

**Aran, Yitzchak**

Nickname: Ike

Born 27<sup>th</sup> August 1923 in Danzig, Germany

Made Aliya in 1934

**This is the Way it Was**

I was born on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1923. We lived in Danzig and the inhabitants of Danzig were German. I studied in a German school and German was my mother tongue. My father came to Palestine in 1932 with a certificate. He came back to Danzig to liquidate his possessions and in 1934 the whole family made Aliya. My father was a Zionist bourgeois and a supporter of Jabotinsky. He registered me to go to a business-oriented high school.

While in Danzig and when I was only 8 years old I joined Habonim and when we came to Palestine I joined the Machanot Olim movement. The school I went to was far-right wing oriented and when I expressed my opinions in public they were to the dislike of many, and I was thrown out. I transferred to the Gordon High School which prepared students for the Palestine Matriculation test. I passed this test in June 1940. At this time there was a split in the Machanot Olim; one part supported Mapai and the other part supported Achdut HaAvoda. In August of 1940 I went with a group for training at Kibbutz Yagur. From Yagur I was sent to work in Haifa to support the commune of the leaders of the movement in Haifa.

I worked in the port of Haifa building fortifications for the British which were built on the stone breakwaters at the entrance to the harbor. One day when I came to work I saw the ship "Patria" with her bow broken and sunken in the water. I had seen her moored there every day when I came to work, but this time the Hagana had attached a mine to its bow, which exploded. This was done so that the ship would not be able to leave for Mauritius, where the British had intended to expel the 2,000 immigrants who had arrived on the ships "Atlantic" and "Pacific" (they were also moored idly in the harbor). About 250 of the olim were killed in the explosion. For some unknown reason the explosion was far greater than was intended.

That morning I was infected with two illnesses; 1. "Aliya Bet", I recovered from this one because now, the "Gates Are Open", 2. "Sea Sickness", I think I never fully overcame my love for the sea. In 1941 our group at Yagur had to provide 3 volunteers. In the British army Palestinian Jews served as drivers, in kitchen duty and other non-combatant tasks. I wanted to fight the Nazis, so I volunteered with the aim of joining up somehow with the Russians. I thought I would get onto one of the Immigrant ships, the "Atlantic" or "Pacific" which once again were being used as merchant ships and there were already some members of Sdot Yam on the "Pacific" (Yehuda Rotem, Gad Kampinski and others). They told the Captain that I intended to jump ship at a port in Turkey so that I could go from there to Armenia and join up there with the Russian Army. (Do not get me wrong. Since

the murder of Marshal Tuchashevsky in 1936 and the expulsion of Trotsky by Stalin, I became a sworn anti-Stalinist). I was not accepted on the "Pacific" so, in despair, I thought I would try to get onto any ship. This ship happened to be the "Sophie", in November of 1941. Almost the entire crew was Jewish, from the Kerem HaTeimanim quarter of Tel Aviv.

At first we sailed from Haifa to Tobruk, Alexandria and back to Haifa. We carried thousands of Italian prisoners of war captured in Libya. General Rommel was then in Benghazi. We then sailed in the Red Sea to Aden and Suez. I recall that in 1942 we had a wonderful Seder night in the home of a Yemenite Jew in Aden. I sailed on this ship for 8 months and then I heard of that new creature, the Palyam. Mobilization was at Kibbutz Sdot Yam, in Kiryat Chaim. I asked an old friend and a member of Sdot Yam, Aharon Meged, to make an appointment for me with Yitzchak Sadeh and Uri Yaffe. Following my conversation with them I was accepted for the first course for the Palyam, which was to start in November 1942 at Sdot Yam, which had moved over to Caesarea.

My "vast" experience (9 months) as a sailor was an important calling card for me because at that first course there had been no one who had sailed on a large ship. The instructor of the course, Shmulik Tankus had a great deal of theoretical knowledge. When the course was completed I had a talk with Yitzchak Sadeh and told him that I wanted to get right back to sea, and was given an unofficial okay. I and my childhood friend, Shaul Avni, boarded the Norwegian tanker Nyholm which sailed as far as India and South Africa. The first time we got back to Palestine Shaul also signed up for the Palyam. Something that I thought important occurred the day after the war against Hitler was over, in 1945. We sailed from the United States on the British vessel "Samclyde" headed for the port of Salonika with a load of wheat for the starving Greeks. When we were about ten miles from the port and while I was at the helm we struck a mine. We were barely able to limp into port. We spent about a month there undergoing repairs, and every day would visit the Jewish quarter. Before the war 60,000 Jews lived there but now we found only 12. Very many never returned from the extermination camps.

From Salonika we sailed to London and while there, I took the test for second mate and a year later for first mate. While in London I was in contact with the people of the Mosad for Aliya Bet, Teddy Kollek, Zeev Shind and Ehud Avriel. They instructed me to get to the USA as quickly as possible. I was there soon enough and reported to Zeev Shind who had gone there a bit earlier. He sent me to Baltimore where the "President Warfield" was anchored (this ship became the "Exodus 1947"). The ship had been built in 1927 and had been used as a ferry boat on Chesapeake Bay. The bay is well protected on three sides and the water is usually very calm. In 1940, after war broke out, Pres. Roosevelt decided to send her to England as part of the "lend-lease deal". On the trip to Europe she was torpedoed by the Germans, but the ship did not sink. She managed to reach Glasgow and was used to instruct naval seamen and officers during the war. In

1944, after the invasion of Normandy, the ship was moved to the area where the Landing had taken place, and was kept about 100 meters off-shore.

In 1946 when I arrived in Baltimore I saw the "Pres. Warfield" for the first time. Some alterations and improvements had been made on her and she was manned by an all-Jewish crew of Americans. Only the Captain and the Chief Engineer were non-Jews. A priest and newspaperman was also to come along with us, John Grauel, a great guy. We sailed in February 1947 and when we passed Norfolk we ran into one hell of a storm. Water ran into our holds from the anchor chain pipes and flooded the food store holds. The captain sent out an SOS but we managed to get back to Norfolk under our own power. Our captain departed the ship at this point and was replaced by Captain Vigo Thomson, an American/Norwegian. He was a brave and creative man. Some of the weaker-kneed volunteers also quit so in the end we were left with a tough crew. I was first mate.

All the newspapers were full of news of the ship so we can say that the period of secrecy was behind us. From this point forward, the English were with us in every port so in this respect our conditions were different than those of other Hagana ships that had gone before us. We met sailors from the English ships in bars later on in Marseilles and in Port de Bouc, and had fistfights with them more than once. Because of the strong influence that the British had over the French government we had to leave for Italy. We pulled into a small port there called Porto Venera. We spent three months there while the ship was being prepared to take on immigrants. Ada Sereni was then in charge of the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Italy. She was the wife of the deceased Enzo Sereni, who had a brother in the Italian Senate. Shaul Meirov (Avigur) also visited Italy at this time. Every one knew that this biggest ship of all, would play a major role in the story of Aliya Bet, despite, or because of, its being so well-known to the British.

The Palyamniks came aboard at this point. The commander of the ship was to be Yossi Hamburger (Harel) and his second-in-command was Micha Perry. Azriel Einav was the radio operator, Miri was in charge of the kitchen and Sima was the nurse. Avraham Zakai was responsible for preparing the ship. He was an old friend of mine from the Machanot Olim and a very resourceful person. In May 1947 we had to move back to Port de Bouc, near Marseilles where the work of preparing the ship was completed. Yossi toured the camps in preparation for receiving the immigrants and in the meantime, the British were on our tail all the way.

On the night of 9<sup>th</sup> July we managed to sneak away from the British and get to the port of Sète. 4,500 olim were ready to board the ship in a few hours. They arrived on the 10<sup>th</sup> and came aboard. We were not located in a convenient spot for such a big ship and needed a pilot in order to get out to sea. No pilot wanted to do so and therefore we had to do so ourselves. I was called to Montpellier, the capital of the region and told by the Governor that we were not allowed to leave

the port. It was clear that we would have to do it ourselves, quickly and in secret; an almost impossible task.

On the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup> I was given the order to take the ship out of port, without a tug or a pilot. We had nothing to lose since the police were scheduled to come that day to take the immigrants off the ship. Even if we were to go out and get stuck, the police would have come to take the refugees off the ship. All this pressure from the French was because there was a meeting at that time in Paris and the British foreign minister, Bevin was putting pressure on the French to have the voyage cancelled before it started. At 1:00 hours we cut the steel cable that tied us to the pier and it snagged on our propeller. Bill Bernstein, the second mate who later died in the fight against the British, went underwater and freed the propeller. Somehow, with the aid of the other officers we managed to get out to sea although we did get caught on a rock but managed to free ourselves. As soon as we were in open water we were joined by a British destroyer and on the following day we had a bevy of five destroyers and the cruiser Ajax following in our wake.

This group stayed with us all the way and every time we passed another ship it inquired why we had all that company. One advantage that we had over the British was that our draft was only 8 feet and all the British ships had a draft of 20 feet. I took advantage of this when we were near the island of Lampedusa and brought the ship close to shore. All the British ships had to alter their course and keep at a distance until we once more went out to deeper water.

We decided to sail for Gaza and from there to head north along the coast, but to remain outside the territorial waters until we were opposite Tel Aviv. There we would head for the shore and with the aid of units of the Palmach on shore get the Olim away from the ship and the coast.

The voyage from France to Tel Aviv was tense, exiting and amusing. The British ships would address our Olim through their bullhorns telling them what their fate would be when they arrive at Palestine. The Olim would answer sarcastically and sometimes they would sing "God Save the King". The olim were in very good spirits. When we were still quite a distance from shore but opposite Gaza, the British decided to attack. (In 1986 I saw what the British had then allowed to be published about the Exodus: The Commander of the Ajax advised the Naval Ministry that the Exodus would not be able to be stopped if it were to reach territorial waters. The Naval Office gave permission to attack on the high seas) This is piracy! They attacked when we were 22 miles out at sea. Their own documents recorded this information.

Preparations had been made for the defense of the ship. There was barbed wire surrounding the deck and pipes were laid out and connected so that we could use hot water and fuel to spray the attackers. The ship's lifeboats were hanging in the air over the water and the reserve steering helm in the engine room had

been prepared for use. We never thought that the **British** would attack at sea as that would constitute an act of piracy, and we were flying the flag of Honduras in international waters in peacetime. But that is what they did.

Ten minutes past midnight they doused their lights and called to us: "You are now entering the territorial waters of Palestine". For four hours they rammed the ship with pairs of destroyers, one on each side. They wrecked the outer structure of the ship, but we were not in any real danger because of the way it had been built. During these hours of ramming they only succeeded in putting 17 Royal Marines on board as our ship stood much higher in the water than the destroyers. In their first attack they captured the bridge and the helm. They hit the second mate, Bill Bernstein with a lead pipe (he died from this blow shortly after) and shot and wounded the helmsman, Bill Millman. I dragged Bill to my room and then went down to the reserve helm and we detached the upper one, making it inoperative. We continued to sail in the direction of Tel Aviv.

Everything that I have written above has been authenticated by Tony Bailey, captain of the destroyer "Childers", when he came to visit me in Tel Aviv in 1978. We then became fast friends. It was from this destroyer that the Marines managed to get aboard our ship. They had constructed a ladder which added the height they needed to get from their ship to our upper deck. From there some were thrown back overboard but others after a round of heavy shooting made it to the bridge.

We sailed towards Haifa in the company of the six destroyers and the cruiser and at Haifa they started unloading the olim onto three deportation ships. We, the crew and the Palyamniks, hid in previously prepared hideouts. In Haifa, while the olim were being dragged off the ship, I gave John Grauel, the journalist who was not arrested, a copy of a photo of the ship on which I wrote in English: "In Memory of a Defeat. One more defeat like that and we have won! One more victory like that and Bevin's empire will sink to the depths and disappear". That is exactly what happened.

At that very same time there was a committee of the UN at Haifa, the UNSCOP. When they saw the sight of the wrecked ship, the dead and the many wounded being dragged from the ship they drew the conclusion that Palestine had to be divided into two countries. On the upper deck full of olim and with Mordechai Rosman at their head, they began singing the song of the partisans: "Do not say that this is my last journey.." When we came out of our hiding places I was given orders to get to Rumania so that I could board one of the ships that were being prepared there, the "Pan York" or the "Pan Crescent". These ships were being readied to sail in a port of the Black Sea.

After some minor troubles we finally left port and sailed through the Dardanelles and into the Mediterranean. British destroyers joined us immediately. We sailed with them straight to Cyprus (as instructed by the Hagana). When we arrived

Yossi Harel told us that we were ordered by the director of the Jewish Agency to leave the ships and go with the immigrants. The captain of the other ship, Gad Hilb, and I refused to do so. We saw ourselves as bound to the leadership of the Palmach/ Palyam and not to the Jewish Agency. We remained on the ships but the ships remained in Cyprus. This was the situation when the State of Israel was declared. The two Pans were then used to bring all the inmates of the camps to Israel and after that brought thousands more immigrants from Europe to Israel. Together, they brought more than 100,000 immigrants to Israel from ports all over the Mediterranean.