

Dear Nini,

Where has the time gone? I wonder how you are doing, and where you are now. I'm sure you left our beloved Tripoli too, but I have no idea where you might have gone. I've decided to write you this letter, in the hope it will somehow find its way to you. I've missed you so much over the years; we never saw each other again after that Saturday afternoon in December. We were fifteen years old! Do you remember? I have thought back countless times to those Saturday afternoons we spent at my house or your house, with me always in my khaki uniform after scouts. Actually, in many ways, the kibbutz reminded me of scouts! Now I'm old, and all things considered I think I've had a good life – definitely not boring anyway! So I thought I'd tell you everything that's happened, picking up from where we left off, that Saturday afternoon.

Do you remember Yosef? Ah, how much I liked him back then! Did you know we got married?! Yes, really! But I'll come to that... Anyway, he was working with some *shlichim* – emissaries from Israel – on an *apalah*, or illegal emigration, and he asked me to go with him. I said yes, of course, but would you believe it, my parents wouldn't let me. There was a rumour going round that he didn't believe in God, of all things! You know what it's like: 'the voice of the people is the voice of God'. A short while later, however, somebody organised another *apalah*. I don't remember who – it was a Jew who came to a private agreement with some fishermen. The situation was much more dangerous, but it was my chance! And so I left with Shimon, my next-door neighbour, who was seventeen years older than me. *Nassati 'ito, zeh hayah be-leil Shabbat*: I set off with him on the eve of the Sabbath.

Everyone was there, including my mum, dad and grandma. My dad recited the *kiddush*, the blessing of the wine that begins the *shabbat* dinner, and then hugged me tight – I remember it well. My mum gave me the silver *shaddai* that my grandma had made when my little brother was born (it's a silver pendant inscribed with the word *Shaddai* – the Omnipotent – which we Jews usually place on a newborn baby's crib to keep Lilith, the demon who kidnaps babies, at bay). We all cried. I will never forget it. We had no idea when, or indeed if, we would ever see each other again. A boy came to tell us that the exact departure time had been set for ten o'clock. So at ten I touched the *mezuzah* (you know, the box containing a blessing hung on the doorpost, the one you always asked me about when you came to my house) and left. Ah Nini, what can I say. It was December, it was raining, and we were wearing two jumpers and four pairs of pants, one on top of the other. We couldn't take a suitcase, in case somebody realised we were leaving. Shimon and I went through the Arab market to the new town, where

the streets had names like Corso Sicilia and Corso Vittorio Emanuele (I wonder what they are called now – as you know, they later changed all the names and bulldozed everything...). I still remember vividly that we ended up on Via Ugo Foscolo, where we were welcomed into an office not by a Jew, but by an Italian man. More and more people arrived, until in the end there were 45 of us, including a four-month-old baby!

After a while we were told we would all have to leave in an hour, and some *balilla* taxis came (I think they were called that because they were driven by Italians) and took us all to Gargarish, a place on the coast, fifteen kilometres from Tripoli, where there were caves in the cliffs. I had never been there before. On arrival, we were ordered to go down to the water's edge, but it was a drop of several metres, and we had absolutely no idea how to do it, especially with the rain. Anyway, Nini, we managed it – I'm still not sure how. Once we were at the bottom, we hid in the caves until everyone was there. Some small boats took us to the ship waiting further out, five people at a time. It was still raining, and the waves rocked the boat. They even tied us up so we wouldn't fall into the sea. It was terrifying! Then when we got to the ship, there was no ladder to climb up, just a few ropes! The captain of the ship, who genuinely seemed like a decent person, came down to collect the small infant. And we had to set off again quickly, before the British saw us, because otherwise, well... But they didn't see us, Nini. However, the ordeal wasn't over yet.

We ended up sailing through a storm, and those of us hidden inside the ship were thrown around left, right and centre. People were crying and being sick, and nobody knew what to do. When we reached Malta, we asked if we could come out for a bit, but the captain said no because the British were there. So we were all stuck inside until Sunday morning, when we finally arrived in Pachino in Sicily, near Syracuse. Have you ever been there? Anyway, when we arrived it was still raining, and there were lots of boulders in the way, so we took off our shoes and scrambled over them until we arrived at a farm. We asked the two farmers we met there where the railway station was, and they showed us the way. It was Sunday, so people weren't at work, and there were roughly forty of us, mostly around 15-16 years old: let's just say it wasn't easy to go unnoticed. Indeed, the police asked us where we were going. We missed the train by a whisker, so we had to stay there at the station.

There wasn't any food on board the ship, only water, and we were completely exhausted. One guy in the group was called Dino B. – did you know him? He was a Jewish Italian who spoke Italian really well, and he told us not to say anything, because he would speak on our behalf. He told the police that we had come from Tripoli, that

the Arabs had beaten us and that we didn't want to stay there any more, but instead wanted to come to Italy, which was our true country, as Tripoli was an Italian colony. The police asked us what we wanted, and we said 'something to eat!' I remember it was if it were yesterday, Nini: they took us to the stadium in the town, sat us down in one of its big rooms and brought us bread and chocolate and pieces of parmesan cheese. At 10 AM they told us that they would take us to a Christian centre half an hour's walk away. People were out on their balconies, and everyone was looking at us! At the centre they asked people to bring us food and clothes, and we were given warm milk and coffee, bread and cheese, soup... I'll never forget it!

The older ones and the boys stayed at the centre, where they were given blankets, while us girls were taken to stay with families. We stayed in Pachino for a week, and every evening we were collected and taken to the houses of our various families. Two other girls and I were housed by a married couple – he was a teacher and she worked at the town hall. They gave us their bedroom, while they slept in the living room. The girls were very religious, and were frightened of the picture of Yeshu – Jesus Christ – and Mary above the bed... In the end I had to tell them to pull themselves together: *Yeshu zeh shelanu!* ('Jesus is one of us!', although we call him Josef – I know you like the sound of my language, so I thought I'd write it down for you). In the mornings we would return to the centre, and in the evenings there would either be a concert, or they would take us to see a film. One in particular springs to mind: *Casablanca*. Do you know why I remember it? Because I always wrote everything in my diary, in Italian. I wonder where it ended up... Even today, when I go travelling, I write everything down, and that way I don't forget it! The evening before we set off for Rome, they held an amazing party for us, with a band, cakes and plenty of kisses... and the next day we made sure we arrived at the station in time!

There was one train a day, put on to transport workers. It took us three days to get to the capital, including the sea crossing. We arrived at Rome station on Sunday, where some people from Joint (you know, the Jewish-American organisation I told you about that helped us to get to Israel) were waiting to take us in a van to Nemi, around fifteen kilometres from Rome. They put us up in a farm owned by an Italian, where there were houses with chimneys, and families of Poles who had survived the Shoah and remained there. We stayed for a month, and were given vouchers to eat at Joint's canteen in Rome. We travelled there by tram, and I met plenty of people from Tripoli there... most importantly, Yosef! Oh, Nini, you can't imagine – I got so emotional when I saw him, I cried and cried. I just couldn't believe it! He was staying in Grottaferrata, and I moved there too. Shlomo accompanied me on the train – I can still remember all the stops!

Then we moved to Yosef's brother's house in Rome, and spent our time travelling around Rome until the order arrived to go to Israel. Not everyone was happy about it... But Yosef was, he was excited!

So we flew from Rome to Lod, on a tiny aeroplane: you should have seen it! We arrived in Israel on 1 or 2 January, and they took us to the camp in Sarafand, which was run by the British. We stayed there in huts, with only a single blanket. It was unbelievably cold, and they gave us a truly pitiful amount of food at the refectory. We were there for two nights. Then Yosef went to Tel Aviv, introduced himself at the Kibbutz Union, and asked whether he, his sister and I could form a family and join the Yagour kibbutz in Haifa. After a few days at one of his uncles' houses in Pardes Katz, where he had emigrated in 1944, we joined the kibbutz. And what a kibbutz it was! I didn't even know what a kibbutz was before then! We arrived there by bus, and we were welcomed by the secretaries, who showed us everything – the chickens, the sheds and the refectory – and gave us our own hut. After a week, the community met and decided that Yosef's sister and I should study Hebrew, so we would study for half a day and work half a day. Yosef, meanwhile, was on a mission: he went to Beit Lid, where new immigrants were arriving, to bring the younger ones to the kibbutz, although few wanted to come.

I was happy there. I worked in the henhouse, milked the cows, and later worked in the fields and with the children. It was a collective way of life based on agriculture, and, you know, it wasn't too bad at all. Sometime later they chose me and five other girls as volunteers to help the Jews arriving from Yemen. We had to go to Rosh ha'Ayin and stay there for a few months. I won't tell you what the conditions were like! When I got back, Yosef's parents had arrived in Israel too, and his mum had fallen ill while they were living in a hut. She died two days after Pesah – we were heartbroken. Yosef went back to the Kibbutz Union and asked for an apartment. They gave us one in Amidah, where most of the residents were survivors of the Shoah, predominantly Poles. Then, finally, my parents arrived too! For a while I had to leave the kibbutz to stay with them – Yosef and I were not yet married, and you know what attitudes were like back then... First they placed them in the Pardes Hana refugee camp, then they moved them to tents in Kiryat Ono. I looked for work in various factories, but it was really heavy going, and I wanted something better, Nini. So when I heard about a course for nursing assistants, I didn't think twice! Plus, you know, I spoke several languages, including Italian... I went there with some friends. Here's a photo of us all. And here's the first photo of Yosef and me together, in Rome in 1948. Would you believe it, the sly old fox sent it to his parents and told them we were already engaged! And finally, here's a photo of me in the kibbutz. Everyone liked me there, but they knew I was engaged...

Later, Nini, I studied to become a pre-school teacher. I also did a pottery course, then shared my skills with all the parents at the nurse school I worked at. I now live in Ramat Gan, near Tel Aviv. And, as I said at the start, Yosef and I got married! We had three children. My grandchildren (all ten of them!) love Tripoli food. I still cook it – I haven't lost the knack. Anyway Nini, I will stop here, as I've already told you a lot. I have had a good life, my friend. And I would love to hear about yours. I hope that this letter reaches you, and that perhaps I may even receive one back from you.

Yours,  
Rina

*Creative elaboration by Martina Melilli, translated by Ian Mansbridge*