

## RG-50.151.0001

### Summary

Benjamin (**Binyomin**) Bashan was born in 1931, in Ciechanowiec, a town near Bialystock, Poland. In 1939, under the Ribbentrop Molotov agreement, the town devolved to Russian control. Jewish life was not impacted by the change until June 21, 1941, when the Germans entered the town with force, control, burned down nearly all the houses and drove out the Russians who were badly defeated.

Conditions for the Jews worsened as the front spread further east. Potential activists were arrested, thrown into the local jail, tortured and never returned to their homes. In the summer of 1942, the Germans started to concentrate the Jews into certain areas fenced in by barbed wire and subjected them to violence. He personally witnessed Jews being beaten and taken into forced labor. Bashan's parents sent him and his older brother, their two eldest children, to live with non-Jewish acquaintances in other towns in the hope that they might survive.

They worked for local farmers until November 1942, when they were told that they had to leave. Non-Jews had been threatened that anyone caught harboring Jews would share their fate. The brothers returned to their town. A former neighbor told them that while they could stay the night with him, they must run away the following morning because Jews were being killed. Bashan's brother decided to remain with the rest of the family. Binyomin on the other hand, decided to make his way to his mother's childhood hometown in the countryside, to a family of an old White Russian friend of his grandfather, with whom the Bashans had remained in contact.

Binyomin managed to find them. They received him well and assured him that they would ensure his well-being. They took him to an estate whose owners agreed that he could help with work on their property. They treated him well. While there, he heard about Jews who had managed to escape from the ghettos of nearby towns. They were denied shelter by the villagers, turned over to the Germans, and executed. Periodically, Jews came to the estate seeking assistance; the estate owners were always helpful.

Over time, the situation changed for the better for the Jews who had managed to escape to the countryside into the territories where the Russian forces were advancing. Though it was still dangerous, the Jews were able to acquire weapons which they used against the Poles who had been denouncing them to the Germans. The Jews in the area near the estate came predominantly from two towns; his uncle had lived in one of them. Early in the winter of 1945, his uncle together with a few companions and a wagon, arrived at the estate and asked Bashan to go with them. The estate owners told Bashan that he was free to do as he wished. Though he had been treated by the estate owners as if he were one of their own, Bashan decided to join his uncle. They made their way to Bialystock.

In the summer of 1945, there was a sizeable number of Jews in Bialystock. The Zionist movement, which had existed before the war, including in Bashan's town, began to operate again. Bashan joined the Zionist Youth movement. He parted from his uncle who wanted to go to South America to his wife's family. Under the auspices of **Aliyat Hanoar (Youth Aliyah)**, the group to which he belonged smuggled their way from Poland to Prague and then to Germany. In Munich, which was under the control of the Americans, they joined a group that was

preparing to go to Palestine. They were led by soldiers of the **"Brigada"** and emissaries of the **Jewish Agency** who made all the arrangements. At the time, **aliya** to Palestine, which was under British control, was restricted.

In the autumn of 1945, Bashan's group went to Marseilles to await departure to Palestine. One evening, 1,300 young people from Aliyat Hanoar, including Bashan, boarded a leaking vessel, the LATRUN. A few days prior to reaching Haifa, the ship was intercepted by the British. After facing some initial resistance, British soldiers boarded the vessel and towed it to Haifa. From Haifa, the passengers were taken to Cyprus where they were interned in a field camp surrounded by barbed wire on the coast.

There were doctors in the camp as well as counselors from the Zionist movement and representatives from the Jewish Agency. The detainees played sports and studied, they could come and go relatively freely, but the British made sure that they would not escape. They took advantage of their time there to read and learn and to get a general education. Bashan was in Cypress for seven months. The British were issuing only a limited number of certificates per month that allowed for legal entry to Palestine from refugee camps in Europe and Cyprus. As a result, many detainees remained in Cypress until Israel became independent.

In May 1947, Bashan arrived in Palestine, and was taken to **Atleet**. From there, Bashan's group was persuaded to go to **Kibbutz Afikim**, where they worked and studied. After the UN vote for partition, on November 29, 1947, the situation with the Arabs worsened. Many of Bashan's older friends joined the **Haganah** and were later killed in the **War of Independence**. Though not yet 17, Bashan volunteered to join his friends in the army. His group was assigned to the southern part of the country, near Beerseba, and were stationed near **Kibbutz Chazerim**. Some of the heads of the kibbutz, who were former members of Kibbutz Afikim, asked Bashan and his group to consider joining the kibbutz. When Bashan was released from the army, he returned to live on Kibbutz Chazerim.