

Dafni Moshe (HaSailor)

Born in 1919 in Ukraine, made Aliya in 1920

Joined the Palmach in 1942

Joined the Palyam in 1945

This is the Way it Was

I came to the Land of Israel from the Ukraine in 1920 when I was one year old. I first lived in Jaffa and then in Tel Aviv. From my earliest days I was attracted to the sea. I read books about the sea and spent a great deal of time in the Tel Aviv Hapoel marina. At 14 I started to work at the Eastern Fair and when I had some free time, would spend it with the fellows who took care of the boats. An older group had its own boat and they adopted me as their deck boy. Any work they gave me, I did with joy. I later found out that these young men were also active in unloading new arrivals who came in 1934, illegally. This Aliya was still in its early beginnings. Even then I thought that that was what I would want to do.

I had a friend with whom I used to go to Jaffa. We would give a pence to an Arab who would take us there in a little boat. We would wander between the large ships and ask the captains if they would hire us to work on their ships. They told us that it wasn't possible for them to take us. There were also sailors who told us: "Don't be foolish, don't go to work on ships!" This didn't discourage us in the least.

After a period of training at Beer Tuvia and Mishmar HaSharon I went to work at Sdot Yam, which was at Kiryat Chaim in those days. Most of the time I worked as a stevedore in the port of Haifa. I was involved in retrieving the bodies of, and equipment from, the ship "Patria" after the terrible and tragic accident that occurred.

In 1940 I was among the members who went to the site of permanent settlement, at Caesarea. We underwent all the difficulties of a new settlement in those days. At Sdot Yam I worked in fishing.

I don't remember the actual date that the Kibbutz sent me to join the Palmach. I know that it was when "B" Company was being formed. We trained in the Carmel forests and among our officers was a British officer who taught us sabotage. There was no permanent conscription as yet, so that after a period of training we returned to our homes and waited to again be called upon. During this period the Italians bombed Tel Aviv for the second time. My mother was injured in that attack, and I had to return home to help support the family. I applied to the kibbutz, but the kibbutz was unable to offer any assistance at that time. The kibbutz said that if I was in the Palmach, then the Palmach should provide support. The Palmach could not help either, so I applied for leave so that I could work elsewhere. I thought I would go to work on a ship. That suited the Palmach fine (maybe they saw farther ahead) and I was given leave.

I obtained work on at sea and spent the next three years sailing on Israeli, English, and Norwegian vessels. It was my luck to have experienced situations in which my ship sank on three different occasions. The first time was because of mistakes in loading the vessel in Port Said. The ship capsized but no one was hurt. The second time was en route to Turkey, near the shore of northern Syria. We encountered a fierce storm and of the 21 crew members, five drowned. I was able to pull three survivors from the water, but two of them lost consciousness. Other crew members also went into the water and rescued men. The worse case was when our ship was hit by a German torpedo in the Atlantic, in the area of Central America. When a ship goes down, anyone close by in the water, is sucked under. It takes a very good swimmer to withstand the force of the suction. It was my luck that there were floating pieces of wood and doors that I was able to grab hold of. Then I found a ladder that I could sit on and row, and that brought me to a raft that had dropped off the ship. When I rowed close to the raft I saw that two seamen were already on it. I made them return to pick up other survivors. We picked up several more so that there were six of us on the raft.

The next morning the current drew us toward a group of small islands. At the same time, sharks swam around the raft for four days and four nights. Had we not picked up those three men, they would surely have been eaten by the sharks. On the fifth day we were picked up by an American coastal patrol vessel and taken to Trinidad. There we found 3 other members of the crew and that was all that was left of the original 47 men. I returned to Palestine several months later via the USA and England. I then continued to work on a British ship which was in the service of the British forces. I took part in the invasion of Southern France, on a ship that brought supplies and two army field medical stations.

In 1945, when I returned to Palestine, Yankale Salomon met me and invited me to return to the Palmach. I returned to the Palyam in October and went straight to the 5th course, as I had had so much experience at sea. After this course I was sent to the officers' course, which was at Yagur. During the course, we were called upon to help unload the ma'apilim from the "Hannah Senesh". We all gathered at Evron, where there were many people, not only Palyamniks. Tasks and duties were assigned. I was to command the force of those who would go onto the vessel and help the ma'apilim off and into the boats or water. Midnight came and the ship did not arrive, so we all went home. The next day we came again. We were told that since it was Christmas Day the British soldiers would not be as alert as usual. We once again arrived at the landing area and saw that we were no more than one platoon, of about 30 men. We sent some of them to bring a boat from the Nahariya branch of Hapoel. Such a boat could hold about 10 people, including its crew. The ship had two boats, each of which could take 6-7 people, and this is what there was with which to unload all of the ma'apilim. The ship came into the shore, as close as possible, and ran up onto a rock. There she rested and a strong north to south current was created about her.

The ship lowered its two boats into the water together with its accompanying crew and left us the boats. I was with the boat from Nahariya and we managed with great difficulty to get to the ship. Then someone yelled to us that one boat had capsized. We looked for and found several people in the water and we took care of them. We left the sailors to take care of themselves and swim to shore. When we reached shore and the operation commander heard what had happened, he gave the command to return to our base.

It is difficult to imagine our feelings about leaving the ma'apilim on the ship. We debated among ourselves whether we should disobey the order and go back to get the people, or whether to keep moving away from the shore. In the end we went back to Evron and not long after our arrival, the commander came along and asked for ten volunteers. These volunteers had to be aware that they could be arrested by the British if they were caught. I immediately volunteered and in a few seconds others came forward and we were ten. We wasted no time and started running back to the ship. When we got there we saw that the ma'apilim, themselves, had lowered a rope from the ship to the shore. Later I found out that among the group of young men that had laid out the rope was Yitzchak Arad (Tolka). I swam out to the ship, and Moshe Klain swam with me. The people on the ship stood there doing nothing. I told the other fellows to stand along the length of the line and help those who had trouble moving forward. I told Moshe to bring all the women first and, one at a time, told each one to grab me by the neck; I then lifted each one up and over the railing so that they could get to the rope ladder. At the ladder someone else helped them start the climb down. Some of the women were afraid and did not want to let go of me. I had to use force so that I could go on to the next person in line. I don't know how many I picked up and moved that way, or where I found the strength to do so, but it was done. On the whole, the ma'apilim were quiet and orderly.

When we had unloaded about half the ma'apilim, Yitzchak Sadeh and Natan Alterman appeared on the shore and I heard Benny Marshak yell: "Hurry, keep moving, come on down!". This galvanized them into moving along more quickly, and once all the ma'apilim were down, he yelled to us to lower all the baggage as well. The baggage had been arranged beforehand on the deck and we seamen stood in a row and passed everything along from one to the next. Some of the ma'apilim helped us and the job was done quickly. We were told to check the ship to see if someone or something had been overlooked but we found nothing. We got off the ship, saw that no one remained near the shore. and west to Yagur. I had the feeling that everyone we saw there was happy with us and the success of the operation. I, for one, thought that the ma'apilim had shown such initiative that even if we had not come, they would have managed to get off the ship by themselves. We just helped, and made it all a bit easier for them. That was the feeling that remained with me throughout all the years, concerning the whole Aliya Bet effort.

We completed the course for naval officers on 29 June, 1946. I happened to be in Yagur on "Black Saturday" and was arrested together with other members of the kibbutz and sent to Rafiah. I was kept there until September. When I was

released I applied to the Mosad for Aliya Bet as I knew that I was a candidate for being sent to Europe. I was sent to France together with a small group of other fellows on a Greek vessel. I was taken to the immigrant camp at St. Jerome and at this time I will not dwell on the experience of working with the survivors of the Holocaust, which was a fascinating experience in itself.

After a time in the camp I was assigned to the vessel "LaNegev". This was a small sailing vessel to which an engine of 150 hp had been added. The vessel had belonged to a Greek smuggler, who prepared it and gathered a crew to man it. He received his wages according to the number of passengers, so prepared room for 650. The bunks were tiered with 50 cm between them. One had to crawl to get into them and the width between the tiers was wide enough for only one person to pass through them at a time. Most of the ma'apilim were young and were organized into groups according to their movement affiliations. There were Revisionists and Partisans, and chalutzim originally from Germany who had spent the war years in England. There were also younger groups of children who were eventually sent to Kibbutz Lochamei HaGhettaot. I saw what material I would have and recalled what others, who had accompanied ma'apilim, had had to say about them. Putting all that together, I decided what I would do with them, considering the difficult conditions under which we would be traveling.

In the middle of January 1947 the ma'apilim arrived in trucks. When they saw the vessel they were dumbstruck. They stood stock still and we had to yell at them and push them forward. What really pushed them forward was the pressure of those that were in line behind them. We were on our way. Ephraim Talmon (Tauman), who could speak French and Italian and managed well with the crewmen, was with me, as well as well as a Gideoni (radio operator). After the ma'apilim were aboard I was dead tired and went to sleep. I had not slept long when Ephraim came to wake me, and told me that water was penetrating the vessel and that the pumps didn't work. He used the hand pumps and several young fellows helped him. Several hours later the engine pumps were fixed and worked steadily during the rest of the voyage. But, to give you an idea of what this vessel was like, I would point out that when it reached Haifa and sat idle for one day, the vessel sank to the bottom of the harbor.

Its speed was supposed to be 5 knots but during the night we did only 3 knots and arrived in Corsica. The hold ventilation didn't work and people were vomiting over each other. We turned the pipes on deck into the wind and this blew some air into the holds. I tried to restore a bit more order and routine into the life of the ma'apilim, and gave various groups certain jobs to do; giving out food, cleaning up and keeping order. Most people lay on their bunks and were silent for twenty hours of the day. They went up on deck by queue. Our plan was to reach Palestine within 7-8 days. We stopped in Sicily, at some village near Messina. Ephraim and the captain had some money and we needed to buy more food. We decided to send the boatswain, who seemed to be a trustworthy fellow, to buy us more food and we sent two sailors and a boy along with him in a boat. After waiting for them all night, the captain, one of the

machinists and I decided to look for them. It turned out that they had left the boat on shore and run away with the money. I decided to appeal to the ma'apilim and made rounds through all the holds and asked those who had brought money with them, to donate it to supply food for all. Perhaps because we had cooperated with them previously, the answer was very positive and I gathered hundreds of dollars. Ephraim and an engineer went down and came back with a large supply of food for the journey. We chose six of the young ma'apilim to help take the places of those of the crew who had left us. We continued on our voyage which lasted for another two weeks. Out of a total of 21 days of sailing, our radio did not work for 19 of them. The Gideoni managed to fix it only shortly before the end of our voyage. We were able to contact Tel Aviv and we headed for the shore of Tel Aviv without being discovered. We were instructed by Tel Aviv to be at Caesarea the following night.

We arrived at Caesarea but had the feeling that we had been followed. We made several diversionary attempts but then we were fired upon and boarded. A number of the ma'apilim joined in the fight, throwing cans of preserves at the English sailors but when I heard that several were injured I ordered that we stop all resistance. Nothing else happened during the night but when we took stock of our situation on the following morning, we found that one of the olim had been killed. He was one of those born in Germany who had found refuge in England during the war years. Our boat was tied to a destroyer and pulled to port. We entered port on the evening of February 9th. Everyone was deported to Cyprus. I returned to Palestine several days later and reported to the Mosad for Aliya Bet.

The British returned the "Enzo Sereni" to us and we had to take it back to Italy for repairs. I was chosen to be responsible for the voyage and for the repairs. In June, 1947, we left Palestine. Aside from the captain and the chief engineer, the rest of the crew were Palyamnikim. In Italy all the others went to their scattered locations and assignments while I and the chief engineer brought the ship to La Gratzia where there was a drydock. I worked there for six months, preparing the ship. I was there when the UN Declaration of 29th November was passed.

In the beginning of February, 1948, I was transferred to the "Yerushalayim Hanetzura" ("Besieged Jerusalem"). Yehudale Tzfati (of blessed memory) was the commander of the ship, Dani Sandlar was the Gideoni (radio operator), and there was also someone else. The captain was an old man, the chief engineer was an Austrian, and there were four other men in the crew. I and the old captain alternated on the bridge. The ma'apilim came aboard, and already on the first night a young woman had labor pains and was about to give birth. The nurse on board was helpless. The baby began to come out and I, with my great "experience" in the cow barn, acted as midwife. The birth was a long and difficult one. The afterbirth did not come out and that worried us. On the following day an older woman came along and applied pressure to the girl's abdomen, and then the placenta moved and came out, and everything was fine. Someone suggested calling the baby Galia, and that is her name to this day. The following day the rest of the ma'apilim arrived and among them was a

doctor and a couple who brought another baby hidden in their belongings. They thought that we would not allow them to bring a baby so they hid him. I and the chief engineer vacated our cabin for the two mothers. We did not have many young children on the ship but we made room on a rear deck where they could play.

The old captain knew what to do when he was on watch on the bridge, and he could draw a straight line on the map, but when it came to anything else he said: "Do as you see fit." So I took four more young men to help with the running of the vessel. As we approached the shores of Palestine a plane spotted us. The captain became frightened so I placed him among the ma'apilim. Destroyers appeared and I told the passengers not to resist. I, myself, left the bridge and went to the children's area. After what we had gone through on the "LaNegev", I thought that there was no reason to resist. I just did not want people to be hurt or humiliated as had occurred on the "LaNegev"

We were deported to Cyprus and I went along with all the ma'apilim, holding little Galia in my arms. This time I wanted to get back to Israel in a hurry. My wife was to give birth very soon and I hadn't been home for 8 months. I came back dressed in the clothes of a refugee. While still in the port I heard that I was the father of a daughter. After the War of Independence had begun I was again sent to Italy to bring back a ship that had been repaired. I returned to Israel and continued to work at the port.

When the war was over I worked as a seaman for a while longer. I attended an officer's course and worked as an officer on Naval vessels. I also worked at drilling tunnels, an occupation in which I had some training. In 1961 I moved to Moshav Sharona and built up a farm specializing in beef cattle. That is what I have continued doing to this day. Over the years I have become a father of a daughter and three sons, and grandfather of 16 grandchildren.