

Arnon ,Yaakov

Born November 30th 1925 in Haifa

Joined the Palmach in 1941

Joined the British Army in 1943

Joined "The Gang" in Italy in 1946

This is the Way it Was

I was the oldest child of my parents, Yehoshua and Nechama. When I was one year old we moved to Jerusalem. In December, 1941 when I was 16, I volunteered for the Palmach and in the summer of 1942, started active service at Kibbutz Givat Chaim and Kfar Gileadi until December of that year.

In January, 1943, I volunteered for the British Army and after basic training at Sarafand, was assigned to "B Company" of the 1st Battalion. I served in Palestine and in Egypt, guarding camps most of the time. In September, 1944 when the Jewish Brigade was organized and assigned to the 8th Army, I became a member of the Brigade. From the political point of view, this unit was created and added to the 8th Army because the Jewish Agency was interested in having a Jewish unit actively fighting against the Nazis. We moved to Egypt and were stationed at a town called Bourg'-el-Arab, near Alexandria. In November, 1944, we sailed for Italy where we trained for going to the front. During March and April of that year we fought against a German Division on the Italian front.

In May 1945, when the war ended, I started to take part in the battle of surviving Jews who wanted to immigrate to Palestine. Since too many soldiers of the Brigade were active in helping Jews, the British decided to move our unit to Belgium and Holland, in Western Europe. The British saw that even then the Brigade was active in more ways than they knew, and decided to send the Brigade back to Palestine and disband it. The Hagana knew that this was going to happen so took steps to avoid having all the soldiers sent back.

It was decided to have 130 soldiers remain in Europe, and 130 immigrants took their identities and were brought to Palestine as "soldiers" by the British. I was one of the "doubles" who remained in Europe, and was sent together with Amos Fink, Zorik Dayan and Yoske Lamberski to Italy, where we were to report to the Mosad for Aliya Bet.

We arrived in Italy just as the "La Spezia" affair had come to an end. Yehuda Arazi and Ada Sereni were in charge there. We joined with Laske Biger, David Salomon, David Shechner, Abu Horowitz, Yochanan Zaid, Sioma Gefen, Avrum Shavit, Moti Hod, Avraham Yaffe and Uri Horowitz and a group of immigrants who had volunteered to help with Aliya Bet. My first job as a driver was to haul supplies and immigrants from the towns to the ships. Afterwards, when a camp was organized for the waiting Olim near the river Magra in north Italy, not far from La Spezia, I joined Chaim Chayat, who commanded the camp, and assisted him.

We would bring immigrants from a train to the camp, and there they would be housed and fed until they left on one of the Hagana ships. There would be between 200 to 300 immigrants in each shipment. They did not stay at this camp for more than a few days.

We also helped the Palyamniks get the immigrants into boats, and from the boats onto ships. At times this work could be dangerous, if we were working at night or the sea was rough. The water was always close to freezing. In the fall of 1946 I was sent by Yehuda Arazi to take command of the camp near the town of Tradate in northern Italy. This was in an isolated location and had formerly been a school. At the time I arrived, approximately 800 grownups and a number of children were staying there.

The immigrants were grouped according to their movement affiliations. No ship appeared ready to sail in the near future, and people lived from day to day. Some were tense, and others apathetic. It was known, however, that if someone made it to this camp, he would get onto a ship sooner or later. The topic of conversation was generally about when a ship would appear. I decided that there had to be more activity in the camp, and do away with the apathy and lethargy. One had to remember that life had not been simple for these people. They had spent years of wandering and deprivation, and the discipline of camps, and that had taken much of their initiative from them. They needed encouragement and incentives That is what I tried to give them.

I initiated discussions about problems of the movement they belonged to, and we had discussions about Palestine and life in the kibbutz. I also instituted room checks so that they would keep them neat and we also had roll call. In the winter of 1946 we received orders to move everyone to Metaponto, which was in the far south of Italy. In early 1947 we left by train on a dreary ride that lasted nearly 24 hours, until we arrived at our destination. The location was an isolated spot on the shore near the sea. There were only a few miserable shacks and once more there was waiting and waiting, but under conditions worse than those at Tradate.

At the end of February the "Ulva" arrived from Sweden, and it was now called the "Chaim Arlosoroff". There were already several hundred Olim on the ship, mostly young girls, and it was under the command of Artur, Lova Eliav. The ship had been ordered to Metaponto so that it could also take the Tradate Olim aboard. Yehuda wanted me to remain at the camp but I was interested in getting back to Palestine to see my mother. I boarded the ship together with the Olim, and after several days of sailing we arrived at Bat Galim. There we put up a fierce fight against the British but in the end, were all sent to Cyprus

It was only a short time after I got to Cyprus, that I joined the group of other Palyamniks who were active in Aliya Bet. After some time we were taken to Haifa, and put on a bus to Atlit, While the bus was making a slow turn, I utilized the opportunity to make a swift departure. I then reported to Davidka Nameri in

the Solel Boneh building. He was then in charge of the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Palestine. After a short stay in the country, I was asked to return to Italy by Yehda Arazi, who also happened to be in Palestine. He wanted me to work in Aliya Daled (falsifying papers and sending immigrants to Palestine under assumed identities).

I returned to Israel in October 1948 and joined the Army. I fulfilled a number of dif positions, the last of which was as an officer in the headquarters of the Southern Command. I was finally discharged from IDF in October, 1970 and went to work for the Aircraft Industry. I served as Director of Personnel and Director of the Quality Assurance Department. From 1988 to 2000 I worked for the "Azriel Fund" of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), where I assisted in the field of immigration to Israel.