

My “Black Saturday”

Yehuda Ben-Tzur (Burstein)'s story of that memorable day



In 1943 I joined D Company of the Palmach. My training lasted for more than two years and our expenses were covered by working in the kibbutzim. This ending happened to coincide with the beginning of the active struggle against the British. The crux of the struggle involved immigration. Therefore, at the end of 1945 I decided to join the Palyam. Serving in the Palyam was for an indeterminate period of time. When I completed the basic course of boat commanders I went on to a higher course which took place at the end of June 1946 at kibbutz Sdot Yam (which we called Keisaria, the Hebrew pronunciation of the name of the ancient city of Caesarea and where the kibbutz is located; today Caesarea is a coastal suburban community). The commander of this course was Yitzik Landauer.

On the night of June 16, 1946, units of the Palmach blew up ten bridges which connected Palestine with neighboring countries. The British reaction to this act came soon after. At dawn of the morning of the 29th June General Barker put Operation Agatha into action. This was what became known in Israeli history as “Black Saturday”. The aim of this operation, as stated in his own words was: “To arrest as many members ... of the illegal armed organization – Palmach”

This operation entailed breaking into many kibbutzim with strong forces of the police and the army. Their aim was to seize weapons and to arrest as many members of the Palmach as possible. In these raids a good number of Palyamniks were in Maabarot and in Yagur and they were brought for interrogation to the Atlit Camp. From there they were sent for internment to the Rafiah camp which was established expressly for their internment. When that camp was being constructed it was declared that its purpose was to detain illegal immigrants there (The Aliya Bet vessel ‘Wedgwood’ was indeed at that time on her way to Palestine; she was captured on June 27, 1946). General Barker: “As a ship carrying illegal immigrants was in fact expected... the cover was good.”

On Saturday morning we in Sdot Yam started to receive bits of information about raids on Givat Chaim and Maabarot. At this stage we did not know how widespread the British operation was to cover. At 10:30 I was called to the commander's office. Yehuda Rotem (Hamburger) - in charge of security at Sdot Yam - was present. I was surprised to learn from him that a short time earlier a number of army and police vehicles had come to the gate of the kibbutz. The guard had refused to open the gate for them and had called the chief of security. When Yehuda arrived the police informed him that they are looking for Yehuda Burstein as they want him for questioning. I told him that we did not have anyone here by that name and they departed. I was taken aback by surprise. “Don't worry, we won't turn you in” he said. I answered: “How did they find out that I was here?”

Until lunch of that day I was still bothered by the question; “Why was the British Empire searching particularly for me?” That and other questions ran through my head. By the end on the meal I decided to disappear from Sdot Yam and I placed my request before Yitzik. He preferred that the course continue as planned but I insisted until I convinced him. He asked me what I intended to do and I asked him to lend me the felucca and I would take it to Neve Yam for a few days. He agreed and agreed to give me two fellows to accompany me, but they were to return to Sdot Yam immediately. My buddies Gad Asher and Ephraim Mitler gladly agreed to come with me. We set off

in a calm sea and enjoyed a pleasant sail of three hours to the small bay at Neve Yam which was full of swimmers. These were mostly high school kids from Tel Aviv who were spending a working holiday at the kibbutz. I got off at the beach and sought out the security chief of the kibbutz and inform him of my forced holiday, and told my friends to head back to Sdot Yam. The boat had become a big attraction for the kids and many of them climbed aboard it. My friends said that they were invited to a party that evening and asked if they could stay and return during the night. I saw no reason to object so they stayed a bit longer and at night I accompanied them to the beach and they took off. I thought that we would meet at Sdot Yam a few days later, but the British Empire thought otherwise.

On the morning of the following day it was announced in Neve Yam that the British Army had surrounded Sdot Yam and I realized that I would not be able to go back there. I considered my alternatives and decided to go to Yagur, as that was where the students of the 3rd Officer's Training Course were staying. I set out for Haifa the next morning and when I arrived there I waited a long time for a bus, but none came so I decided to walk. When I was on the outskirts of the city a bus passed by and then came to a sudden stop. In it I saw none other than my old friend Nissan Levitan, a member of the course I just mentioned. "Where do you think you are going", he asked. I answered that I was on my way to Yagur. "Are you crazy", he said. "The British Army is all over the place since last night, we have to beat it and get to Maabarot."

On the way we swapped stories of what had happened to each of us these past few days. Nissan told me that their course finished up the past Friday and on the 30th they were scheduled to go out on a final sailing. He took advantage of a short break and went to visit his girl in Ginosar. He was there when he heard of the search going on at Yagur. He also heard that all the men at Sdot Yam had been arrested and that Yigal Alon had told those members of the Palyam who had managed to stay at liberty to gather at Maabarot. There were some vessels coming in and help would be needed to unload the ma'apilim (illegal immigrants).

It was only after I arrived at Maabarot that I heard the details of the arrest of Gad and Ephraim. They returned to Sot Yam at about three in the morning. Two hours later the British raided the kibbutz and went through the kibbutz with bayonets drawn. All the men were rounded up and put into trucks. The ones who were caught in the Palyam campsite were treated to brutal handling. Yitzik tried to resist and was wounded. The men were driven to the Atlit camp while I myself was loafing in Neve Yam, just only about two km from the camp. The British asked all of the men they interrogated if they were Yehuda Burstein. After that the men were taken to Rafiah. They were kept there together with other detainees for several months. In the summary report of the British they report that 2 718 men were detained, among them some of the foremost leaders of the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Eretz Israel).

During the months of July and August 8 vessels of ma'apilim reached Palestine, but only the last one – 'Amiram Shochat' managed to break through the British blockade and reach shore. I had the privilege to be among those who helped to unload them on 16th August, near the shore of Sdot Yam. The Palmach command decided to spread us among the members of Moshav Herut in the Tel Mond area and a month went by before we returned to our bases at Sdot Yam and Maabarot.

Before returning to Sdot Yam I sidetracked to visit my family in Tel Aviv and it was then that I found out what had led the British to look for me at Sdot Yam. The police had been to my home the week before “Black Saturday” and when they asked my parents where I was they told them that I was a member of the kibbutz at Caesarea. My father Tsvi was arrested as a hostage and taken to the Latrun prison. He spent four days there and was then called for questioning. The first question was: “Where were you arrested?” He understood that the interrogator did not connect between him and his son so he said that he was arrested when he was going to a store in the neighborhood during a curfew. The interrogator apologized and he was set free. Under other circumstances I should have been angry with my parents for having told the British that I was a member of Kibbutz Sdot Yam but since the end result was that I got away, there was no reason to find fault. As I said, several hours after my visit to Tel Aviv, the British came to “talk” to me in Sdot Yam and I ran off to Neve Yam and saved myself a stay of several months in the Rafiah Camp.

In his final report of the Operation, General Barker declared that the arrests were to begin at 04:15 on June 29th. “It was the hour at which a number of wanted personnel were to be arrested... Most of the wanted ... were picked up .. There are still a few who have so far evaded capture”. The discovery of the weapons in Kibbutz Yagur was, according to the British, a very heavy blow to the Hagana.

“The objects of the operation did not include a search for arms in the settlements. Meshek Yagur, however, was believed to contain arms and ammunition ... The settlement was found to contain a number of arms caches and a large amount of arms and ammunition ...”.

I was glad to be among the few who managed to avoid arrest but I still do not have a clear answer as to why I was mentioned by name in the wanted list (a famous person on this list was Yitzhak Rabin; he was picked up at his home as he had been in a motorcycle accident and had a foot in a plaster cast). I can only assume that since I had three previous arrests during the years 1943-1945, one of which involved the British looking for concealed arms in Ramat HaKovesh, I became a target for arrest on this occasion.

Back to Caesarea: since 1995 I'm a resident of Caesarea; according to my Fishing Licence – the cover to my Palyam activities – I became a resident there in June 1947...



Yehuda Ben-tzur, Caesarea, revised Oct., 2009