

Ben-Yami, Menachem

Born in 1926 in Warsaw, Poland

Joined the Bricha in Europe in 1946

Joined a course for Gideonim in Marseilles

Made Aliya as a Gideoni on the "Moledet" in March 1947

This is the Way it Was

I was born in Warsaw, Poland, to Zionist parents and learned Israeli-style Hebrew when I was still in kindergarten. With the outbreak of World War II, I was able to study for another two years in a clandestine study group. In the Ghetto, I worked as an errand boy, as a load carrier and as a carpenter's helper. My parents, my sister and many of my relatives were murdered in the Holocaust.

In the spring of 1943 I escaped from the Warsaw Ghetto and two months later I joined the partisans. These were mainly Jews who had been among the fighters of the Ghetto of Warsaw. One year after I joined, as the front got closer to us, the unit that I was with headed eastwards to the forest of Bielovyezha and those of us who survived an ambush by Polish fascists, joined the Soviet partisans of the Kapusta Division. Soon after, we crossed the front lines and I joined the 492nd Infantry Regiment of the Red Army's 199th Division.

We fought on the Second White Russian Front and after a short period of training I was placed as a sapper in the scouts platoon of our regiment. In March, 1945, in the battle for Gdansk, I was seriously injured and brought over to a hospital in Russia.

Towards Palestine

In August 1945, after five months of recuperation, I was transferred to the Polish Army at my request. I was discharged by the Poles and joined a group from the "Dror" movement that was preparing for aliya. In December of 1945 we crossed borders until we came to a refugee camp in Bavaria, and while there I acted as a leader of the group. I was brought into the activities of the "Bricha" (clandestine aliya), and was active in receiving "Transports" of refugees who had been smuggled from the British Zone to the American one. In the autumn of 1946 it became my turn for aliya and I was sent to the camp of Jewish clandestine immigrants at Salon, near Marseilles, France. There, I was sworn into the "Hagana" and placed in a course of marine radio operators, which had begun in Marseilles.

The Course

The aim of the course was to prepare a group of gideonim from among the olim (immigrants from among the Holocaust survivors) and the Machal (volunteers from the USA, UK, and Canada). We studied radio communication in Hebrew and in English and other means of communication at sea. We also learned

about international wireless procedures and special codes that were used by the Hagana, as well as the basics of radio-technician's skills. This, in case emergency repairs became necessary. Furthermore, we were given the regular Palmach (Hagana's commando units) military training. The course participants came from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Great Britain and the United States. Several of them had been soldiers in WW II. The instructors were all Israelis – Palyamniks (members of the Palmach's naval unit), from the Mossad for Aliya Bet (Administration for clandestine aliya) and from the Jewish Brigade in the British Army.

Sailing

In March 1947 I was chosen to be the first of the students at the course to sail as gideoni on a ship with immigrants. She was an 800-ton steamship "San Filippo", re-named "Moledet". She had been built at the end of the 19th Century and served as a coaster carrying cargo and up to 15 passengers in the fiords of Norway. In France, she was modified so that she could carry up to 1,600 passengers. After she was made ready, we sailed to Italy to pick up the olim. The commander was a Palyamnik called Fabby Gaber. The ship's captain was a veteran Spanish seaman, a refugee from Franco's regime, and the crew had several Spanish sailors and three more Israelis, two Palyamniks and the other from the Jewish Brigade. I had a very old spark-radio model with a limited range, and a small transmitter hand-made by the Israeli technician, Ronny Rubinstein. It was with this contraption that I maintained contact with Marseilles and with Palestine. At the beginning, when we set out from France, our signals that reached Palestine were very weak.

"Moledet" anchored offshore a small harbour near Metaponto in Southern Italy. It took us two nights to load the olim. They came alongside in rubber boats that carried 10 -15 each trip. The boats were pulled back and forth along a cable that had been stretched from the ship to a fixed point on shore. There was an accident when one boat lost the air that inflated it, and several of the olim fell into the sea. We managed to haul all of them onto the ship. One pair had heavy packs on their backs and created a very difficult situation. I shinnied down a rope to sea level and cut the packs from their backs, so that we could pull them up. In all, we picked up almost 1600 olim.

On the morning after the second night we set sail for Palestine. At first we were able to make 7-8 knots, but as the coal bunker emptied, the center of gravity of the ship moved higher and the ship started to heel over to one side. The more she tilted, the less way she made. The angle became so steep, that at one stage the captain ordered all the life rafts on deck to be thrown overboard. This did not prove to be of much help, and soon we continued to lose our stability.

Our next step was to send all people who were on deck, including those who were seasick, down into the lowest holds. If the ship tilted to port, the people were moved to starboard, and vice versa. If there was a sudden change in the

wind and she suddenly leaned to the side where the olim were concentrated, – the imbalance was increased and people were scared out of their wits. To our luck the sea was calm, which made matters a bit easier. Things however grew worse from day to day and we could only make progress at about 3 knots.

As we now had less coal and it was farther from the boilers we needed extra volunteers from among the olim to help us feed the boilers. When we were about 60 nautical miles from Haifa, water started to penetrate the engine room and the coal bunkers. Soon the boilers were flooded and the engine died. “Moledet” remained adrift and just tossed on the waves. We had a short conference and decided to send out an SOS as the water kept rising. I was for sending this out immediately because of the limited range of our spark-radio, and we had met very few ships en route. On the other hand, I was quite certain that the British naval wireless station in Haifa would hear our signal. We had to remember that there were 1600 passengers on board and we had no rafts or life boats.

The British come

As I sent out the SOS message, within minutes two destroyers appeared on the horizon. In less than a half-hour they came alongside “Moledet”, one on each side. In the meantime a group of the huskiest of the olim stood next to the radio room. Their job was to prevent the British from reaching it until all records and equipment had been thrown overboard, including our secret codes.

One of the destroyers tied up alongside Moledet and a group of sailors came on board with a mobile pump to pump the water from the holds. At the same time they started moving all women and children to the deck of the destroyer. The second destroyer kept a distance of some 100 meters, and we could clearly see the soldiers in helmets with clubs in their hands lined up on deck. I radioed the Tel Aviv end that I was closing down and, after tying weights to all the clandestine stuff and the little transmitter, threw it all overboard. Soon afterwards our ship was being towed eastwards.

In the hideout

As we approached Haifa it was time to move into the hideout we had prepared in the bilges under the lowest rung of sleeping shelves. There was myself and two others, who had accompanied the ma’apilim, who were to hide there until the ma’apilim had been removed and transferred to the deportation ship. The space was very small and the only way we could all fit in was to sit in a cramped position. Soon after we took our places inside, we heard the noise of battle between the British and the ma’apilim. The British then used tear gas which being heavier than air, sank down into the bilge. We almost choked to death, but what saved us was a small crack in the ceiling of our hideout at which we took turns to get some air. For several hours, we took turns breathing from the crack until the air in the hold cleared.

We remained in that little hideout for two days. On the first day we heard people moving about outside and couldn't tell if they were Jews (who were supposed to pick us up), Arabs or British. I suggested that one of us goes out to try to make contact. Since one of those who were with me was AWOL from the British Army, and the other was a Palyamnik with a file at the British police, I was the only one left to do it. At first I studied at night the distance of the ship from the breakwater and the movements of the two watchmen on board. Then I took note of the frequency of the movement of the naval searchlights and of the depth charges that were detonated at regular intervals. On the second night I gathered all my possessions into a small bundle and tied them to a life-belt. I then slid down a rope into the water and swam to the breakwater without being seen.

Under arrest

I dressed in my wet clothes and walked along the breakwater towards the HaOgen Boatyards, as instructed by my friends. However, before I had even gone 100 meters I was accosted by two Arab policemen who took me to the police station in the port. I was surprised by the great number of police who were in the port area. Only later I learned that two days earlier there had been an explosion at the Refineries and a curfew was now in effect. I was thought to be a Jewish terrorist and was not sure that I convinced the British officer who questioned me that I was only a new immigrant who had managed to avoid being sent to Cyprus. That same day a Jewish police-officer came to see me and all I said to him was, "Notify them that I was caught." Soon after, a representative of the Mossad for Aliya Bet came, who knew that we had failed to make a getaway from our hideout. I told him "go around and talk and sing in Yiddish; and the two would come out". That is what happened.

"Burned"

One day later I found myself in the Atlit detention camp. I was cooped up there for 4½ months. This was despite the special way the Hagana had of smuggling needed Palyamniks and foreign seamen out off the camp. I was told that I was 'burned' because the British had not been convinced that I was not a terrorist, were keeping a watchful eye on me inside the camp, and my disappearance may lead them to the escape route. I accepted my fate with good grace, and every Friday would help in "packaging" those to be sneaked out of the camp in the large tin containers, in which Sabbath bread was brought to the camp. In August, 1947 I was smuggled out myself, and at the olim center in Bat Galim was given a false identity card, and a note to the Hamashbir super-store to supply me with khaki clothes, work shoes and an Israeli style cap. I walked out of that store a free man breathing the fresh air of the Land of Israel.

Another 53 years

I joined the "Hatzofim" kibbutz at Rehovot - a group, sitting there while waiting to establish the Kibbutz Maagan Michael. I worked as a stevedore in the Tel Aviv harbour, and since the fighting started – in an underground ammunition plant. In

the spring of 1948, I joined the Navy and, until the Port of Haifa was captured, taught signaling at Giv'at Olga. In the navy I served as a wireless operator on board "South Africa" (S-29), sailed to France as communications officer on board the K-20 frigate, and was in-charge of communications of the "little flotilla" of patrol boats. Next, I was put in charge of a set of courses in wireless and signaling and, completed my 2-years naval service as the commander of the central Naval wireless station, located under the Stella Maris lighthouse in Haifa.

After my discharge from the Navy, I went to work as a fisherman on board Maagan Michael's vessel 'Tzofia', of which, later, I became a skipper. In 1956, I had become a family man and moved to Kibbutz Sa'ar, where I skippered their boats, "Shomria" and "Saar", and, later, became a fishing technologist at the Haifa Sea Fisheries Research Station. During the years 1960-1963 I worked in Eritrea as advisor and Master fisherman. When on reserve duty in the Navy, I commanded an armed fishing vessel: during the "Kadesh" operation I commanded the "Saar", one of the two vessels that whisked out Jews from Port Said, while during other spells of reserve service in periods of war and peace, until after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, I commanded the "Carmel" and "Ophir". After that I commanded the "Shachaf", a vessel used for mine detection. During the years 1967 – 1975, I was chief of the Fishing Technology Unit of the Ministry of Agriculture, until I joined the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations as an expert in fishing technology. In 1982, I returned to Israel and back to my work in fishing technology until I retired in 1985. Since then I work as a private consultant, lecturer, and writer on fisheries. I have written several books on this topic and numerous articles, and carry an Honorary Doctorate from the Technical University of Kaliningrad, Russia, which specializes in the sciences of fisheries and fishing technology.