

Kalbersh Benjamin (Benny)  
Born 1920 in Georgia, USA  
Volunteered for Aliya Bet in France, 1946  
Gideoni on Hagana Ship "Geulah"

### **This is the Way it Was**

I was a member of the Hashomer Hatzair Youth Movement from the age of 12 and when I was 20 years old I went to the movement's training farm in Hightstown NJ to prepare myself for Aliya. With the outbreak of WW II and the closing of the doors to Palestine I remained at the farm until I enlisted in the US Army in 1943.

I was in communications in the army. I received training in radio and electronics and as a radar technician and the end of the war with Japan found me on the west coast of the US. Although the war was already over I was sent to a small island from which the bomber had taken off that carried the atom bomb. I spent six long months on that little island before returning to the mainland and receiving my army discharge.

As soon as I became a free man I went to the communal house where other members of my Kibbutz were living and waiting for their Aliya to Palestine. Other members of my kibbutz were also looking for a similar route. We were told that if we could get to France then the Hagana would put us aboard an Aliya Bet ship to Palestine. We left on a ship that had carried American troops to Europe during the war, and fairly soon we were in Paris. An emissary of the Mosad for Aliya Bet met us there and we went south with him to an immigrant camp not far from Marseilles. Our first meeting with the remnants of the Holocaust was at the La Ciotat camp. We did not stay there very long, but were transferred to another camp near Marseilles.

There were many immigrants en route to southern France and it was necessary to build more camps in order to house and feed and care for them. We Americans were co-opted to help in the work of building and running the camps. I was chosen to run a small camp that contained couples in which the woman was pregnant. There were about 40 couples in this camp, and every morning we had roll call and I would give a little speech in my American-Yiddish. My biggest job was to prevent them from leaving the camp and selling artifacts on the black market, as this would have complicated our standing with the authorities.

We were always waiting for the news that our ship, the one that would take us to Palestine, had docked and was waiting for us to board. One night we did get word that our ship was in and we should prepare to leave. I did not board that ship because I was told that a course for Gideonim was to start very soon and I was a candidate to take part in it. Before the start of the course I was sworn into

the Hagana in the traditional way, receiving a bible and a gun. The course was run under the cover of being a Jewish boy's school.

There were three German Jews who had made it over to England during the early years of the Nazi rise to power, and they were from the Habonim Youth Movement. There were three other Jews from Poland, and me. Our commander was a soldier of the Jewish Brigade, named Chanoch Beltzen, and the chief instructor was Menachem Keller of Kibbutz Kfar Gileadi. The course lasted for several months and when it was over some of the students left almost immediately on immigrant ships and went to work. I was left behind once again because they wanted me to set up a small studio that would build emergency radio sets. Menachem Keller was in charge of this operation and the technical man was a Scottish Jew named Sam Gold.

I worked at this project for several months until word finally came that two ships were being prepared to sail on the west coast of France. One of these was the "Paducah", later renamed "Geulah", on which Menachem Keller and I were to sail. The other ship was the "Northland" which was renamed "The Jewish State". Gadi Shochat from Kfar Gileadi was in charge of getting these ships ready to sail. Most of the crew on these two ships was young Jewish fellows from the USA. I am also from the US, but in the eyes of the other Americans I was considered one of the shu-shu boys, as the men of the Mosad for Aliya Bet were called. The captain of the ship was Rudy Pazert – a very nice person. The commander of the ship was the well-known Palyamnik, Moka Limon.

We sailed towards the end of the summer of 1947. After we passed through the Straits of Gibraltar the destroyers of His Majesty's navy were already there waiting for us and they accompanied us to the Dardanelles. Our first stop was the port of Varna in Bulgaria. We took aboard supplies there and also went ashore and toured the city. We picked up the immigrants at Burgas, Bulgaria. All this was done with the knowledge of the government. At night they arrived in a long line of trucks; they were out of the trucks and aboard the ship and down in the holds in a very short time. Everything went off in a very orderly and calm and efficient atmosphere.

We set off again, this time for Palestine. Once again, as we passed through the Dardanelles and into the Mediterranean Sea, the British destroyers were there to accompany us to the territorial waters of Palestine. While en route we exploited the good radio speakers that we had to broadcast programs of songs and speeches, etc. to the passengers. We also received orders en route to transfer our passengers (1300 souls) to "The Jewish State" and to head back to Europe. Since this seemed to us too dangerous an operation (for the immigrants) we decided to ignore it and to continue to Haifa.

I believe, but I am not certain, that we received orders not to resist the British if they were to take possession of the ship, but we did prepare our weapons of

defense in any case; cans of preserves, nuts and bolts, etc. Before the soldiers boarded our vessel I destroyed our radio and went "underground" with the rest of the Palyamnikim. I did keep with me a small portable hand radio transmitter with which I kept in contact with headquarters and let them know what was happening on the ship.

We arrived at Haifa harbor and were so close and yet so far! Menachem and I went below deck to a small hold that usually contained water and the idea was to wait there for a day or two and then when workers would board the ship we would join them and make our way out. However, I hate closed spaces and could not remain there so I went back on deck and was taken with the other immigrants to Cyprus. Our commander, Moka also was taken to Cyprus.

I spent two weeks in Cyprus and received a certificate in the name of someone else when immigrants from the "Knesset Israel" received theirs. We were taken first to Atlit and then to Kiryat Shmuel and all in all, after about one month in these camps I was finally a free man in the Land of Israel. The whole journey had taken me about 13 months. I was given some khaki clothes and some money and then made my way to Kibbutz Hatzor, where the rest of my friends had gathered to create our kibbutz. In Hatzor I worked in agriculture for many years and then taught biology in our high school. Since 1979 I have worked in the archives of our kibbutz.