demand of Y. Karlenboim, he and the prisoners' man of confidence met in the camp with two of the representatives alone. Karlenboim voiced his fears of a situation in which the prisoners would be placed at the end of the war, when SS men might attempt to take revenge on the Jewish POWs at the last moment and the Red Cross men were urged to warn the German command that POWs were British soldiers with equal rights. The Red Cross representatives demurred; in their opinion, any statement of this sort would only wake sleeping dogs. They further claimed that it was not within their jurisdiction to intervene. Nevertheless, Karlenboim planned an emergency resistance plan dealing with two possibilities: with the help of the British prisoners and without it, and appropriate commands were relayed from Lamsdorf to the labor detachments.¹³⁷

During the coming weeks, the Red Army rapidly advanced towards the Oder River. Prisoners from the detachments began to be sent to Lamsdorf and the

¹³³ Brigadier Woolley to Shertok, 19.6.1944, CZA, S-25\4721.

¹³⁴ G. Hirsch (Avner) to M. Simon, 20.9.1944, CZA, S-25\4851.

¹³⁵ The War Office to General Headquarters Middle East and to Palestine Headquarters, 19.10.1944, W.O., 169\15659.

¹³⁶ Lichtheim to the Jewish Agency, 15.1.1945, CZA, S-25\4721.

¹³⁷ Slodash, p. 242.

overcrowding grew. Cases of typhus were discovered and fear of an epidemic grew. On January 22nd, during the final visit of the Swiss delegation, order came through to evacuate the internees to Stalag VIII A near Görlitz in Lower Silesia, 240 kilometers away from Lamsdorf. On that same afternoon, the first group of 1,000 POWs commenced their journey which was to last 12 days.¹³⁸

The Palestinian prisoners in the camp (who had been joined by hundreds who had returned from the labor detachments) were to leave with the third group. While it was important to maintain a Palestinian bloc, it was not considered advisable that all should leave in one group, should the Germans decide to attack them en route. Four hundred Jewish prisoners left on the journey on that day, 50 of them returning to the camp on various pretexts, some to leave the next day in a group of British, Australian and others prisoners. One the same day, when the Russian arrival seemed imminent, the German personnel evacuated the camp. A committee of prisoners sought means of making contact with the Red Army, and for that purpose co-opted several Russian-speaking Palestinians. About 100 men left the camp the next few nights, in an attempt to find the Russian spearhead. At the beginning of February 1945, the Russian advance was halted and in several places near Lamsdorf, the Red Army was even forced to retreat. Escaping POWs who did not succeed in reaching the Russians began now to return to the camp.

On February 10, the Germans regained control of the camp, unguarded for almost two weeks. British, Polish and Russian prisoners were now recaptured on the roads and brought back to Lamsdorf. On the 15th of the month, the evacuation of the camp commenced for the second time. Among the 1,000 prisoners who began their journey westward were a group of 70 Palestinians.¹³⁹

In the confusion which accompanied the Russian offensive in the winter of 1945, the Palestinian prisoners dispersed throughout Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. It is difficult to trace their fate as they mingled with different groups of British prisoners – and each group had its own experience. Fifty-four Palestinian prisoners succeeded in reaching the Red Army lines; at the

¹³⁸ Report of the Swiss Embassy on a visit to Stalag 344, 22.1.1945, W.O. 224\27.

¹³⁹ Slodash, pp. 244-254.

beginning of February their names were announced over the Polish radio broadcasting from Lublin.¹⁴⁰ They were transported by the Russians to Rumania where they waited to set sail for the Middle East. Another group of 49 prisoners marched eastward to Krakow where they were collected by the Red Army, sent to Odessa, and embarked for Egypt; at the beginning of April 1945 they reached Palestine. They were among the first to report in Palestine about survivors in Poland.¹⁴¹

The remainder of the prisoners spent an additional two months in captivity, shuttled throughout Germany, suffering as before from hunger and torture.¹⁴² In the course of their journey, they were joined by Jews who had escaped from the death marches from the concentration camps. They provided them with uniforms and with identification papers of Prisoners of War. One of these groups – evacuated from the labor detachment at Beuten – marched a distance of 1,200 kilometers from Silesia through Bohemia to Nürnberg in Bavaria until they were liberated by the American army near Regensburg. Several of the Palestinians were killed or wounded during the wanderings of the last days of the war by aerial bombing.¹⁴³ Others lost their lives after liberation when the plane carrying them to Britain crashed over French soil. The three Palestinian officers were released on April 12, flown to Brussels and from there to Britain.¹⁴⁴ The main group of Palestinian prisoners at Lamsdorf were liberated at the beginning of April and reached Britain a few days later.¹⁴⁵ Other less fortunate prisoners remained in POW camps in Austria or in hospitals until the end of the war – the early days of May 1945. After their release by the Americans they assisted them as interpreters and took part in manhunts for war criminals and SS men, during which they discovered groups of Jewish survivors in various corners of Austria and Bavaria.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰ A list of their names in CZA, S-25\4851.

¹⁴¹ See Davar, 3.4.1945.

¹⁴² H. Davidowsky, "Marsh ha-Eimim", in Ha-Hayal ha-Ivri, 7.5.1946, p. 2.

¹⁴³ Slodash, pp. 225-259; see also letter of a soldier who was a member of Kfar Blum, in the leaflet Be-Kibutzeynu, 6.4.1945.

¹⁴⁴ Ben-Aharon, Michtavim le-Bni, pp. 67-68.

¹⁴⁵ Survey of Karlenboim, 13.6.1945, and his letter to Shertok, 24.4.1945, CZA, S-25\4721.

¹⁴⁶ Slodash, pp. 259-262.

Close to 900 liberated POWs reached the transfer camp at Newcastle at the end of the war. At the end of May, the first group of 437 men sailed for the Middle East.

It is difficult to establish the precise number of the Palestinians Jewish POWs, for many captives actually served in British units and held no Palestinian identification. Further, not all of them fell into the main group of prisoners – members of the Pioneer Corps and the stevedores – whose war history forms the bulk of this discussion. Even the official reports of the War Office to Parliament are lacking in full information.¹⁴⁷

The prisoners themselves numbered their fallen comrades in captivity as 30, but to this number added “and ten of others missing whose names are unknown”.¹⁴⁸ Any statistical summary pertaining to captivity must of necessity be inexact. The most comprehensive summing-up which was made by the British military authorities listed 1,514 Jewish POWs from Palestine. An additional 169 were regarded as missing, and it was known then that another 12 were killed while in captivity.¹⁴⁹ These data were slightly modified at the end of the war with the liberation of the POWs, and subsequent discovery of some of those reported missing who safely returned from captivity; others were discovered in Greece and in Yugoslavia and revealed the circumstances surrounding the death of several whose fate until then was unknown.

M19 (the British Intelligence Branch Department dealing with POW matters) did not back the Palestinian prisoners; these had to set their own ethical standard, framework of mutual relations vis-à-vis the British, and conduct with the Germans. All this was done under difficult physical conditions in the face of immense emotional pressures and great danger.

The Germans, who were not prepared for the phenomenon of Jewish captives as soldiers in the British Army, were initially puzzled, but after several months accepted the principle of equal treatment. Outbursts against Jews, while not

¹⁴⁷ Thus for example Margesson, Minister of War, reported to Parliament on September 10, 1941 about 1,450 Palestinian prisoners (including Arabs) – a number much lower than the actual one.

¹⁴⁸ A list of those who died in captivity in Ha-Hayal ha-Ivri, 7.5.1946, p. 2.

¹⁴⁹ Current statistics of POWs killed and missing, 6.9.1943, ISA, D\95\4111.

uncommon in German POW camps, were usually the result of personal or camp initiative and not of orders from above.

British prisoners generally forestalled German attempts to institute procedures employed in cases of Jewish prisoners from other armies, in that they did not hold themselves apart from the Palestinian and demanded that British and Palestinian alike be given equal treatment. Anti-Semitic manifestations on the part of British POWs were rare; more common were the friendly contacts that prevailed, and along with joint cultural and social activities, escapes also constituted joint ventures.

The Palestinian POWs constituted a heterogeneous group, a cross-section of the volunteers for the British Army. Most of them were illegal immigrants and those who, before the war, had not yet become an integral part of the organized Yishuv. Only in a few of the units did leadership to crystallize from within and, during the period of captivity, this slowly evolved into leadership of the entire group of prisoners. The shared experiences served, after a while, to unite them socially and to crystallize them nationally. Even in adversity they tried, each in his own way, to contribute to the war effort, and to help fellow Jews. This ranged from assistance to forced laborers in the camps in Silesia, the liberation of Jewish women from the concentration camp in Meklenburg and aiding survivors of the death marches, to the adoption of surviving children whom they brought to Eretz Israel.

Source: Yoav Gelber, "Palestinian POWs In German Captivity", *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. XIV, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1981 pp. 89-137.