
Micha PAZ

TO EREZ, TO FREEDOM



Micha Paz (Fass) was born in Berlin on July 7, 1924, to Sender Alexander Fass and Ida Fass, née Spiro. His father was tortured to death in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1940.

His mother came illegally to Yugoslavia in 1941 with her son, Sami. They were put in a private camp in Šabac with many other refugees. When the Germans occupied Yugoslavia the camp fell under German control and, from that moment on, Micha never heard anything about them again,

despite all his efforts to learn at least something about their fate.

He also had a sister, Ruth, who fell ill in Berlin and died during the cold and harsh winter of 1940 because, like all Jews, she was denied the right to use the shelters for protection from British air raids.

In the course of his career Micha Pas did various kinds of work. During the war years, from 1943, to 1946, he served in the British Army in Egypt, Italy, Belgium and Holland, part of the time in the Jewish Brigade from its foundation. Then, for a year, he worked for a Jewish agency and for Hagana in Europe. He helped survivors of the Holocaust rebuild their lives and arranged their emigration to Palestine. He was then a teacher in British camps for internees who were trying to reach the Palestine coast but were denied official permits.

He worked for a number of years in the military service of the Israeli Air Force with the rank of major and then, from 1952 to 1975,

held a number of positions in the Israeli Defence Ministry and Foreign Service. He was the first secretary of the Israeli Embassy in Monrovia-Liberia and counsellor at the Israeli Embassy in Vienna as well as permanent representative to the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation. He was then director of the Jewish National Foundation in Switzerland and the manager of KKL (the Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael Jewish National Fund), Treuhand A.G. Zurich, director of the Division for Economic Projects at the KKL Administration in Jerusalem, director of the marketing and public relations service of the American Israel Corporation, Ampal, in Israel, director and vice-president of Ampal in Canada and director of the Jewish National Foundation in Germany.

He has been married to Miriam (Mira) since 1950. They have three sons, Nadav, Alexander and Atsmon, and five grandchildren.

BERLIN, 1939

In September 1939, a few days after Germany invaded Poland, my father was taken, because of his Polish citizenship, from our apartment in Berlin to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp where he was tortured to death. The Gestapo sent us his ashes and even charged us for this. He was buried in the Adas Yisroel cemetery in Berlin-Wessensee.

Mrs Recha Freier, the leading figure in the Zionist movement in Germany and the founder of the Jugendaliyah was very active in helping the families of those who were taken to Sachsenhausen. She organised financial assistance and tried to obtain visas for those who were still alive so they would be liberated and allowed to leave Germany. Most of her efforts were in vain. But she promised the widowed mothers that she would do all in her power to save their children from Nazi Germany.

By the summer of 1940 the German Army had completed the occupation of the Benelux countries and France. The British Royal Air Force began bombing German cities including Berlin heavily, almost every night, which I observed with satisfaction, even when some bombs fell in our neighbourhood, causing great damage.

At that time Jews were still allowed to take refuge in the shelters of residential buildings during the bombing, but later were barred from them. I was still going to the special Youth Aliyah school with my

friends from the Maccabi Hatzair², in which I had been active from the age of ten or eleven. The school was founded after the Nazis dismantled the formal Jewish school system.

Recha Freier actively sought ways to keep her promise to use any means possible to get children who had lost their fathers in concentration camps out of Germany.

I was already at an age where there was a danger of being taken to a concentration camp and she chose me to travel with three men so that they could smuggle me over the Hungarian border and I could get to Budapest. We travelled to Vienna and, with the help of the local Zionist movement, were taken to the border area. I was never told what went wrong, but after a few days we had to return to Berlin.

BERLIN, AUTUMN OF 1940

In Berlin I again met up with my friends at the aliyah school. A few weeks later my mother told me that Recha Freier had left Germany for Yugoslavia where she would organise transport for children who would join her there. I was to leave with the first group of fifteen boys. I still remember the conversation with my mother when I told her that I didn't want to go, after my experience with the Hungarian border, that I didn't want to leave my sister, my younger brother and my closest friends.

Finally I set off with the group that was to be a pilot project for the journey of salvation to Yugoslavia, a test for the many groups which Recha Freier had planned to bring to Yugoslavia.

We left Berlin for Vienna at the beginning of September 1940, organised like children on a school excursion, with rucksacks on our backs. In Vienna we were met by a local Zionist activist who organised places for us to spend the night. The next day we boarded a train for Graz and from there continued to the border region, to a place called Spielfeld. We knew nothing of the arrangements for crossing the border with the help of smugglers, nor about any other agreements. I was the eldest in the group and, because of my earlier experience at the Hungarian border, I had some doubts, although I hoped it would succeed this time.

² Youth branch of the Maccabees

The Germans checked our documents while we waited. When darkness fell the local guide took us, on foot, to a nearby wooded area. For some time we walked through the woods, over hilly terrain, uphill and down, over small water paths until we came to a cabin where we stopped for food and rest. I don't recall now, after so many years, whether we crossed the border that night or waited until the following night. In any case, from there we continued walking through the woods to a place where there was a sawmill, in front of which logs were piled up high in a "V" shape, which was a perfect place for us to hide. Our guide told us to scatter in small groups and hide behind the huge stacks of logs. We were already on Yugoslav soil, in the Maribor region, and were to wait here to be picked up by cars from Zagreb. A few hours passed then the cars arrived and drove us safely to Zagreb. This time we had managed to reach our destination.



Micha Paz in his youth

It was the early morning hours when we arrived in Zagreb. I was accommodated with a group of boys in the Jewish old people's home for a few days. From there we were each placed individually in the homes of Jewish families.

ZAGREB, 1940-1941

I was assigned to the family of Sandor and Lili Dojč, who lived in a nice cottage near a large business area on the outskirts of Zagreb.

They put me in a room with their son Feliks, who was a year or so older than me.

I shall never forget the warmth they gave me for the whole six months I stayed with them, as though I were part of the family. I was happy to find out after the war that the whole family had survived the wartime, although they endured great suffering. My Zagreb hosts moved to Israel and, after I found them, in a modest apartment in Ramat Gan, I stayed in touch with them for many years I also maintained contact with their son Feliks, who became a scientist.

After my time in this family's home, I returned to Zagreb. Soon after I found accommodation they took me to the Jewish Community building. This was in the centre of Zagreb and, in the basement, the Community organised a gathering and meeting place for the boys who had come with me from Berlin and for those who were yet to come. There I again met Recha Freier, who gave us a warm welcome. She told us that now we had arrived successfully she would continue her mission of taking groups of boys and girls from Germany to Palestine.

There we got to know our mentors and youth leaders, the activists from the Yugoslav Hashomer Hatzair who had been involved in the whole operation from the very beginning of our illegal border crossing and our safe transfer to Zagreb.

Now they were trying to organise a daily program of classes in Hebrew and other subjects for us. They talked to us about our future in Erez Israel and arranged various activities. Because we were living in Zagreb illegally and didn't know the local language, they advised us not to go out in groups for fear of arousing the suspicions of the local authorities.

From the very beginning, Joško Indig of the Zagreb Hashomer Hatzair was in charge of our group which gradually increased from fifteen to about ninety boys and girls by the time we were ready to move on. Joško was eventually joined by Armando Moreno and Zehava, who were very devoted to our group and who organised some pleasant activities for us in these difficult circumstance by keeping us safe from the outside world.

Time passed and we were already in the first months of 1941. As far as I remember now, the increased German pressure on Yugoslavia could be felt in the air, especially in Zagreb, and the fear of the invasion that was to come.

One day, in March 1941, Mr Dojč, the head of my new family, told me that I had to prepare to leave for Belgrade in just a few hours

with the whole group of boys because it was dangerous for us to stay in Zagreb. He brought me a suitcase fully packed with clothing and told me that this would come in handy on my journey to Palestine and when I arrived. Then he drove me in his car to the railway station. I was given a warm farewell by Mr Dojč. I thanked him for his wonderful hospitality and for the warm relationship with all the members of his family. Unfortunately I was unable to say goodbye to Mrs Dojč, to Feliks whose room I had shared or his sister Ester.

BELGRADE, MARCH 1941

We arrived in Belgrade by night. All that I remember is that we were organised in a marching group, like boy scouts. I think that we were led by Armando Moreno, marching us through the dark, empty streets of Belgrade like children on a school excursion. We stayed somewhere in the city for the night and then hurried back to the station the next day to catch the train for Istanbul.

At the time we knew very little about all the strings that were being pulled or the efforts made by the local people like Joško and Armando to make it possible for us to get seats on this train which, as we later discovered, was the last train to leave Yugoslavia in this direction before the Germans attacked.

MY MOTHER AND BROTHER REMAIN IN YUGOSLAVIA

Here I should note that my mother, Ida Fass, and my seven-year-old brother, Sami Fass, had also arrived in Zagreb a few weeks earlier via the same illegal route as I had. Our meeting in the home of the Dojč family was full of joy. After they were told by people from Jewish Welfare that they should not stay in Zagreb, they went to Serbia and settled in Šabac, where many refugees from Germany had gathered. Neither of them, not even my little brother, were able to join us on our journey to Palestine, because the permits for Palestine, which were issued by the British, were limited to our group of ninety people.

The meeting with my mother and brother in Zagreb was the last time I saw them. All my efforts, over all these years, to find out what happened to them have been in vain. The last I heard of them was in

1942, when I received a short form letter from the Red Cross, sent from a camp in Yugoslavia with a German censor's stamp on it.

ON THE TRAIN FOR ISTANBUL

During our trip to Turkey by train I still felt that my mother and brother were safe in Yugoslavia. It was only when we were very close to Istanbul that they told us about the German invasion of Yugoslavia.

The train trip itself was very interesting and not without surprises and questions. Once the train stopped unexpectedly near the border between Albania and Greece because of the danger of an air raid. In northern Greece, British troops were engaged in military operations against the Italian forces which had occupied Albania. All the passengers jumped out to take shelter in the ditches beside the railway tracks. After a short time we returned to the train and continued our journey. When we got to Salonica, we walked around the train and, for the first time, saw British soldiers and, among them, soldiers from Palestine who spoke Hebrew. They told us about the military operations in the region and we only hoped that our train journey would lead us to our final destination – Palestine and Erez Israel.

Finally, after a number of interruptions here and there, after losing a wagon with all our luggage and our personal belongings somewhere along the way, we arrived in Istanbul.

We were accommodated for a few days in a villa on a small island in the Bosphorus Strait. There we were told about the German occupation of Yugoslavia. Now we understood the dedication of the Jewish Communities, of the people from Hashomer Hatzair like Joško and Armando, of the families who took us in and others who got us out of Yugoslavia at the very last moment but who had themselves remained to face an uncertain fate at the hands of the Germans.

I shall never forget the boundless efforts of all these people and I shall continue to tell my children and grandchildren about them.

ARRIVAL IN PALESTINE

From Istanbul we continued by train to Beirut and from there by bus to the border crossing at Rosh Hanikra and on to Haifa. From Rosh Hanikra we could see the coast all the way to the port of Haifa

and to the southern part of the country, and we felt that part of our dreams had become reality.

With another three boys from my group I was sent to the Mishmar Hasharon kibbutz, part of the Maccabi Hatzair movement in which I had grown up in Germany. There we formed a new group from the Youth Aliyah, the Olim³ group with other boys and girls who had arrived at the same time as us, but from Sweden and other countries.

A new life had begun here, with a great vision to be fulfilled in the years ahead.

³ *Olim* plural of *ole*, an immigrant to Israel.