

**Karni, Avraham (Rickman)**

Nickname: Geshar

Born in 1917 in Kosice, Czechoslovakia

Came to Palestine in 1935

Joined the Palmach in 1942

Joined the Palyam in 1943

**This is the Way it Was**

I made Aliya to Palestine with my parents in 1935, when I was 18 years old. My brother and sister were already here when we came, so we moved into their large apartment in Tel Aviv. A year before coming to Palestine I cut short my studies and started working in a company that dealt with electricity. I wanted to have a trade before coming to Palestine so that I would be able to find work more easily. I remained with my family in Tel Aviv until 1938 and then joined the third Israeli kibbutz, Kibbutz Gimel, which was in the Moshava of Rishon Letzion at that time.

In 1942 I joined "E" Company of the Palmach, which was being mobilized at that time in the southern part of the country and whose commander was Avraham Negev. The platoon commander was my friend Chaim Zinger (Ronen) whom I knew from activities of the Hagana in Rishon. I became one of his squad leaders. (I had done the squad leaders' course the year before at Juara). When it was decided that the Palmach should combine work with training I went together with my company to Givat Brenner. Two new platoons were formed there, and I was appointed commander of one of them. When I heard of the formation of the Naval Company of the Palmach, which was to become active in "illegal immigration", this intrigued me and I wanted to take part in this work.

I was called to take part in the first course for small boat commanders (I forget the date that it took place) which was held in Caesarea. The course commander was Yaakov Salomon and the instructors were Shmuel Tankus, Dov (Berchik) Magen and Moka Limon. The course was quite difficult since it took place during the winter months. We practiced boat handling and learned some theoretical stuff as well. When the course was over, all those who took part returned to the units from which they came. In 1943 I went to a course for platoon leaders, after which I returned to "E" Company for a short time.

When the Naval Company was formed, a permanent camp was established at Caesarea. Some of those who had participated in earlier courses were called upon to be instructors, and to also help prepare more men of the Palmach to participate in unloading Olim (immigrants) from ships to arrive shortly. I was active as an instructor and as commander in these courses. In the Mosad for Aliya Bet it was decided to give a number of those who had taken part in the small boat commanders course, the opportunity to participate in a naval officer's course as well. I took part in this course which was held in the School for Naval Officers, next to the Haifa Technion. I think that it took place at the end of 1944

and finished in early 1945. This was a very intensive course but we lacked practical experience.

The Jewish-English shipping company, Atid, agreed to hire a number of Palmachniks as seamen on its vessel, "Amos", to give them practical experience. A number of Palmachniks went to work for the company and did the work of ordinary seamen. Practical experience was important and I also got to work on that ship for several months.

I had to get to Italy by roundabout means so I got to Ismailia in the guise of a British soldier, and from there, got a lift on a vessel that brought Italian prisoners back to Italy. Jewish soldiers in the British Army took five Palmachniks onto the ship with them and hid them in a previously prepared place. When the ship reached Bari, they were able to disappear and contact friends.

From Bari, we traveled north with a convoy of Israeli drivers in the British army. We left the convoy at Milan and went to the refugee camp of Terdeta nearby. It was there that I first encountered survivors of the Holocaust and where I remained to help in organizing and running the daily life of the camp. We prepared them for the trip to Palestine and for life on the ship. We organized them into groups with leaders responsible for them. We gave them lectures about life in Palestine and in the kibbutzim, although they were already organized into various Zionist movements. After a short time in Italy I discovered that it was easy for me to learn to speak Italian. Perhaps this was because I had studied Latin in school for many years.

From that time on, I helped prepare ships to take the Olim to Palestine. I would help prepare the bunks and make necessary arrangements for drinking, washing, etc. Much of the physical work was done by Italian laborers and when all was completed, the ship would sail to the rendezvous point to pick up the Olim. This was usually done at night at some small fishing wharf, and very often the fishermen and their boats would help us load the Olim onto the ships. As most readers know, a large number of these ships were intercepted by the British and we had trouble getting the Italian crews back to Italy. One way of getting around this problem which we used often, was to send two ships, one large and one small. They would meet at an appointed spot not far from Cyprus and the passengers of the small vessel would transfer to the large one, and the crew of the large vessel would transfer to the small one, which would then head back to its point of origin. I made the voyage on the small vessel "Albertina" three times, so that it could return the Italian crews home. Finally, I was chosen to sail all the way to Israel with the Olim on the ship "Susanna", which we called the "Shoshana". I was very glad to get back as I had not seen my wife for a long time, and had left a three month-old boy at home who now celebrated his first birthday and did not yet know his father.

After we had begun the voyage there were a number of mishaps, but we finally reached Metaponto. There, with the help of fishermen and Palmachniks, we loaded 650 Olim onto the ship during the night and at daybreak were ready to

sail. The sea was calm and things went smoothly until we were in the area of Crete. A storm broke out and we were forced to seek shelter in a small bay. A day went by, and the following day we again set sail in a northerly direction. As we approached the island of Rhodes we met the "Albertina". She transferred her 160 Olim to our ship and the Italian crew went over to her; that is, all but the captain who refused to leave the ship, with so many people aboard. The ship headed south, as if to Egypt, trying to mislead the British Navy. At night she veered sharply north and made for the shore near Nitzanim. It was early in the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> of March, 1947. The waves were so high that the boats on shore could not get to us. It was decided to raise anchor and come into shore and beach the vessel. The Italian captain did not like this decision because of damage that the vessel might suffer, but he accepted it. The ship went in and was stranded about 50 meters offshore. We strung a cable from ship to shore to facilitate unloading the Olim. There were Palmachniks on shore and others in the area, to help as well.

A ship of the British Navy discovered us but could not approach us. It came as close as it could, and contacted British ground forces which sealed off the area. Most of the new Olim were successfully moved from the area to surrounding kibbutzim. A fire was lit on the shore and everyone there threw his ID card into it so that the British found it difficult to identify Israelis from Olim. Anyone whom the British asked, would answer. "I am a Jew from the Land of Israel." The British did catch a few of the Olim who had not managed to reach the kibbutzim, as well as the Israelis who accompanied them. They were brought to Haifa and shipped to Cyprus. We who had accompanied the Olim, checked first that all had left the ship and then we also abandoned it. I brought the captain to a safe place, and then set off for Beer Tuvia and home. My wife was told that there was a chance that I might soon arrive home. The kibbutz had not heard of the ship's arrival, so when I walked through the gate they were surprised to see me.

Soon, the whole country heard of the arrival of the ship and newsmen and photographers flocked to the shore at Nitzanim. The people of the Mosad for Aliya Bet and Palyam headquarters were happy at having succeeded in breaking the British blockade. The name of the ship was changed to the "Shabtai Luzinski", someone who had been active in Aliya Bet in Italy and was killed in an automobile accident there.

After having been overseas for about a year I was given a short vacation which I spent with my family. I then continued as an instructor at Caesarea for other courses and again went to Italy. This time my object was to bring Czech weapons located at Shivnik in Yugoslavia. We did not want to put all the weapons into one ship, for security reasons. We reached Tel Aviv with the weapons and then spent three nights unloading the ship. It carried rifles, ammunition, Bren guns, etc., all of Czech manufacture. I then returned to Yugoslavia and came back with another load. This took only one night to unload as the British army had already left the country.

That was to be my last trip and after that I remained in Israel as a Navy man. I worked in Operations under the command of Avraham Zakai and instructed a group of French volunteers in landing operations. I also worked in the Intelligence Department.

I was discharged at the end of 1949 and returned to the kibbutz that had already moved to its permanent site of settlement at Hatzor, near Gan Yavneh. That is where I still live. I am active in the economic and social life of the kibbutz and feel quite satisfied with what I have accomplished in my life, together with my family.