

Etzion Gershon

Nickname: Yisrael

Born 3rd January 1921 in Poland and made Aliya in 1934

Joined the Palmach in 1941

Joined the Gideon network in 1945

This is the Way it Was

I was the youngest of ten children in our family. My oldest sister was 20 years my senior, had left home before I was born, and came to Palestine as a pioneer in the Labor Battalion. My whole family came to Palestine with certificates when I was 13 years of age. We lived in Kiryat Chaim where I joined the Hashomer Hatzair youth movement. I was inducted into a communications unit of the Hagana.

In 1940 I joined Kibbutz Eretz Yisraeli Vav, (today, Kibbutz Ein Dor) which was then in training at Hadar, and from there I joined the Palmach. In 1941 I was sent to a course for squad leaders in communications. At the time, I was in "C" Company at Yagur, which was under the command of Uri Yaffe. In 1943 I went to a course for radio communications, after which I served as communications man for the "Tamar" network. In 1944 I was sent to a course for platoon leaders at Juara. My company went to Eilon and Hanita and by the time I finished the course, we went to the Jordan Valley. I received command of a platoon at Ashdot Yaakov and discontinued my work in communications. It was during this period that battalions were formed, and Uri Yaffe became the battalion commander and Moshe Netzer became commander of "C" Company. I suddenly received orders to go overseas as a Gideoni (radio operator) on a ship carrying Olim.

In October 1945, I sailed on the "Peter B" which reached the shore at Shefayim and unloaded 170 Olim. There were 3 Palmachnikim on the ship, Aya Pinkerfeld, Yoash Tzidon and myself. Between sailings I was in charge of camps of Olim near Marseilles and Brussels. Most of the Olim were from the youth movements and had been saved from the Incinerators. They were adamant in their desire to make Aliya. They had a vision, were disciplined, and ready to do anything to reach Palestine. I sailed as a Gideoni when we left from Savona and the commander of the ship was Zalman Perach. Gad Lasker was also with us. We carried 900 Olim, congestion was terrible, and conditions difficult. The ship was named the "Enzo Sereni". The radio transmitter was home-made. The British discovered us outside the territorial waters of Palestine and we were towed to Haifa accompanied by two destroyers. The transmitter was thrown into the sea, the crew mingled with the passengers, and all of us were sent to Atlit. After a two week stay we received certificates and were freed.

When I left Atlit I reported immediately to Aliya Bet headquarters and gave a full report of the trip. I went back to my kibbutz for a short vacation and two weeks later returned to Europe on a ship that brought cotton to Italy. We left the ship in

Venice and made our way to Milan. There was a club for Jewish soldiers there where we could also stay and sleep. Yehuda Arazi was in charge there and he sent me to La Spezia to prepare a ship, the "Fedeh" (later called the "Dov Hoz"). The commander of the ship was Eliezer Klain and I was the Gideoni. A rumor had spread that a group of Fascists intended to flee the country the same night that a large group of Olim was being carried on military transport to the ship, and the Italian police came to arrest them (the Fascists).

Shalhevet Freier and Yisrael Libertovsky, who were in charge of the convoy of Olim, were arrested by the British, but the Olim were first put aboard the ships "Dov Hoz" and "Eliahu Golomb" Negotiations began between the Olim, who were organized by Arazi and Moshe Rabinovitch, and the Italians, who were sorry to have been the cause of the trouble. They supported the Aliya of these poor refugees of the Holocaust with numbers tattooed on their arms. The Olim (about 1,000 in number) began a hunger strike which lasted 75 hours. The leaders of the Jewish community in Palestine also went on strike in sympathy with the Olim. At the same time, Harold Laski, the leader of the British Labor Party and member of Parliament, happened to be visiting in Italy. When he saw the suffering and distress of the Olim, he intervened on their behalf, would not agree to returning them to the camps, they were given certificates, and the two ships set sail for Palestine.

I remained in Italy and from there went to Belgium. I was placed in charge of a camp near Brussels, until the sailing of the next ship, "Hachayal Haivri" I had to prepare the Olim for boarding the ship and get them used to discipline and self control. When the ship was loaded with fuel and food, and sleeping arrangements completed, the Greek crew and captain refused to sail because they feared being caught by the British. We tried to calm their fears by telling them that several smaller boats would be waiting for us in the vicinity of Cyprus, and we would transfer the Olim to these boats. They bought the story and so we departed. In Palestine they knew nothing of what we had told the Greeks, so I made radio contact and reported what had happened.

From Palestine we were told that not much could be done because the British already knew of our coming. When we reached Cyprus and there was still no sign of the British, we arrested the Greek officers and confined them to their cabins. Only the chief engineer went about his work, but under heavy guard. We mobilized several of the younger Olim to help us guard the Greeks. We, the Palyamnikim, and some of the crew that supported us, continued to sail the ship. We arrived near Haifa before being detected.

All of the Olim were taken to Atlit, and we Israelis jumped into the water and made for another Aliya Bet ship tied up in the port. We were picked up by Solel Boneh people, who brought us dry clothes, and we left the port area as a part of their gang.

All of the Olim who arrived on subsequent Aliya Bet ships, were sent to Cyprus. After this voyage my time with the Palyam and Aliya Bet ended. I felt that these years were very important to me and that I had done something that was very worthwhile. I had learned to cope with difficult situations from which I also derived much satisfaction. In 1946 I returned to my kibbutz, which was preparing for settlement in the Lower Galilee.

I married Rina who was a radio operator under my command in "C" Company of the Palmach, and raised a family at Kibbutz Ein Dor, from which I was periodically called up for reserve duty. In 1947 I was called to command a platoon that held an outpost on the Tel Aviv–Jerusalem Road. I was located at Mikveh Yisrael and one of the squads was at the JNF house. I was thereafter commander of a communications platoon that was part of the 5th Battalion of the Harel Brigade. I took part in all the campaigns of the Brigade until 1949 after which I was placed in the reserves. In 1956 I took part in the Sinai Campaign as Battalion communications officer of the 9th Brigade, under the command of Avraham Yaffe, and was among those who captured Sharm-a-Sheikh. I live in Kibbutz Ein Dor with my wife, my children my grandchildren and great-grandchildren.