

Cohen Menachem (“Churchill”) (of blessed memory)

Born in 1924 in Tel Aviv

Joined the Palmach in 1942

Joined the Palyam in 1943

Died 4 November 1981

Written by: Avigail Cohen

This is the Way it Was

Menachem was born in the spring of 1924 in Tel Aviv. His mother, Yefiah Kles, was from Rishon Letzion and his father, Yehuda Cohen, had served in the Jewish Legion in World War I. In 1934 the men of the Jewish Legion founded Moshav Avichail and Menachem, his sister, and parents went there to live. In 1938, when he was 14, Menachem received field training with light weapons within the framework of the regional branch of the Hagana. He served in communications and in guard duty at the Moshav, as this was the beginning of the 1936-39 riots. In 1942 he joined “C” Company of the Palmach which was camped at Kibbutz Eilon and Kibbutz Hanita. He participated in a course for squad leaders and at the end of the same year volunteered for the first nautical course of the Palmach at Caesarea. This course lasted for several months and was difficult because it was winter and the weather was terrible. As a graduate of the course he became a small boat commander and handler experienced in all kinds of weather.

He then returned to “C” Company and continued his squad leaders' course for a year. With that behind him he returned to Caesarea and became an instructor for the 4th course, in which various platoons of the Palmach participated. In 1943, when the Naval Company of the Palmach was established, Menachem found his niche.

As was the custom in the Palmach, members worked half-time in various places in order to support themselves during the other half, when they trained. The men of the Naval Company worked in the port of Haifa, as stevedores, fishermen, or in other capacities. For six months in 1944 Menachem went to work on the freighter, “Amos”, as a deckhand, along with several others. This gave him invaluable experience.

When he came off the “Amos” he took the second naval officers training course, to accompany Ma’apilim,. The subjects included seamanship, economics, and social and organizational aspects of the work. It was during this year that the nautical platoon became a Company – Palyam.

In 1946 Menachem infiltrated his way into Europe, together with other Palyamnikim. They went on a small vessel and after numerous adventures, arrived in Italy, where vessels were being prepared to carry Ma’apilim to the Promised Land. His meeting with survivors of the Holocaust made a very deep impression upon him, which remained with him for the rest of his life.

In October, 1946 he sailed on the “Bracha Fuld”, which carried 806 Ma’apilim. The voyage was plagued with problems and in the end was caught, and the

Ma'apilim deported to Cyprus. In the camps Menachem taught those capable, to use light weapons and Kapap (a method of stick fighting). Two months later he managed to get back to Palestine and again traveled to Italy. In April, 1947, he sailed to Palestine on the "Shaar Yashuv", which carried 768 Ma'apilim. When close to the shores of Palestine the ship was discovered by the British and fighting took place in which Menachem was wounded and suffered hemorrhaging from blows received from the British. The British took the Ma'apilim to Cyprus but Menachem was hidden and taken off the ship by members of the Hagana after the British had departed.

That same year he again went to Europe, this time to France with false papers; with the aim of helping prepare the "Exodus 1947" for its voyage. He was arrested in Piraeus by the British, together with other friends, and brought back to Palestine two months later. He was questioned by British intelligence, received a heavy fine, and was forbidden to leave the country. When he had been in Italy he bought an accordion with some of his pocket money, and managed somehow to bring it to Palestine. It was with him on all of his voyages and he would often play for the crew or passengers to while away the time.

Since he had been 'burned' by the British and could not easily find a way to go abroad, he enrolled to study music at the Academy of Music in Tel Aviv. At the same time he worked for a unit involved in installations of the Electric Company. That same year he also found time to marry and to start a family. When fighting started shortly before the foundation of the State, Mernachem returned to active duty.

From the Palyam to the Navy

1948 – Menachem joined the Navy the moment it came into existence. He was in the crew of the S-29 (the "South Africa") as second-in-command with the rank of lieutenant. He served on this vessel until the end of the War of Independence. After that he served on other vessels. He was commander of the P-39, the P-35 and the S-45.

In 1950 he was second-in-command of the K-32, with the rank of lieutenant-commander when it arrived in Israel, and was later captain of that ship. He was finally permitted a break for studies to conclude his matriculation examinations. Nine months later he was appointed Chief of Operations with the rank of commander.

In 1953, after a lapse of eight months, he returned to the K-32 as its captain. He served at the same time as second-in-command of Fleet One (Frigates) for several months. In January, 1956, he flew to England to observe and study the repair of destroyers that we had purchased from them. In March 1956 he put the destroyer "Eilat" into active service as its captain. That same year, in the Kadesh Campaign, the "Eilat" took an active role in capturing the Egyptian warship, "Ibrahim-Al-Awal". It put a boarding party onto the ship and towed it to Haifa. His last mission with the "Eilat" was sailing to France, for training purposes. In 1958 he participated in the advanced course for command officers and was then assigned to H.Q. as chief of Department Five.

In 1959, Menachem and his family went to Eilat where he served as commander of the Red Sea area. During this period the frigates were sold to Sri Lanka and Menachem supervised the complicated transaction.

In 1963 he was put in command of the destroyers' fleet ("Eilat", "Yafo" and "Haifa") and now held the rank of Captain. He was discharged in 1967.

During the Six-Day War he commanded the ship "Dolphin" when it was to make a test-run in the Sharm-a-Sheikh Strait. For years, Menachem continued to serve the country in various capacities and was away from home for extended periods. He never discussed details.

In 1969 Menachem received the civilian rank of captain, and served on commercial vessels for a number of years, though not continuously. He also worked for the Israel Oceanographic and Limnological Research Institute , and mapped the shores of Israel as well.

He was on a commercial cruise when he heard of the sinking of the destroyer "Eilat".

In his last years Menachem spent more time with his true love, music. He learned to play the cello and achieved a respectable standard of play. He died on November 4, 1981 when only 57 years of age.