

**Auerbach, Yisrael**

Born in 1925 in Jerusalem

Joined the Palmach in 1942

Joined the Palyam in 1943

**This is the Way it Was**

I was born in Jerusalem in 1925 and until the age of 11 had never seen the sea and did not know how to swim. At that age we moved to Bat Galim in Haifa, and from that moment on the sea played a very important role in my life. That is where I met the rough ocean waves as I coasted along on my home made raft. One night the raft fell apart and I was thrown onto the rocks. Injured and bleeding I returned home 'and felt elated', I felt that I could cope with anything I had the same feeling 10 years later when I came to the same spot on the immigrant ship "Chaim Arlosoroff" which crashed against those very same rocks, after I and my friends had evaded our British pursuers. I had that same feeling; we could cope with the sea and we could cope with the British.

In the summer of 1942 I joined a young group from the Machanot Olim movement in Haifa. All those who were working or had finished studying, gathered in that group and were waiting for their friends who were taking tests or finishing exams. One day we were asked if we wanted to volunteer for the Palmach. We didn't know exactly what the Palmach was and were told that it was military training in preparation for the invasion of Palestine by the Germans. We all volunteered.

Immediately afterwards the Secretariat of the Machanot Olim movement decided that we should go for training to Kibbutz Hulata on the shore of Lake Hulah. This was a young kibbutz that did fishing, along with agriculture. It was suggested that we remain there until the other members of our group joined us. We were glad to go and felt good there. My best friend was Menachem Shvat (Chemale) who was later killed in the War of Independence in the Battle of Mishmar HaEmek. Menachem and Yehudit were the first couple in our group. I liked both of them very much and visited them often in their tent. Our group had to send one person to active duty in the Palmach, and Chemale was chosen. I saw how difficult it was for the young couple to separate, so I volunteered instead.

"F" Company of the Palmach was then at Givat Chaim and Ein HaChoresh, near Hadera. I joined the platoon at Ein HaChoresh. The company commander was a Tel Aviv engineer named Libertovsky. My platoon commander was Lolik Gershonovitch. The squad leaders were Miki Haft, Mike Feron, Micha Peri and Chaim from Tel Yosef. They were called the "Jerusalem platoon," as its members were drawn from the Machanot Olim in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, plus a few students and kibbutznikim like Yonatan Giladi from Ramat Rachel.

One day we heard that "A" Company had gone down to the Negev armed with sticks to meet the German invaders. We, "F" Company, were to go to the Galilee and later on relieve them. We were to go by foot. We were put up in tents at Ayelet HaShachar. We were three men to a tent. Levi Faigenbaum from Kiryat Chaim and Yonatan Giladi from Ramat Rachel were in my tent. Levi was killed at Beit Keshet during the War of Independence and Yonatan was killed while in command of a troop of minority origin near Beersheva. Chaim Ben Dor and Dani Maas were our neighbors. Dani was killed with the "Thirty-Five" who were on their way to Gush Etzion, and Chaim was killed at Balad E Sheikh (Nesher, near Haifa). Dani, Chaim and I were the weapons experts. We prepared weapons for hiding in "Slicks" (hideouts) and in general the five of us were a rowdy bunch. Dani was the oldest and a student at the University, Chaim was a bookworm and wrote stories and poetry, Yonatan was a good-hearted rascal, and Levi was a bit clumsy but solid and trustworthy. We worked long hours in the kibbutz so that we could save up time for training. The rains then came, time started to drag and we were ready for action.

### **The First Sea Course of the Palyam (January – March 1943)**

A notice was posted on the bulletin board asking for volunteers for a nautical training course. I saw this as an opportunity to switch from work in the dairy barn and vegetable gardens. Also, I really did like the sea. I registered for the course and so did Chaim ben Dor. We went to Haifa to be interviewed by the acceptance committee. I convinced them that I am a seaman from Bat Galim, a fisherman from Hulata, and an excellent swimmer. I was accepted and Chaim was not, and was disappointed. He felt that the war would soon be over and he meanwhile, was playing with Tnuva boxes. He went AWOL from the Palmach and joined the British Navy.. Some time later I was sent to the merchant navy and met him in whites at Alexandria. He was complaining of wasting his time there.

In January of 1943 I entered the first seamanship course of the Palyam. It was near Caesarea, which at the time was a sleepy little village next to Sdot Yam, also at the very beginning of its development. On one side there was the ancient hippodrome and on the other were a few wooden buildings and a small pier for building fishing boats. Our "camp" consisted of a row of tents in a circle, with a tall flagpole in the center. There was also a shed where lectures took place. Toilets were some distance away, and a sort of makeshift shed and makeshift shower that worked one day a week.

There was a group of participants from "A" Company, most of them a bit older than me; they were graduates of Wingate (Major Orde Charles Wingate, who taught our pre-Palmach fighters the basics of guerilla warfare.), veterans of the 1936-39 riots and graduates of the incursion into Lebanon. Among those present were Moshe Shturman, Moshe Erez, Zemi from Hulata and Zalman Perach from Beit HaShita. Among the younger participants was Itche, whom I knew from the Machanot Olim and who had already returned from two years of sailing in the British merchant marine, He came out of that adventure with the name of Ike. Ike

had a sack full of stories about his adventures, attacks by submarines, fights in bars and all the ports he had been in.

The course commander was Yankale Salomon, himself a strictly land person. The instructors were Shmulik Tankus, Dov Magen (Berchik), Moka Limon, and Avraham Zakai, who assisted on occasion. They were from the Hapoel Hayarkon group, which included the "Twenty-Three" who were lost at sea. They accompanied immigrant ships to Palestine and were good seamen. The physical conditions of the camp and the conditions for learning were very sparse that year. The boats that we sailed in were the Dov, the Rivka, and the Tirza. The "Twenty-Three" had also trained in these boats before they went out on their mission. At the time of the course we still were not certain what had befallen them. We often went out nights to rescue floundering boats and would come back, cold and shivering, to our leaky and windy tents. We ate together with the kibbutzniks and gave some extra bully beef rations that we received from the Palmach to our kitchen "commander", Hannah Senesh.

Yitzchak Sadeh came to visit our course one day. We told him that we wanted to remain a separate unit within the framework of the Palmach. He didn't think that a good idea and felt that there should be some men, in all Palmach units, who knew the sea. We were disappointed and when the course was over, I dispersed back to our units. He had won the first round.

When the first course was drawing to a close, everyone asked, "What comes next?" The course had been financed by the Mosad for Aliya Bet and they wanted to use us to bring over ships of immigrants. Yitzchak Sadeh was firm in his opinion and Zalman Perach represented our side in the argument. The news that we received from Europe gave a tragic picture of what was happening there. I was sent back to "F" Company and the others to their units. I was unhappy where I was because I had heard that the Mosad was starting to move ships and immigrants, and I wanted to be part of that operation. My platoon leader was Yitzchak Rabin and I had had some unpleasant run-ins with him. I had been put into an auxiliary unit of the company in which I was not particularly interested. His attitude was: "You do what you are assigned to do. I don't want spoiled children in the outfit!" so I became a spoiled child and was sent to a course for non-com officers in Ayelet HaShachar.

I felt a bit better at this course but I was still looking for ways to get to the sea. My course commander was Tzion the Redhead, from Jerusalem, and the other instructors were Dov Tzesis and Chaim from Tel Yosef. Shortly before the end of the course I had a terrible bout of malaria and was in the kibbutz sick ward. I had a very high fever and was left thin and drained, and could hardly stand on my feet. I was sent to the Megiddo Sanitarium in Haifa for a week and came back, still too weak to finish the course. I had to be given something else to do.

### **Taking Olim from Syria to Rosh Pina (May-June 1943)**

A small stream of Aliya Bet from the Arab countries came in all the time. One of the ways in which this was done was to bring groups of Jews from Lebanon and Syria in small groups of about twenty men, women and children to the town of Kunetra, on the Syrian border of the Golan and then to Dardara, east of the Hulah. From there they were transferred by boats from Hulata to the western side of the Hulah. We would then bring them by foot to Rosh Pina. After resting at Rosh Pina for the night they would be dispersed throughout the country by car the next day.

I would be brought by pick-up truck to Hulata and at about 9 in the evening we would leave for Rosh Pina. We would arrive there shortly before dawn, leave the Olim in the culture house, and then get some rest. Then, during the morning hours, we would return to Ayelet HaShachar. If I had a day off I would go to the course which had not yet ended, so that in a somewhat haphazard manner I managed to complete the course.

### **A Half Year at "Haogen" in Haifa (July-December 1943)**

One day I was told to report to Davidka Nameri at the Solel Boneh building in Haifa. Davidka arranged for Kippy and I to work at HaOgen, a subsidiary of Solel Boneh, which ran all sorts and sizes of motor launches to service the ships in the harbor. At first we were assistant helmsmen and then promoted to helmsmen. We lived in the middle section of the city, on the slopes of the Mount Carmel, and we were at the center of where action took place. We followed developments concerning the setting up of an independent Palyam unit, in which Zalman Perach was our chief protagonist. He ran from Yigal Alon to Yitzchak Sadeh, and between the leaders of the Histadrut and the leaders of the Mosad for Aliya Bet. Finally, the Naval Unit of the Palmach was created.

### **Again at Kfar Giladi (the auxiliary unit of F Company, January 1944)**

Kippy was sent to work on the merchant ship "Amal" as a deckhand and I once again found myself in the auxiliary unit of "F" Company. As I said previously, Yitzchak Rabin was commander and his second-in-command was Amos Horev (Sochatchever).. Matty Peled, Yankale Hefetz and Yochai Fishman (ben Nun) were also there. I worked for a month in the vegetable gardens, kitchen, and laundry. Finally the Naval Unit was officially formed and I was ordered to report to it. The fellows at Kfar Giladi gave me a big send-off party, and off I went to Sdot Yam.

### **The Next Half Year at Sdot Yam (February-July 1944)**

The kibbutz had half its members at Sdot Yam and half at Kiryat Haim near Haifa. We worked as stevedores in the port together with the Salonikan stevedores (who couldn't quite figure out what we were doing there) and Haurani stevedores. We worked very, very hard, and with patience. We were in competition with Arab workers over the right to work in the port. We were very motivated to succeed and to prove that we could do the work as well as the

Arabs. There were then no standards for the size or weight of the sacks and some of the produce unloaded, which came in 100 kg sacks. Two men would lift a sack and put it on the back of a third person who would carry it to the storeroom and come back for another. We unloaded sacks of potash from the railroad cars and crates of oranges. At noon we would have our lunch in the workers dining hall. Zalman Perach was our commander now and he would arrange our work schedule. He would also collect our pay from the contractor we worked for, and if he had any spare time he would come and work with us. We learned from him that if a sack was placed correctly on one's back, it weighed less.

Our platoon grew and Zalman was a very good officer. His orders sounded more as if they had been decided by the platoon and not given from the top down. Zalman visited all the companies and grabbed all the seamen who were in them, arguing his way along and winning. I found myself acting as instructor in seamanship to the German Platoon before they were to volunteer for the Jewish Brigade. In February of 1944 I received orders to report for work on the merchant ship "Amal" as a deckhand. I was very happy as I had finally been transformed from a seaman on little launches, to a seaman on a real ship.

#### **The Ship, "Amal" (February 1944 to December 1945)**

The ship "Amal" was an old ship that belonged to the Atid Company of the Burkhardt family. It flew under the Palestinian flag (the British flag) and could make about 7-8 knots. It usually carried supplies and ammunition for the British Navy. The crew was made up of Jews, Arabs, Egyptians and Greeks. There were also 4 sailors of the Royal Navy who were responsible for operating the three anti-aircraft 20 mm canons that we carried. Since the ship was in the service of the Royal Navy it had a special insignia on the British flag. I started my career there as kitchen boy, and ended up by running the kitchen.

At that time the "Amal" moved around the Mediterranean from Alexandria to Port Said and Ismailia, and to Port Tewfik and Port Ibrahim on the southern side of the Suez Canal. We sailed to Masawa in Eritrea, and back to Haifa and Beirut. We carried canon shells for the Royal Navy and cordite and very heavy shells for large canons. If we were lucky, we also carried supplies for the army NAFFI stores. In that case, despite the watchful eyes of the guards we were usually able to pilfer cigarettes, chocolate or whatever.

At that time the Germans were in full retreat from North Africa. There were troops of many nations in Egypt. There were South Africans, Australians and Polish troops of the General Anders army. There were also Hindus and Palestinians. Black market was rampant and so was sex.

While in Egypt we met the Palmach German Platoon who wandered about in the German POW camps. Shimon Avidan was commander of this platoon. We also met Jewish soldiers who served in other units of the British army. We met Chaim

ben Dor there, who helped us in two ways; he would fill his pants pockets with goodies from the NAAFI and bring them to us, and sometimes he would put some revolvers in his pants and pass them to us. Yair Braker and Malachi Efrat worked with me in weapons transfers. The Germans tried to halt the advance of the Allies by dropping magnetic mines into the Suez Canal by plane at night. The canal was full of sunken ships. Because of all the ammunition and explosives that we carried, we did not travel in convoy with other ships. We traveled alone. While navigating the canal the captain would be on the bridge with the French pilot and the helmsman. The crew would crouch on deck wondering if there would be enough left of us to bury, if we were to hit a mine with all the explosives we carried on the ship. Luckily we never bumped into anything.

Most of the crew members dallied in smuggling. Victor and Luca the Greeks brought hashish from Palestine to Egypt and Syria. Yumbo the boatswain sold stolen watches. The captain loaded and unloaded heavy crates of some mysterious substance in every port we entered. We carried them but had no idea what was in them. On the following day we would notice that some rope was missing, or a few cans of paint. I smuggled weapons. There was a camp of the British Navy at Alexandria and Israeli junior officers served there. Every so often they would bring revolvers or semi-automatic weapons to the ship, and we would unload them at night into the launches of "Haogen".

One day, several days after Lord Moyne was killed in Cairo by members of "LECHI" (an extreme right-wing Israeli group) on the 6<sup>th</sup> November 1944, I visited my friend Chaim ben Dor, who had skipped from the Palmach to fight against the Nazis. Before I left the camp I was given five revolvers that I was to bring to Haifa for use by the Hagana. I had the guns hidden under my battle dress and had to walk from Gate 42 to Gate 6 in order to leave the camp and get to my launch. The camp was full of British MP's. I walked along singing like a drunk and bumped into every MP to ask where Gate 6 was. I finally made it to the Gate, shivering with fear and sweat.

On another occasion we were given lessons on the 20mm anti-aircraft canon that we had on the "Amal", and each of us was assigned to be number two man to one of the English gunners. I was assigned to the Scot, Jock. He was a nice guy and I learned some Scottish ballads from him. After Rommel was defeated in North Africa and the Americans captured Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, we received a large supply of ammunition and the invasion of Sicily began. We were loaded with war material in the port of Alexandria and waiting eagerly to finally move to the continent of Europe for the real action against the Germans.

We unloaded our stuff in Malta and then turned to Taranto in the boot of Italy. Meanwhile, Sicily fell into the hands of the Allies and action moved to southern Italy. We spent several days in Taranto as the Allied forces made their way north. One day a truck passed from a unit of Israeli drivers in the British army. The driver was Moshe Mosinsohn from Kibbutz Naan, and from him and the others

with him, we heard for the first time some details of the Shoah which they had heard from first survivors who reached the west. DP camps had already been set up in Southern Italy at Bari, Brindisi, and Santa Maria by the Israelis and by the American JDC.

There was a big Hebrew Palestinian transport company that mobilized to help the Jewish survivors. I met Yisrael Libertovsky there, my commander from "F" Company in the Palmach, and Meirke Davidson from Eilon. They were sergeants in the company and organized the aid given to the survivors. They also originated the phantom outfit known as the "TTG" (Telchas Tizi Gescheften), the "Yashkeni" outfit that helped in Aliya Bet. (I returned to Italy at a later date and was active in Aliya Bet for a long period of time).

I also met Israeli parachutists at Bari. Chana Senesh, whom I had known in Caesarea, had already made her drop behind the lines in Hungary. Tzvi ben Yaakov, who had been in the naval course with me had made a drop in Czechoslovakia. Sorika from Kibbutz Shamir and Shapira from Maoz Chaim were still in Bari, as were a few others.

I was shocked the first time that I saw survivors of the camps with numbers tattooed on their arms. I wanted to leave the ship and join the transport team in helping the survivors, but Yisrael Libertovsky said to me: "You may be able to help them here, but the big problem is getting them to Palestine. For this we need seamen. Go back to Palestine and get into the Palyam and in that way you will do more good." Meanwhile, the soldiers had prepared a shipment of weapons to be taken to Palestine. There were revolvers and tommy guns, and PIAT anti-tank weapons and ammunition. How could we take such a shipment onto a ship that included English sailors in the crew, as well as Egyptians, Arabs and Greeks as well? In addition, the Jewish captain was not trustworthy. I brought the first mate, Jockey Epshtein into the picture and we prepared a secret hideout in the chain locker, Jockey invited the Englishmen to his cabin for a drink, and we switched the Greek watchmen with some of our own people. In the middle of the night pickup trucks arrived with the contraband and we quickly moved all of it into the hideout in the chain locker. The weapons were well oiled, wrapped in sacks, and hidden under the chains. The loading was successfully concluded.

We received sailing orders and were soon out at sea and around the boot of Italy as part of a large convoy. Suddenly the order came to change course and make for the port of Brindisi. It seemed that we were headed for the port of Ancona which had been captured by our forces, but the port was retaken by the Germans. We had to wait for its recapture. This time it was the Australians and soldiers of the Jewish Brigade who retook the town.

The harbor was full of sunken ships and the town itself was a shambles. There were very few townspeople but the town was full of soldiers of many armies. The ship was not a safe place to be because of the ammunition it carried, and the

frequent bombing of the town and the harbor by the Germans. It nevertheless became the center and the meeting place for soldiers of the Jewish Brigade and the Jewish transport drivers, for Jewish soldiers of the Australian and South African armies, and even for the few Italian Jewish partisans that came down from the hills and into the town.

The ship was unloaded by army stevedores who worked day and night, except if there were aerial attacks. When the ship was empty we sailed out by ourselves without a convoy. It would not have been a great loss if our empty ship were sunk. After having sailed the Mediterranean for almost a year, we returned to Haifa. There, I met my old friends from the naval unit of the Palyam. I received orders to leave the ship and join the course for ships officers which had just begun at the Technion. That same night we unloaded, onto launches of Haogen, the weapons that had been hidden in the chain locker. Yair Braker also joined the Palyam after this voyage, and he was already an experienced seaman.

### **The First Officers' Course (winter of '44-'45)**

There were about 15 participants in this first course for officers at the Technion. Among them were: Moshe Rabinovitch, Yose Huber(Dror), Yisrael Rosenboim (Rotem), David ben Chorin (Dudale), Tzvi Katznelson (Miri), Kippy, Berchik and Micky Haft. We resided at Sdot Yam during the course. The commander of the course was Berchik (Dov Magen) and the instructors were: Shmuel Tankus, Sheinman(the Italian captain) who taught navigation and Professor Olendorff, who taught us mathematics. It was an excellent course from the point of view of the seriousness in which all participated in the studies, and also from the point of view of the rich content of what we learned. Everyone worked hard.

During the course we knew already that we would go from the course to working in Aliya Bet, and there was emphasis on preparing the ships for carrying the survivors of the Holocaust. We were told about the ships that had come during the period 1936–1939. We also took a course in sabotage at Mishmar Haemek and a course in physical training. Not everyone finished the course because some of the participants left for Europe even before it was over.

### **“Amos” (March – May 1945)**

At the end of the course a crew was formed for the ship “Amos” of the Atid Company. I was chosen together with Menachem Cohen, Alex Shur, Peter Hoffman, Bob Shtrasberg (Nativ) and others. The captain was Martin Ekdish. This had been a fishing vessel, converted to a merchant ship, which traveled to Beirut and Alexandria. Life on the ship was quite difficult. While we were in Alexandria we heard that the Germans had surrendered. We met the first fellows there who had started work in Aliya Bet in Italy. Among them was Zalman Perach who was in soldier's uniform, and on his way to Europe.



### **Course for Non-com Officers No. 5, Helping the Olim of the “Berl Katznelson” and the “Hannah Senesh”:**

We became restless because some of the fellows were already in Europe and working in Aliya Bet, and we were still on the ship. After several months I left the ship and was an instructor for the 5<sup>th</sup> non-com officers' course under the command of Yosef Dror<sup>(1)</sup>. While the course continued, we assisted in bringing Olim of the “Berl Katznelson” to shore at Shefayim. I was in command of one of the four boats which moved the Olim. Others there to help in the work, were Yosef Dror, Alex Shur, Yoske Almog and Nimrod Eshel. Two of the boats headed southwards, and two northwards. The two that had gone south were caught and all those in the boats were taken to the detention center at Latrun. Yosef Dror, Yoske Almog and Nimrod Eshel were in those boats. I had Moshe Lipson, Nissan Levitan and Uri Rabikovitch in my boat. We wandered out at sea for two days, and at night would come into the mouth of Wadi Falik. At dawn, the launch of a British warship approached us. Moshe Lipson spoke to the sailors in Arabic and the sailor reported to his officers that we were Arab fishermen. We continued to move to the north. We were asked to identify ourselves, and were even shot at from shore. We finally reached Caesarea and came ashore. Shortly afterwards Alex Shur also arrived with his boat, which had had similar escapades. All this occurred two weeks before the end of the course. I took Yosale Dror's place as commander of the course <sup>(1)</sup> because he was still in Latrun.

The ship “Hannah Senesh” ran onto a rock on the coast off Nahariya. A line was thrown to shore and the Olim were brought to shore one by one. The ship was in danger of capsizing. I remember that David'ke Nimri panicked and shouted “we have to call the police!”. There was a bitter argument between him and the Palyamniks about this issue. The ship indeed capsized, but only shortly after the last person was taken off her.

There were also other special actions of the Palmach during the course. One of these was the blowing up of the railway lines. We left Caesarea for Atlit by launch and the sappers went ashore. As soon as there was an explosion we picked them up and returned to Caesarea. This action was the first time that the Palmach and the Palyam carried out a joint sea-land action.

### **Working in the Diaspora – Working in Various Camps in Organization, Cleanup and Administration (March – April 1946)**

One day I was called to Tel Aviv. I dressed in a suit and went aboard the “Cadio”, a Greek passenger ship whose destination was France. Yosef Leizerovitch, the Gideoni was with me, as were Kippy and Eliezer Versch. We had no papers. Only Chana Sereni and Haggai Avriel had papers. The captain must have been

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<sup>(1)</sup> A note by Yoske Rom, one of the website's editors and a participant in this course: Yosale Dror was not the commander, but one of the instructors. The commanders of this course and its supplement were Avraham Rickman-Karni and Avraham Zakai (commander of the Palyam).

well paid for not causing a problem. Yisrulik Rotem met us in Marseilles. He was with a group of Dutch Jews who were in a camp near the city. I was given the uniform of a British soldier to wear and remained in that area for three weeks. I was then transferred to Milan which was the center of Aliya Bet, and this is where Yehuda Arazi, Yisrael Libertovsky and Meirke Davidson were located. I did not feel natural wandering around in uniform, so it was suggested that I go to the camp of the Olim at Magenta. I was glad to go there and found my old friend Moshe Rabinovitch there. He was the camp commander.

The camp was on the grounds of a villa on the banks of the Ticino River, a tributary of the Po. Its previous owner was a Fascist and there were still bands of Fascists roaming the surrounding area. The fuel for ships and cars was kept at this camp, as well as food supplies and weapons. We helped to clean and store the weapons and we also received the fuel that was delivered there. There was also a group of Italian Jews from Abba Kovner's "revenge unit". These were a good people and I became friends with a number of them. Moshe Rabinovitch and I spent some time in Magenta and worked with the Olim in several other camps near Milan. We also accompanied the convoy to La Spezia. Then Moshe left the camp and started working on ships and preparing them at La Spezia.

#### **“Eliahu Golomb” and “Dov Hoz” – The La Spezia Affair**

In preparation for the sailing, Olim were concentrated in a large camp near Milan from which they were to be brought to La Spezia in a convoy. The distance from the camp to the port was about 300 km. About twenty trucks were mobilized from all the Jewish transport units in the British Army, in addition to the “TTG” trucks that we arranged. They were all readied and waiting to move in Milan. They had all been given false license numbers and written orders were prepared for them by Yisrael Libertovsky. Besides our own Palmach men, we also took additional men from the Jewish Brigade to help us. We started on our way with Yisrael in command of the convoy. When we were about 25 km from La Spezia, in some small town, a unit of the Italian Army stopped and surrounded us. We worked hard to convince the Italians that we were not Italian Fascists trying to escape the country and they finally agreed to accompany us to La Spezia.

When we reached the port, the Olim left the trucks and were brought to the pier where our ships lay waiting. The empty trucks were sent to the central square where they were well guarded. Since it was obvious that the British MPs would soon appear, we civilians who were not in uniform, were told to disappear and get to Milan. This included Berchik, Eliezer Biger, Peter Hoffman and me. The MPs came and a South African sergeant was the first one out of the first jeep. It was difficult for him to hide his sympathy towards us, and he told the Italians to let the trucks return to their outfits, or else he would decide on the spot where to send the trucks. The trucks were soon on their way back when the British discovered that they were missing, and set up roadblocks to find them. The transport units knew that their trucks were on the way back and they prepared more paint. As the trucks arrived, their original number was painted back onto the

license while the motors were still hot. Jewish commanders didn't allow the MPs into their camps by raising obstacles, which went on for several days. The TTG vehicles received the same treatment so that all evidence of the movement of trucks was destroyed.

After this, the British decided to move all Jewish army units out of Italy. This put an end to the use of British Army vehicles so, at this point, we decided who should go AWOL from the British Army and join us in Aliya Bet work. We now organized trucks from UNRRA and from the JDC. Eliezer Biger was in charge of this transport outfit. We left the square, as I had said, and went to the train station. We took the train to Genoa and from there we went back to Magenta. Berchik went to Milan and we began to reorganize.

### **The "Wedgwood" (18 – 26 June, 1946)**

I was back in Magenta and shortly after I arrived there, Rotem and Benjamin Nativ came from Palestine. We were sent to Savona to prepare the "Wedgwood" for taking on Olim. This was a Corvette of 750 tons which carried a Panama flag. It had come from America with an American crew. We worked very hard to complete the preparation in 3 weeks. When the ship was ready we left for Capo Vado with an Italian pilot (he had been the captain of the "Chana Senesh"). The immigrants were already waiting for us, surrounded by policemen. It seems that the Italian Communists were to blame for our situation. At that time there were actually two governments working in northern Italy, that of the Communist partisans and that of the official government. The partisans had not disbanded yet and in a number of cases were very helpful for us.

This time they tripped us up. The Communist partisan leader in the region of Savona, Rosso, ordered all traffic on the road to Vado to be stopped so that we could move the immigrants faster. He was not ready though, to face off against the Italian police. When they happened to show up, Rosso's men took off and we were caught in the middle. Yehuda Arazi, who was at the scene, suggested we put the women on the ship and he himself returned to Savona to negotiate with the Italian police.

We asked and received permission to put the women on the ship and at the same time we continued to load the men as well. Arazi notified us that if he does not return within two hours we should make our getaway, with force, if necessary. That is exactly what we did. At 9:00 hours we raised the anchor, cut the ropes and moved out to sea. We took all of the important people who were in charge of the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Italy with us, as there was some fear that they would be arrested if they remained. Several hours later, we put all of them onto one of the ship's lifeboats and sent them back to shore, with a supply of food. We heard later that evening that the boat and the people in it had arrived safely on shore. We had 1,250 immigrants on the ship, most of them from Poland and a few from Russia, Hungary and Greece. Berchik was commander of the ship and Miri

Katznelson, Benyamin Nativ and I were his assistants. Moshe Yerushalmi was the Gideoni (radio operator).

The trip was quiet and uneventful. When we neared Haifa the ship was taken into custody and the Olim sent to Atlit. There was no resistance as our aim was to put pressure on the authorities by filling Atlit to overcapacity. I got off the ship and walked into the offices of Al-Tuvia. I changed clothes there, left the port and took a bus to Kibbutz Maoz Chaim, where my sister lived. I had arrived exactly on "Black Saturday" but luckily, Maoz was not disturbed by that day's events. The following day I reported at the Solel Boneh offices near the port of Haifa. Davidka was very glad to see me and to see that I had not been arrested. He immediately sent me to a rest home at Neve Yam where I was to stay until the dust settled. Ten days later I was on a passenger ship sailing to Marseilles.

### **Back to Europe – The "Yagur", August 1946**

Once the "Wedgwood" had been delivered to Palestine I returned again to Europe in order to bring another ship. I left as a stowaway on a small passenger ship, the "Cadio", which had been a Canadian warship that was converted to a passenger ship. I think we used this same ship in the past for similar purposes. First we stopped at the port of Alexandria and then headed to Piraeus, where two of our men left the ship. One of them was Kippy. I continued until the ship reached Marseilles and then I left, at the end of July, 1946. We were met at the port by people who took us to one of the camps near the city.

Shmarya Tzamaret of Beit HaShita was in charge of the camps. Abi Schwartz of Dafna and Poli Farkash (ben Zeev) and others helped Shmarya. He and Yehuda Arazi were not on the best of terms. Actually, Yehuda had removed Shmarya from Italy. I was told that I would sail on the ship, "Yagur" which had already been prepared and was to sail within the next few days. We were to leave from the port of La Ciotat, and the Olim were in a camp close to the port.

I wanted to visit the ship and see if it was really ready and in satisfactory condition, but Shmarya answered that that was not possible because of the secrecy required. That did not make sense to me as I had prepared ships previously and knew what was involved. However, Shmarya would not change his mind. When a person who is not the commander of the ship asks too many questions, the commander may think that the fellow is afraid and has doubts about the voyage, so will look for someone else. Because of my experience on merchant ships I thought I was a better seaman than most of the Palyamniks, and had an eye for technical problems that might arise. Of course there was room for "calculated risks" which could vary with each individual, but there is no doubt that some of the trips were made in ships of the Palyam that bordered on the reckless. Sometimes the danger was known and sometimes the attitude was – "it will be okay, don't worry".

I arrived at La Ciotat in the evening and the first person I met was Malka Rofeh, the gideonit (radio operator). Malka was from Kibbutz Maoz Chaim and a veteran of the underground. She had previously been on a mission to Iraq disguised as a Palestinian soldier. I also met an older man there, Menachem, from Kvutzat Kinneret, who was studying fish-raising in ponds. He had finished his studies and asked Shaul Avigur, his brother-in-law and a member of his kibbutz, if he could help out in Aliya Bet. He was nicknamed Moshe. My nickname in the underground was Uzi.

I went aboard the "Yagur", which was an old Turkish vessel and its engine was faulty. It was about 300 tons and made of wood. It also had a set of sails and an auxiliary engine. There was no safety equipment at all, and none for putting out a fire. The immigrants that had already arrived and were supposed to go down into the hold were shocked. Some of them refused to step onto the ship. The ship was supposed to carry 650 passengers, divided into groups according to the movements to which they belonged. Among them were a group of Habonim and a group of Hashomer Hatzair, from England. Some of them were from Europe and had arrived in England before the outbreak of the War. Others had been born in England. There were also groups from the extermination camps and a large group of partisans that had fought the Germans from the forests. Everyone belonged to some group and each group had its leader.

Suddenly, Shaul Avigur appeared on the pier with his wife and Shmarya Tzameret. I went over to talk to them and to receive last minute instructions. Shaul Avigur requested that his friend Menachem be commander of the vessel and this came as a complete surprise to me. What was I to do? Menachem was neither a sailor nor a fighter. He was a very nice guy with a lot of experience in several fields. But would he have the physical and moral strength to carry out the job? I was never one to fight for advancement or for rank; if I was given a job I tried to do it properly. In this case, I said that I am glad that someone older and more mature will be on board and I would be glad to cooperate with him.

The first of the immigrants came along in single file to board the ship, and each one had his single bundle of worldly possessions. Some had bundles that were larger than they were and I knew I would have to be strict and limit them. Bottlenecks were created at the narrow entrances to the holds, and people did not want to go down. We had to push them down into the holds. The heads of the various groups were not a big help and a serious problem was created. The Turkish captain got cold feet and decided that we already had enough passengers and prevented more from coming onto the ship. Shaul's wife burst into tears at the sight of the immigrants and the whole mess that was created. Shmarya took the ship's captain to his room and must have given him an extra amount of gold coins. The French director of the harbor, who was friendly to us, urged us to hurry, because if someone were to phone the Marseille police the whole venture might be endangered. Finally, we decided to take all the people on

deck and leave. This was on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July, 1946. At 14:00 hours a tug took us out to sea and we left the territorial waters of France.

The drinking water tanks leaked, so rationing had to be instituted immediately. A group of six elderly Jews came to me and demanded that they receive kosher food. I told them that they were not scheduled to sail with this group, and only because they applied pressure were they put onto the ship. In the end they were placated and had to do with what we offered. The menu consisted of sardines, biscuits and fresh vegetables. They made the cheese kosher themselves. We had trouble mainly with two groups; the partisans, who were tough, stood up for their rights, and what they were not given they were ready to take by force. The other group were the husbands of the pregnant women. Here too there was a technical, organizational glitch. Women who were more than five months pregnant were not supposed to be on this ship. They were supposed to wait, and go with certificates. However, they did not have the patience and came with this ship.

Malka let it be known that we did not have radio contact. How were we to keep this a secret from the Turkish crew? We had promised them that they would not sail to Palestine, but that we would transfer the passengers to another vessel at one of the Greek islands. Without radio contact we could no longer keep that promise and arrange that another ship would take their passengers. We were afraid that the Turkish captain would change direction were he to know that we were sailing to Palestine. To our luck, he sailed as did our forefathers, by keeping in sight of the coast so that he would always know where he was.

We sailed slowly, it was hot, people washed themselves in seawater and soon they developed skin ailments of all kinds. Some of the immigrants jumped into the sea, which was very dangerous and had to be stopped. Our drinking water was dangerously low and we had to decrease the rations for each person. Every one had to make do with one liter of water a day. The Turkish crew had their own source for water and they would sell bottles of water to the immigrants.

Although it seemed that things were going along fairly smoothly, I was very troubled and feared the worst. I knew that we would run out of water and I knew that we had no radio contact. We would have to force the Turkish crew to make for Palestine. I sat up on the bridge looking over the mass of people who had put their fate in our hands, and here we were in one big mess. I was also angry, because these immigrants did not deserve such treatment, neither they nor I. The responsibility of the authorities on dry land ends at the shoreline. When the ship is at sea then the seamen are left with all of the responsibility and with all of the mistakes that that should have been corrected in port.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of August a British plane swooped over our heads before we were able to get everyone below deck, and in the evening two destroyers came along to accompany us to Haifa. On the 12<sup>th</sup>, we anchored in the bay outside the

harbor surrounded by British vessels of all kinds. A tugboat pulled alongside our ship and began distributing water to everyone. A launch of the Ha'Ogen Company also approached and gave out fresh bread. The commander of the launch recognized me and called out that I should take note of the bread. The bread was examined and we found sticks of dynamite, fuses and detonators hidden inside the loaves. There was also a note from Davidka Nameri that we were to be deported to Cyprus and we should resist as best we can. All Haifa will be there to support us. If nothing else worked we were to blow up the deportation ship but to avoid loss of life.

Meanwhile, the "Henrietta Szold" arrived with children from Greece. Samek (Shmuel Yanai) and Kippy (Aryeh Kaplan) were on this ship. The two ships were anchored side by side so we were able to exchange words with them. We decided that our ship would put up the main show of resistance and the ship with the children would resist weakly. On the other side of the pier were the "Ocean Vigour" and the "Empire Rival", the deportation ships that were each of 10,000 tons. The ships were surrounded by British paratroops. The Jewish announcer for the British called out over the intercom that the passengers were to leave their ships within ten minutes and come down to the pier. Otherwise, they would be removed from the ships by force. The immigrants answered by throwing objects at the soldiers and singing Hatikvah.

There was a real struggle between the immigrants and the soldiers that lasted for three hours. At one stage I decided to go over to the deportation ship so that I could see if there was an opportunity to blow it up in the harbor. On the pier the immigrants had to pass between two rows of soldiers who checked their baggage and they were also given a good dosing of DDT. I must have been under observation because as soon as I came onto the pier two soldiers jumped on me and pinned me to the ground. I was taken aside and a British police officer came and searched me very carefully. They found the detonators and fuses and called over a paratroop major in charge of the whole operation. An argument erupted between the two. The police officer was of the opinion that I could reveal to them the commander of the ship, and the major said that his orders were to take them all to Cyprus, except for the sick and the injured. There would be plenty of time to question me there. The major had his way and after photographing me from every angle I was sent in the direction of the deportation ships with the help of a few kicks in the behind.

I went down to the lowest hold on the ship, changed clothes and found a different cap to help hide my identity a bit, and then went to find Moshe. He looked as if he was in shock, and told me that when he saw that I had been arrested, he thought that someone had reported me, so threw away the detonator and the fuse that he had been carrying; Malka had done the same. She even threw £ 100.00 overboard. I felt like crying as I saw the Carmel Range recede in the distance. What else would these people have to endure before reaching the Promised Land?

We did not make a disturbance about getting off the ship in Cyprus because the physical condition of the immigrants was poor and they needed rest. They went from the ship to barges which brought them to land and then they mounted trucks which took them to the tent camp at Caraolos, near Famagusta. This camp had been set up in a hurry and lacked the most elementary facilities. The immigrants ran all over the camp and the soldiers were quite helpless and did not know what to do. Once again there was no choice but to organize the immigrants into groups with leaders and restore order. I approached the major who was camp commander and suggested that we cooperate. I told him that I was the commander of the immigrants. At that time I was 21 years old.

The "Henrietta Szold" arrived shortly after we did and we organized the life for all the immigrants irrespective of which ship they came in on. When the "Kaf Gimel Yordei Ha"sira" and the "Katriel Jaffe" also arrived, we decided that Kippy should be our representative to the British. Samek escaped from the camp to the interior of the island and started to organize how to get the rest of the Palyamniks out of the camp and back to Europe. In this he was helped by the Cypriot Communists who were willing to work against the British. At this point my personal life and my work got a bit entangled. Among the girls on the "Yagur" was a girl from England, but born in Germany. She had blue eyes and fair hair that caught my attention. Her name was Ruth. I had my eye on her during the whole voyage, but I kept my distance. Meanwhile, my good friend Yisrael Rotem had arrived at the camp with the Olim of the "Tel Chai". We lived together with the group of English Habonim but kept a low profile. We were waiting for the right moment to make an escape from the camp. There was a barbed wire fence all around the perimeter and there were watch towers every number of meters. We would each go out with a girl and a blanket so as not to arouse suspicion and check to see how alert the guards were and how often they changed their watches. When I first asked the girl to come with me she refused, but when I explained to her why I needed a partner she agreed to cooperate.

I was in the camp for two months when Shaul Aharonov and I were sent to accompany a group of children to the beach. On the return the children managed to cause a miscount. Shaul and I hid behind a rock until dark. At night we made our way to Famagusta where we met others who had also escaped from the camp. There were nine of us and we took a Greek ship to Greece and from there each one was sent to his station. Ruth arrived in Palestine in December of 1946, and was in training at Kfar Blum. I returned in April of 1947 and shortly afterwards, we were married.

#### **"Chaim Arlosoroff" – March 1947**

It took us two months to get from Famagusta to Marseilles. This period was one long adventure. It included a chase, an arrest and almost an arrest by the British. When I arrived at Marseilles I joined a group that was preparing the "Chaim Arlosoroff", a former American coast guard cutter. Gideon Shochat, Aryeh Eliav,



Nissan Levitan, Tzvi Katznelson, Gad Hilb and Musik (Moshe Gidron) were the other members of the group. The ship left from Marseilles for Copenhagen and we waited in Copenhagen for the immigrants to be concentrated at Trelleborg, Sweden.

The Danish police kept a watchful eye on the ship because the British had told them that the ship was meant to load women who would be taken and sold as prostitutes in South America. After a wait of a few days we sailed for the little port of Trelleborg in the south of Sweden, and there we waited for the Olim. A train came along and out poured a large group of young women dressed in furs and carrying suitcases. Years ago an agreement had been signed between Count Bernadotte and Himmler that saved the lives of hundreds of Jewish girls. These girls had grown and become young women and it was difficult to convince them that they could not take their suitcases. About 800 women boarded the ship. Gad Hilb was captain, and Lova Eliav was commander. Nissan Levitan, Miri and I were Lova's assistants and Musik was the Gideoni. In Italy we took on several soldiers who were on their way home; among them was Avraham Shavit.

We entered the port of Le Havre in order to take on fuel, water and food supplies and were arrested by the port authorities. Negotiations began among the higher echelons in Paris about freeing us. At some point it was decided to take on another 800 Olim at Taranto, Italy, so in the end we were carrying 1,400 Olim to Palestine. British planes had us in sight very soon and not long after destroyers came to surround us and keep us from reaching shore. A fight broke out between our ship and the British ships, but we managed to reach the coast at Bat Galim

We decided that some of the Palyamniks would go to Cyprus with the immigrants and others would try to escape to shore. Nisan Levitan and Avraham Shavit, who had been a soldier, and I were to try to get ashore. We hid in a small hold and waited until darkness. We came out at night, avoided the Arab watchmen guarding the ship, lowered ourselves into the water, and swam ashore. We asked some people I knew in Bat Galim to put us up for the night. In the morning my hosts telephoned to Davidka Nameri at Solel Boneh and he came and picked us up.

I was quite worn out from all my Aliya Bet adventures. In addition, because I was an experienced seaman I could see all the faulty things that were done and this bothered me. I asked for leave and was told that only someone who gets married gets leave. When my girlfriend Ruth, reached Palestine she contacted my mother and my sister and had become part of the family, so I said okay, I am getting married. I went to my sister at Maoz Chaim, lived there for six months and worked in the metal shop.

I would like to put in an aside at this point and explain that the men of the Palyam were a very close-knit group of men. Perhaps this was because they did not spend all their time together, and each one was in a different place and on a

different ship. However, when they did meet it was a very happy occasion even if the joy was of short duration. We talked of going to a kibbutz or establishing a kibbutz connected to work at sea.

At any rate, when the vacation was over I was called back and given command of Course 8 of the Palyam at Caesarea. We took part in several actions, including the blowing up of the radar at the Olga police station. In these actions we acted mostly as porters; and carried the explosives.

### **Naval Officers Course No. 5 – November 1947**

On the 29<sup>th</sup> November the UN decided on the division of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. At that same time there was an ongoing course at the Haifa Technion for naval officers. I was in charge of that course. The students were taught mathematics and navigation by the instructors of the Technion, and I and others taught them about the problems of Aliya Bet. There were 25 students and the course was to last for six months. At first, the students lived at Kibbutz Yagur and traveled to the Technion every day. Travel on this route became difficult as the Arabs attacked or stoned the buses as they passed through their town, and several reprisals were made against them by the Palyam group in the port. It was quite obvious that we were on the verge of war. Under these circumstances, it was difficult to sit and to study seamanship.

The commander of the Palyam was Samek and the commander of the Fourth Battalion of the Palmach to which the Palyam was affiliated was Yosefele Tabenkin. I gave both of them my estimate of the situation and suggested the men be assigned to more important jobs. They decided that the course should continue as scheduled. The truth is that I wanted to end the course because I thought that I could be more useful elsewhere. We continued the course and I tried to increase the motivation of the students. They were taken for various actions at night and often fell asleep during the day. One could only guess where they were or had done the previous night. I was of two minds because on the one hand I could understand and sympathize with what they did besides taking part in the course. On the other hand I wanted them to learn. They thought that I was just a pain in the ass.

One day near the end of December 1947 we arrived by bus at Yagur toward evening. I was living with my wife at Kiryat Amal, a bit further along the road, at my mother's house. Ruth was at the beginning of her pregnancy so I tried to get home every evening. I was delayed a bit in leaving Yagur, when I heard that Chaim ben Dor, a student at the course, was running around trying to borrow a good pair of shoes from someone. That only meant that he intended to go out on some "job". I made inquiries and found out that a reprisal was scheduled for that night against the nearby town of Balad-E-Sheikh, whose inhabitants had participated in the slaughter of the refinery workers.

Chaim was a friend of mine from Machanot Olim days and also had been with me in "F" Company of the Palmach. I liked him very much. He was a happy person, with a very good disposition, and wrote poetry as well. At one stage he left the Palmach and volunteered for the British Navy. He had left the navy and was at Kibbutz Manara when I convinced the company commander to accept him into the present course. I took Chaim aside and tried to convince him not to go out on this "job" and he promised me that he wouldn't go. The next morning I heard about the action at that town, and that there had been two casualties, Hanan Zelinger and Chaim ben Dor. I was so sorry that I did not stay at Yagur that night to make sure that he did not go out. A short time later his father was killed in the bombing of Jerusalem; that left his mother and a sick sister alone.

It was decided to transfer our dwellings from Yagur to an empty house in Haifa, on Geulah Street. I cannot vouch for the effectiveness of the studies. In Haifa there were battles with the Arabs. The special unit of the Palmach that was active in Haifa and the unit of the Palmach in the port area were very effective in breaking the morale of the Arabs. Every day more and more students disappeared and reappeared at the course, usually with smiles of satisfaction on their faces.

I took it upon myself to mobilize men for the Palyam. I sat in a room on Balfour Street at the corner of Nordau with a Navy man, Yehuda Helman, and we enrolled ex-British Navy men and ex-merchant marine men in the Palyam, as well as men who had been in the sea branches of Hapoel, the sea scouts, and fishermen. Other units also tried to get these types of individual to join them, so a lively competition developed. We were still a part of the Palmach, and I often organized for the Palyam, and the men were sent to help break the siege of Jerusalem. Many were wounded or killed in this battle.

### **Disbanding of the Naval Section and the creation of the Navy – March 1948**

At Company headquarters which were at Hadera, Yisrael Rosenbaum (Rotem) the second in command of the Company and I, were assigned to draw up a plan for a naval unit. This plan was delivered to Palmach headquarters in February, 1948. it was called "Plan for a Naval Palmach". We thought that the Palyam was a good kernel around which to build the Navy, but Ben Gurion did not want us there. He was afraid of giving us power. He feared the Achdut HaAvoda Party. The antagonism between Achdut HaAvodah and Mapai was very strong and command of the Palmach was in the hands of Achdut HaAvodah. He preferred to put a Tel Aviv teacher in command of the outfit, named Gershon Zak. He brought along all of his friends, Mapai loyalists, none of whom had any knowledge of the sea.

He sent emissaries to Europe and found seamen from the merchant marine and on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 1948 he created the Naval Department. Gershon Zak brought with him Avraham Ofer, Shimon Horn and Lova Eliav. Together with some foreign advisors, some men from the Israeli Merchant Marine and some

graduates of the British Navy he created the new Navy. Several weeks later the Navy headquarters command was established, bases were set up, men were mobilized and equipment purchased.

At first, the Palyam fought the establishment of the Navy in this manner. After all, the father of the idea of what the navy should be had been Zalman Perach. His idea was that we should have small coastal vessels with heavy fire power; this was what the Palyam had wanted to create. Ben Gurion had his own ideas however, and did not want the Palyam people or the Palyam concepts. At first the idea was to move the whole Palyam organization into the navy but then very many were sent to the Jerusalem front as I mentioned previously. A good number of those that remained were absorbed into the Navy.

The Command headquarters swelled rapidly in size. New departments were established. The transportation department was necessary so that officers could be given vehicles. A property department was established so that apartments could be distributed to the officers from "abandoned property". In a very short time there were thousands of men in the Navy. To sum it all up, Ben Gurion made a big mistake.