

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE INFORMATION REPORT

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15. SUMMARY: 1. (U) A biographic sketch of Asher (Arthur) BEN-NATHAN, Director General of the Defense Ministry of Israel, including highlights of his part in the "BERICHAH" immigration, is forwarded in its entirety. (Leave Blank)

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✓ "Asher Ben-Nathan - Director General of Defense Ministry"

"It was just a usual, grey weekday, accidentally picked out among others. The Director General arrived at work as usual, at 8 o'clock. Some "heavy" files are already waiting on his desk. A glance at the calendar, a day full of meetings, debates, interviews. Where to start? First comes the Head of Afro-Asian Aid Department, a field of action which no longer constitutes a novelty, and which covers large areas in both continents, in which Israel has established close friendly relations with a whole series of states. These relations require constant supervision and development. They also create various problems with which the Defense Ministry is closely concerned; problems of Gdna, Kahal, instruction, etc.

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Tel Aviv, Israel

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As a result of the C.e.S and Ben-Nathan's tour in some of the Far East states, new matters have to be taken up and discussed. Next: consultation with the Economic Control Department, on matters of supervision and efficiency in various fields of action. Then come the men from the Organisation and Administration Section. Again efficiency is discussed. The work efficiency is reiterated on every level. That is, in fact, all the debates aim at.

At noon there is not always time to go home. You eat something in a hurry, and go on working. Or else, some VIP is invited for dinner, which involves ceremonies, protocol, official atmosphere.

Back to the office. A talk with Mr. Peres on Zahal's pensionaries; problems of discharged officers in the light of various public aspects. Last come the current files. A work day of 12 hours has not yet come to an end. At home you still have to prepare the Friday night lecture for journalists. This is a typical day, not an overcharged one. Sometimes the Director General has no less than seven meetings in the morning. One day in the week is devoted to the Defense Minister, for consultations within a limited frame; Prime Minister, Deputy-Defense Minister, C.e.S. and Deputy, and the Director General. In the capacity of Director General, he always takes part in meetings of the General Staff.

The Director General pulls quite a number of strings. He will pay attention to whatever problem is submitted to him, from the "big" ones, such as international dealings and transactions, to the "futile" affairs such as scholarships or other kinds of financial support to individuals. For each problem he will try to find the adequate solution, and always after thoroughly weighing and examining the matter. "Arthur knows how to deal with men," they say about him in the Ministry. From the driver and the typist and up to senior officials - they all agree that the Boss is a perfect gentleman.

Once, in the days of Late Disengoff, people used to say that in order to be mayor of a city, you first have to build it, as Disengoff had built Tel Aviv. It seems that now the same may be said about the State: In order to occupy a key position in the State, you ought to have built it, or at least been among those who did. Asher (Arthur) Ben-Nathan was among the pioneers who did not show off, did not appear in the headlines, did not hold speeches in public, but acted almost secretly, underground, behind the curtains. He is one of those who have become a legend in their lifetime. A mysterious legend, slightly romantic, audacious and not devoid of adventures, from the days of the "berichak" (immigration of camp survivors through Vienna) up to the Jiboutti and Inkeda period and the Bat Galin ship.

Arthur, as the Director General is called in the office, belongs to the "Vienna Group" of top men, which include also Teddi Kelek, Ehud Avriel, Haim Ben-David. They have created a sort of personal "style", a "Vienna" style, which differs from the "Sabra", the East European, the German or the Anglo-Saxon ones. This style is not only based on good manners, culture and politeness which were once so typical for Vienna, but also on inner delicacy, optimism, good humor and smiles. All these features were largely influenced by the Viennese music, the waltzes, but also the literary creations of the Vienna doctrine, of Schnitzler, Zweig and last but not least - Herzl.

As a pupil in the Hebrew Gymnasium of Vienna, Arthur participated every year in the traditional procession of the town's Zionists to Herzl's tombstone in the Medeling quarter. This tradition, that had a considerable impact on the young generation, was only broken with the Nazi occupation of Austria. Arthur was a member of "Maccabi Hassair" already when he was still a student. This was the right wing among pioneer movements. He joined the "Kibbutzim and Kevutset Union" only in Israel, and from the political point of view became integrated in Mapai. Being tall and blond, of a "Nordic" and "Aryan" look, was not directly hit by the Nazis. In those days, the youth movement used to take long walks outside the town, to the romantic Vienna Woods, where Martin Buber used to speak to the enthusiastic youth.

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Then the moment of the "Aliyah" (emigration and immigration to Israel) came.

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It was, of course, the illegal Aliyah, (permits were extremely limited), and the immigrants managed to land in Casarea on the 29th of June, 1938, some three months after Austria had been occupied. The next day Arthur and his friends were transferred to Hadera for agricultural training. He went to work in the citrus groves, in the forest or wherever required to. A few years later the group established its permanent home in the kibbutz of Devrat, to which Arthur is still closely attached. During the Hadera period Arthur learned to know Erika, who is now his wife and mother of his two children.

Immigration to Israel was a frequent phenomenon in these days. Less so was the emigration from Israel. But Arthur has experience in it too, when in October 1945, he was ordered to leave in a small boat, together with other young men, for a rescue mission in Europe. The way to Italy and from there to Vienna was not easy. He started his journey in Brigade uniform, then with papers of an Austrian "refugee" who returns home. The task conferred on him consisted mainly of looking for war criminals (Nazis). The problem was how to reach them. Together with five friends, he left for Graz, which at that time was under British occupation, in a Brigade car. The car had an accident and they had to carry on by feet to Vienna. The problem arose when he had to cross the border between the British and Russian zones. His papers provoked the suspicion of the Soviet guard. However, a British sergeant, impressed with Arthur's good English, helped him to jump on the Vienna bound train when it was already leaving the quay.

In Vienna he immediately started the hunt of Nazi criminals. His first target was Adolf Eichman. A photo of Eichman, found by one of Arthur's friends, later on helped in identifying him and catching him.

The most important chapter started when Arthur was appointed commander of the "Berichak" (immigration through Vienna). He had to pass more than 200,000 Jewish refugees, holocaust survivors, from Poland, Russia, Rumania, Hungary, etc. to the temporary camps in Germany or to immigration bases in Italy. This period is wrapped with a haze of legend. It was said then that there are four Occupying Powers in Austria, and the fifth is the "Berichak" Command. All intelligence services tried to detect this mysterious Arthur, who then appeared as a journalist under the name of Arthur Feiler, and represented two Palestinian newspapers and one telegraphic agency. He often had exciting scoops, which he did not invent, but actually created, as, for instance, when he organized demonstrations of Vienna Jews near the headquarters of the Anglo-American Eres Israel Committee. At the same period, Arthur's wife acted for the Jewish Agency as UNRRA representative in Austria, and Arthur often acted as her driver, for purposes of camouflage. Once he crossed over to Germany with papers of a prisoner's escort, whereas the prisoner was no other than Arthur himself. The most suspicious of all were, of course, the Russians, who were disturbed by the very idea of conveying Jews outside the Iron Curtain.

His price would be too high if they managed to get hold of him. And indeed, he was caught once, and...released. Years later, when Arthur was already Director General, of the Defence Ministry, a strange character showed up in his office, wearing a green cap and raising the secretary's suspicion; the man claimed he was among the "Berichak" men and had received an order to kill Arthur. The secretary was about to alert the Security Officer, when the fellow introduced himself as an ex-BKVD man and told that at the time, the Soviet authorities had ordered him to liquidate the "Berichak" commander at any cost. "Don't you remember me?" the man now asked.

Once a British journalist addressed Arthur, "Do you happen to know who was this mysterious Arthur who was in charge of the Jewish ~~EE~~ Refugees activity?" "I would like to make his acquaintance myself," Arthur replied, keeping his mysterious smile. This smile also won him the label of "Sphinx." This Sphinx one day entered the "Royal Menceau" Hotel in Paris, where David Ben-Gurion was in

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exile and acted as the Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive. It was in the year 1946, and Arthur came to report on the "B'richai" activities. His report was straight to the point, without superfluous dramatization. Ben-Gurion was impressed by it, and a year later he asked the Kibbutz Devrat to free Arthur of his duties in the kibbutz, and took him to his Tel Aviv office (in the Red House). There he spent his time up to the establishment of the State of Israel, when he was called to serve in the Political Department of the Foreign Office and was sent on some secret mission to France.

At the end of the mission he was granted study vacations and went to Geneva, where he studied political science, international law and economics, and was the pupil of the old Professor Rapard, former member of the League of Nations' Mandate Commission, and a personal friend of President Weizman. Then came the period of Africa - Djibouti, Ethiopia, the Inkoda Company and Bat Galim (ship). Everything else is silence.

And Paris again - at the head of the Defence Ministry Delegation, with all the responsibility involved in this important task of procurement and relations with the top of the French Army. From there - to the top of the Defence Ministry, first as Acting Director General, and then up to the present moment, as Director General.

"It is a pleasure to work with him," say his assistants, who talk of him with real admiration, mentioning his enormous working capacity, his quick grasp even in most complicated matters, his extraordinary power of persuasion, his common sense, the way he evades honor, his great gift of knowing how to handle people. He has wide horizons and his fields of interest are vast; music, art, literature, languages, sport. He plays tennis whenever he has got the time for it, he likes to play musical instruments, and when he was in Teheran recently, he used the opportunity to do some skiing.

On New Year's Eve, Arthur brings his wishes to all the Ministry employees personally. On this day he "travels" several kilometers, without omitting any of the employees. He drinks a toast with all of them and never forgets to go over to the disabled club, in order to wish them a happy new year.

In the Supply Section he one day met a producer who came to discuss a matter concerning his business. When Arthur learned the man was producing sights (for guns), he said, "I hope your intentions are good, indeed." (In Hebrew the same word means "intentions" and "sights.")

The traditional tour of all the offices in the big building takes some 20 hours of walk, by foot. This tour may illustrate his entire way of working. Many hours combined with excellent work conditions and relations.

Comment: As indicated in this article, BEN NATHAN is a highly respected individual not only by the IDF, but by the Attache Corps as well.

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