

צילום: Yonatan Shaul // David Yechiel, Rivka Beit-Halachmi and Ben-Zion Solomin (all seated) with their families

חדשות

## Prisoners of memory

Despite harrowing World War II ordeal, the story of the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps, British Army volunteers captured by the Nazis in Greece, is virtually unknown • Seventy years later, their families seek to tell their stories

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Ben Zion Solomin, age 101, wears the cap of a British soldier and is assisted by his son and caregiver as he slowly approaches the front of

the stage to light a Hanukkah candle and welcome the crowd at the Armored Corps Memorial at Latrun, near Jerusalem.

The ceremony was held to honor the families of the prisoners of war from the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps, who were captured by the Nazis during World War II and later freed by the Allied forces. In a cracked voice, with his son helping him, Solomin read his welcome speech from the text he had prepared.

"In honor of the endurance, the survival, the Zionist flame and the devotion to the security services," he said, and told his story briefly.

The marks Ben-Zion Solomin proudly bears on his chest tell an impressive story of combat and survival, one that has almost been erased from collective memory: the story of the 3,200 volunteers from pre-state Israel, who joined the pioneer corps in mid-1940, leaving their families behind to serve in His Majesty's Armed Forces. Close to 400 of them were Arabs, and together they made up one-tenth of all the men and women from pre-state Israel who volunteered with the British army during the war.

Most AMPC members saw their first action in the western desert on the Egyptian-Libyan border. Their objective was to fend off the Italian army. The British then redeployed them to meet the German threat, which was how some of them reached the Balkans and Greece.

The seminal event that changed the lives of many of these volunteers took place on the morning of April 29, 1941. On the beach at Kalamata in the south of the Peloponnese peninsula in southern Greece, more than 1,500 AMPC members and 12,000 British soldiers were captured by the Germans. The British gave the order to surrender only after it became clear that there would be no possibility of a rescue. And so, on

the night before they surrendered, the members of AMPC engaged in battles with the German troops and suffered losses. Solomin was among the wounded.

The POWs were held in German captivity for four years. Many were transferred to work camps, 200 were killed during the war, some suffered from various forms of torture, and those who survived were left emotionally scarred.

Seventy years after their release from captivity, their families set up a forum to tell the story that had been silenced for decades. Heading the efforts is Talia Klayner-Dayagi, the granddaughter of a former AMPC soldier, who says that she has so far located 250 families with stories similar to her own. There are currently only eight families of rescued AMPC servicemen living in Israel, she said.

The most important research on the captives' story was done by Professor Yoav Gelber, a historian at Haifa University. Gelber based his study on numerous documents collected in Israel and abroad, and on interviews with former members of the British army. In 1982, as the work was progressing, he wrote an article about the subject for Yad Vashem titled "Palestinian POWs in German captivity."

According to Gelber's research, at least 150 POWs are believed to have escaped from captivity. One man who evaded capture several hours before the British surrender was 90-year-old David Yechiel. Athletic and broad-shouldered, he was quick to say of himself that he had excelled from childhood in swimming and boxing, which helped him during his time as a volunteer.

Recalling the circumstances that led him to volunteer to the AMPC in

1940, he said, "I was 16 years old, and tables were set up in the streets of Tel Aviv, and they urged us to volunteer for the British army. I had to lie about my age, and so I did. I went to the British base in Sarafand (today Tzrifin) and said that I was 17 and a half. They believed me. All my friends volunteered, and so did I. My parents supported me, but they did not know that I was going to war. The Jewish community leaders wanted us to volunteer so that we would get a military education. The British had a slogan: 'Join the army and see the world.'"

Yechiel recalled that while in the desert, the members of the AMPC were soldiers in every sense, so they were trained as infantry troops.

"I was lucky," he said. "During the entire war, in the desert and later in Greece, I came face to face with death more than 10 times. My friend, who stuck close to me, was killed on the spot by a German aerial strike. When I got to the Kalamata port, there was concern I might be taken prisoner by the Germans. I told myself that I would never let that happen. I figured that the Germans killed Jews, and certainly Jewish soldiers. I told myself that I had nothing to lose, either I would die trying to escape or the Germans would kill me once I was taken prisoner.

"The only option was to swim at night toward two Australian ships. I was determined. I went into the water, and I swam for about an hour and a half, carrying my weapon, until I came close to one of the ships. A small boat brought me to the ship, and so I was saved. Later on, they brought me back to Egypt and from there to the Sarafand camp, where I was trained and transferred to the British Infantry."

Among the captives was legendary workers' leader Yitzhak Ben-Aharon, who later served as the secretary-general of the Histadrut labor federation, an MK and transportation minister. Ben-Aharon was

35 when he was taken prisoner, and the trauma cut short his career as a workers' leader.

Gelber quotes from letters that Ben-Aharon wrote to his son, Yariv, while he was in captivity, in the book "Letters to My Son," which was published after the war. "I was the only one among the officers, and around me was a surging, raging sea, people whose mental state bordered on madness. The Jews went about in depression, terror and fear, and I, who walked at their head, took everyone's fear into myself and my heart was like water. Many of our young men wanted to commit suicide."

Another commander who was captured was Yosef Almogi, who later served as mayor of Haifa and held several ministerial posts. Almogi was 31 at the time, a sergeant in the British army, and wrote about his life in captivity in his book, "With Head Held High."

The former prisoners and their families spoke at length about Almogi's efforts to unite the prisoners, when he called on officers of all ranks to stay with their men and not abandon them. In his book he wrote that his request stemmed from a double fear: "that the conditions at the work camp would be worse than in a stalag [a German term for a POW camp], and that there they would try to deprive our men of their rights and even kill them."

Gelber's research found the Germans had decided they would not set up special camps for the Jewish POWs as early as 1940, when they waged war on France. They preferred that the French, like the British, separate themselves from the Jews and demand to be taken to work outside the camp. But they were quickly proved wrong. Representatives of the British prisoners in the Lamsdorf POW camp in

Silesia -- where 1,160 POWs from pre-state Israel arrived about six months later, joining 19,000 British POWs -- made it clear that they would do no such thing, "and through the diplomatic pipelines it was hinted to them that the British government would also insist that the Jewish prisoners be afforded equal treatment."

Gelber said that after the Germans announced that the Red Cross packages would not be distributed to the POWs from Palestine, the representative of the British POWs said that in that case, the British would not accept the packages either.

In summing up the German captors' treatment of the Jewish POWs, Gelber makes a distinction between the policy from above and the reality on the ground. He says that after several months, the Germans accepted the principle of equal treatment for the British POWs. But, he wrote, "outbursts against Jews, while not uncommon in German POW camps, were usually the result of personal or camp initiative and not of orders from above."

Starvation, humiliation, abuse and forced labor at gunpoint were routine for the POWs. Several POWs were even shot to death by the Germans. Early in their captivity, several hungry prisoners who fell upon foodstuffs were shot dead. POWs who worked in coal mines were murdered later on. The Germans treated the POWs with cruelty even in early 1945, when Germany's surrender was only a matter of time.

"Most of them were held by the Germans until the surrender," Gelber wrote in his essay. "Some could not endure the final days of captivity and fell on the brink of liberation."

Binyamin Beit-Halachmi, who was severely traumatized by his long stint in German captivity, died at 80 years of age. Beit-Halahmi volunteered for the AMPC at the age of 18 and a half and married his wife, Rivka, in 1947. Rivka recalled that he weighed only 37 kilograms on his release and was sent to London to recover.

“We didn’t know what post-traumatic stress disorder was then,” she recalled, “but it was obvious that this was what had happened to him. I knew a pleasant, generous and tranquil man who, after age 30, became irritable and impatient. He was afraid of every police officer he saw on the street and would stop the car even though there was no reason to do that.”

Every story of a member of the AMPC is a fascinating, inconceivable account of survival. Such is the story of the brothers Shmuel and Shlomo Laufer of Tel Aviv, who went to war together and were liberated close to the war’s end in May 1945. Sara Kochavi, 68, a member of Kibbutz Yagur and a journalist by profession, is Shmuel’s daughter. Recently, she wrote about the heroism and survival of her father and her uncle in the kibbutz weekly journal.

“My father and his brother were among the people who built the Tel Aviv port in 1936,” he said.

“They had to leave a wife and small child behind. My father’s motive for volunteering in the British army was a double one: the closing of the port and the motivation to fight the Nazis. What contributed particularly to the brothers’ survival was that each one encouraged the other. Even in captivity, my father never lost his sense of humor. Like many of the POWs, he learned English in captivity, and before he returned to Palestine he was sent to England to recover, as all the

captives were. When they returned to Palestine, the Jewish community ignored them because in the eyes of its leaders, being a POW was no great honor.”

Most of the POWs were saved by a miracle. The Germans, it turns out, had planned a death march for them as well. According to Yossi Solomin, in the second half of 1941 his father and a large group of Palestinian POWs marched from Silesia toward Germany.

“The Germans quickly left the place and fled toward Germany because they were afraid of the Russian army,” he said. “There were terrible conditions of snow and freezing cold. Because of the Germans’ fear, they ordered the captives to march at night as well. Not everyone had food to eat -- not even the German soldiers did. Everyone ate frozen beet sugar. They marched for several months, almost to Munich, an unimaginable distance of 900 kilometers. There was a snowstorm and they thought that they were going to die, and they shouted ‘Shema Yisrael.’ And suddenly, a miracle occurred and trucks from the Swiss Red Cross saved them.”

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