

Gaver, Fabi

Born 1920 in Vienna, Austria
 Came to Palestine in June 1938
 Joined the Palmach in 1941
 Joined the Palyam in 1945

This is the Way it Was**Childhood in Vienna**

I grew up in Vienna in a Zionist, orthodox household, and as a boy did training exercises at Maccabi. I was also a member of the Young Maccabi-Gordonia youth movement. I studied in a secondary school after which I started to study to be a dental technician. In June, 1938, after the conquest of Austria by the Nazis, I left Austria with a group of friends from Young Maccabi, and traveled by train to Greece. We sailed from Greece to Palestine on one of the illegal vessels.

In Palestine, Before joining the Palmach: 1938 – 1941

Once in Palestine, I went with a group of friends to Kfar Hachoshim for training. After a short period, I enlisted as a ghaffir (a Jewish policeman, part of the British police force) to protect the Jewish settlements in the vicinity of the kibbutz on the outskirts of Nazareth. When the group finished its training, it moved to Hadera and lived as an independent unit for three years. After that we joined together with another group that had been living at Ein Harod, and in 1945 created a new settlement in Palestine – Kvutzat Dovrat

The period of the Palmach

In the spring of 1941 I went to a squad leader's course run by the Hagana at Juara and in August of 1941 joined the Palmach's 'C' Company. In 1942 I finished a course in scouting and sabotage, at Mishmar HaEmek. After that I spent time in training in Ein Sara near Nahariya, at Kibbutz HaZorea and at Kibbutz Ashdot Yaakov. In 1943 I completed a course for platoon leaders at Kibbutz Dalia and in 1945, volunteered for the Palyam.

The period of the Palyam

I participated in 4th naval course at Caesarea and the 2nd course for naval officers, in Haifa. In the spring of 1946 I went abroad for the first time. This was a voyage full of adventure which is told in the book "Ulva", written by Lova Eliav. I was responsible for two ships of Olim: "Arba Cheruyot" [the "Four Freedoms"] in the summer of 1946, and "Moledet" in the spring of 1947. We took 1,100 Olim on the 'Four Freedoms'. With me on this voyage, were Peter Hoffman and the Gideoni Eli Zohar. This ship was special for several reasons. This was the first ship in which it was certain that if caught by the British, the Olim would be deported to Cyprus. It was also the first ship that was ordered to resist deportation from Palestine with force. These conditions gave the Olim added motivation to obey the instructions of the Palyamniks, and they hid below deck

despite the difficult conditions. They also trained in defense with gusto. An American journalist named Claire Neikind accompanied us on this voyage.

The ship sailed along the coast of North Africa during very hot weather. There was a lack of water, the food was dry, and the air in the hold was foul. Despite these harsh conditions, morale was high. The ship was discovered by a British plane when it was about twenty miles from Tel Aviv. We tried to get to shore as fast as we could, but British destroyers appeared from the north and intercepted us in territorial waters. We refused their demand that we surrender so they fired several shots over the ship and drenched us with water from hoses. Our artillery consisted of cans of food, eating utensils and cups, and we threw it all at the British. There was one very dangerous moment when a destroyer came alongside and tore out a piece of the deck with its anchor. After that a group of British soldiers managed to jump onto our ship.

We managed to overcome them and corner them at one side of the ship. In further action they rammed the ship again, managed to wreck our steering mechanism, and the ship went out of control. The fight lasted about three hours and when it was over, our ship was towed to Haifa and all of the Olim and crew were deported to Cyprus. After spending several weeks in Cyprus I managed to escape while we were out swimming one day. I was taken aboard a small Israeli fishing boat which waited for escaping Palyamniks. There were eight Palyamniks and a Greek sailor on this trip, and we headed back to Europe where we were needed for further voyages with Olim. The eight were: Yisrael Rotem, Yisrael Auerbuch, Eliezer Versh, Shaul Aharonov, Peter Hoffman, Eli Zohar, Yoske Lazarovsky and me.

In the bay of Athens, on the night of Yom Kippur, we were arrested by a Greek coast guard vessel. We were jailed in Piraeus for three weeks but were given privileged conditions, thanks to the efforts of the 'Mosad for Aliya Bet'. Once freed, we fled to Italy on a Greek boat. Because of a severe storm, we had to take shelter at one of the northernmost Greek islands, opposite Albania. When local police came to pay a call, we told them that we were British emissaries of the Joint Distribution Committee and worked in refugee camps in Italy. We were saved by a fishing vessel after our own boat sank during the storm and all our documents were lost. The officer in charge of the police believed our story and tried to arrange a meeting with a British citizen living on the island. We excused ourselves because of our miserable appearance and said that we could not shame the British Empire by appearing in public in such terrible shape. This officer still wanted to be helpful so he came next morning accompanied by the Englishman. While we all played sick, we sent Yoske Lazarovsky, our best English speaker, to meet the Englishman on deck. Yoske had a good accent and was convincing enough to pass superficial scrutiny. Meanwhile the sea had calmed sufficiently for us to set sail once again, and make for Italy with all possible speed.

In the spring of 1947 I received command of another ship of Olim, the "Moledet". "Moledet" had been organized to take on Olim in Marseilles. There was suspicion, however, that the ship would be impounded by local authorities at the request of the British, so it sailed for Corsica and from there to Italy. In Italy it took on 1,500 Olim. "Moledet" was an old ship. It had been built to carry general cargo in the fiords of Norway, and not for sailing on the open sea. Soon after we had taken the passengers aboard, the ship heeled over to one side and we started the voyage at an angle of twelve degrees. By the time we finished, we were at an angle of twenty degrees. The pumps stopped working, and the diesel engine died. All of this happened near Cyprus. To our great luck the sea at that moment was extremely calm, and had it not been so, any small wave might have caused us to capsize.

I had to send out an SOS and a British destroyer appeared and towed us to Haifa. From there we were deported to Cyprus via the deportation ships. We had prepared for resistance on this ship, but since we had asked the British for help, our resistance was passive at best. Once again I found myself a prisoner in Cyprus and once again I escaped after several weeks. This time I managed to sneak onto a British ship which brought Olim back to Palestine, who had received certificates.

After a short stay in Palestine I sailed legally on a passenger ship to Italy. I used a false passport which had been made by the Mosad for Aliya Bet. There was no resemblance at all, in the photo of the fat man with dark eyes and dark hair, and me. To my luck, the check-out in the port of Haifa was not too stringent. On the other hand, the reception clerk in the hotel in Genoa was very surprised and even mentioned that the very same passport had come into his hands from a different person only a few weeks previously. I did not remain at that hotel and said that I didn't like the room; I went on to Milan in a big hurry.

I illegally crossed the border into France where my next job was to run a camp for Olim in Lyon. After that I went to Marseilles and was part of a group that prepared ships and Olim for Aliya. From the end of 1947 and until May of 1948 I was in Tunis. My job there was to find suitable sites for ships to anchor and where to keep immigrants until they boarded ship. I also trained young people from the youth movements in the use of revolvers, and in "kapap" [a form of hand-to-hand combat with sticks]. We also prepared defenses for the local ghetto in case of attack.

Another story connected with camps of Olim, has to do with the camp at Magenta, near Milan. Produce and all kinds of foodstuffs were kept at this camp, and ships that left with Olim received supplies from this camp. Weapons were also stored here that had been brought by Jewish (Israeli) soldiers in the British army. There were between 30 and 40 young people living at the camp in that period who had been through the Holocaust and were waiting their turn for Aliya. Many of them had been in the Gordonia movement in Poland before the war.

The Palyamniks also lived at the camp until they were called to command or otherwise work in connection with one of the ships. In the summer of 1946 the British Army decided to return all soldiers, of the Jewish Brigade and other auxiliary units of Jews in the British Army, back to Palestine. There were many men of the Hagana in these units, who were stationed at the time, in Belgium and Holland. Among them were a number of known figures, such as Chaim Laskov and Ben Artzi.

A convoy of British Army trucks carrying weapons left a base in the north and traveled south in an attempt to bring these weapons to the Mediterranean. The weapons would then be shipped in any manner possible, for Hagana use in Palestine. This convoy of weapons was no secret and a chase began as soon as the convoy left base. A number of trucks were caught, but about 7 or 8 trucks [called 3 tonners, their legal load limit] managed to get to our camp in Magenta.

As I was in charge of the camp, I was informed of the coming of these trucks. I organized people to help unload the trucks and prepared the approach to the hideout where the weapons were to be stored. We also had to prepare other places of storage because of the large number of weapons that were being brought. We worked continuously day and night, to unload the trucks, and as soon as we finished one, it left our camp and returned north by any route that the driver saw fit to take. Two trucks had not finish unloading when Italian police arrived at the gate of the camp the next morning. They said that they wanted to come in and make out a report on trucks that had committed a driving offense. I denied that any truck had come to the camp on the previous day or days. Since a dirt road led to the camp, the policemen said that the truck tracks led them there. I said that that they were the tracks of a trailer which we used when we bought foodstuffs in town or for other purposes.

The police did not give up easily and neither did I, and the argument became harsher as it progressed. The police insisted that I open the gate and I was adamant that we had sick people in the camp and they needed rest and quiet. If a bunch of uniformed police entered the grounds it would remind them of what they had gone through in the past, and they would have recurrences of nightmares and other troubles. That would place the government of Italy at fault for a worsening of their condition. I threatened that I would issue a complaint of their brutal behavior to Commandante Alyato [Commander Aliya]. The Italians were impressed by the ring of the words and the nobility of the office, and asked that I not complain, left the scene, and once again there was peace and quiet.

The Epilogue of the story

In the summer of 1946 we packed everything as directed by Yehuda Arazi and he took care of shipping everything to Palestine. In August of 1948, three months after the Declaration of the State, I returned to Israel on one of the ships of Olim. This time the Olim came to an independent country, didn't have to hide and didn't have to fight in order to enter. I returned home to Kibbutz Dovrat which, at

the time, was an army outpost. In February, 1950, I left the kibbutz, settled in Tel Aviv, and was employed by the Ministry of Defense. In 1954 I married Rachel and we had two sons, Yaron and Amos. I was sent to Italy by the Ministry of Defense during the years 1959 to 1962 and to France from 1970 to 1974. There were also other short periods when I was sent abroad.

Today I am a retiree and a grandfather of eight grandchildren: Ido, Yahel, Tal, Yuval, Lior, Elad, Shachar and Nimrod. Ido, the oldest, is a graduate of the course for naval officer's and serves as a officer in the Navy.