

Keller, Menachem

Nickname: Yotam

Born in 1912 in Rosh Pina

Joined those working in Aliya Bet in 1934

This is the Way it Was

When I finished school in Rosh Pina I left with a group of friends to look for work and/ or perhaps to learn a trade. I had a relative in Tel Aviv who ran a small foundry so I started to work there and to learn that trade mostly because of a lack of other choices. While working there I joined the Noar HaOved youth movement, and after that, the nautical section of Hapoel Tel Aviv. Every Saturday we would go down to the Yarkon River and learn how to sail boats. At the same time, I was also inducted into the Hagana. This was the period when the port of Tel Aviv was being built. My social contacts brought me into contact with Simcha Even Zohar, who was in charge of the radio operator sector. At one stage, he suggested that I join a kibbutz and I had a number of references. Since 1937 I have been a member of Kibbutz Kfar Gileadi and have worked there as a driver for the Egged Bus Company, in which the kibbutz has shares.

The vessel "Velos", my first contact with a ship of Olim.

When I was in the Nautical Section of Hapoel in 1934, a number of us were gathered together one evening and taken to Hadera by bus. From the buses we went down to the seashore barefoot. Someone called to me in the dark, "Menachem, come here quickly." I saw that a boatload of Olim had mounted a wave and come down onto a rock. We went to the rock and helped them down and to the shore, and they hugged and kissed us. They had arrived on the vessel "Velos" that had set out from Piraeus. We could not free the boat from the rocks, and were unable to take more passengers from the vessel. It went back out to sea and the next day entered Tel Aviv harbour, where the other Olim were unloaded.

I become a radio operator

Another source of income was at Sdom, on the southern end of the Dead Sea. A number of kibbutzim had people working at the factory there, as a source of income. I was sent to Sdom where I met a very nice group of men. Among them was Yona Yarchi from Kibbutz Beit Hashita. There was a radio transmitter at Sdom and he was its operator. This station was the only means the plant had for contact with the rest of the country. It was time for Yona to return to his kibbutz and since he had taught me the Morse code, he suggested that I relieve him. He had also taught David Cornil the Morse code. Yona himself had taken part in one of the first courses at Achuzat, in the Haifa area of the Carmel. Shifra Krauze of Kfar Gileadi had also attended that course. Yona was the son of Y. H. Ravnitzky who had edited the "Book Of Legends" together with CH. N. Bialik. Bialik in his introduction to the book mentioned Yona as "Red-headed Yona". He fell in the Sinai Campaign.

In my years as a radio operator I came to know a good many commanders. When my tour of duty at Sdom was over, Even Zohar gave me the task of

setting up a radio station at Kfar Gileadi. The job was done the same week, and the station has been in operation ever since.

Course for radio operators in Marseilles

I was soon given another task. I was sent to Marseilles and instructed a group of young people, survivors of the Holocaust, into becoming radio operators, so that they could serve as Gideonim on ships of Olim.

Our technicians

I was also sent to Paris as a radio operator and while there met the emissary who was a member of Kibbutz Neot Mordechai. He told me that he had a good radio technician, a Scotsman with a kilt. We met and talked and soon saw that he was a real expert. We went to a market with him and bought spare parts for everything and set up a station. Sam Gold became devoted to our cause and later married the daughter of Shaul Meirov. The fellows whom I met and worked with were really great. They liked me and I liked them. The chief technician of the Gideon network was Munia Adam. If someone wanted to enter his room they had to call, in a series of unusual notes.

The vessel “Paducah”, Burgas, February 1947

The second ship which left from Bulgaria was the “Geula”, on which I had already worked as Gideoni (radio operator). I had other connections with work for Aliya Bet as well.

The “Arlosorov”

This ship was anchored in a river near a small town in France. There was a bridge across the river which would rise at regular intervals to let ships pass farther up the river. It would close, to let passengers and vehicles use the bridge to connect the two sides of the town. We were on the ship which was already loaded with Olim and on the upper side of the river from the bridge. We were ready to sail but the bridge operator wanted to lower it and we would not have been able to leave. I had to restrain him by force so that our ship could leave and move on down river. In the meantime, a long line of cars and pedestrians waited in the streets for the bridge to come down so that they could cross to the other side. The Olim on the ship sang Hatikva as we left the town behind us and headed out to sea.

The “Tiger Hill”

I received a message to get to Atlit with my transmitter as we were expecting to unload Olim from the “Tiger Hill”. I was in a boat and signalled the ship that she can start unloading her passengers. Before we knew what was happening our boat started to fill with water. Our commander, Davidka, ordered us to return to sea and await further orders. The Olim who had gone ashore, scattered. At midnight we went to Eliyahu Golomb’s house in Tel-Aviv. Eliyahu thought a moment and said: “There is word that a ship is in Beirut loaded with passengers and ready to sail, but the crew has disappeared. Tomorrow we will send Menachem there, and if they have a radioman with them, they will be able to manage.” So, Eliyahu told me and my buddy Eliyahu Kovarsky to go to Beirut and find Yosef Fain there, and get hold of a battery so that we could make contact with all parties.

We got to Beirut and bought a receiver. Fain bought us blankets so that we could get some sleep on the ship "Persola", which was carrying a load of Olim and was anchored in Beirut harbor. While we were on the ship, it received orders to sail and we were given an azimuth so that we would encounter the "Tiger Hill" at sea. I went to check on the transmitting station and saw that there were two Arab guards there with Mausers. Both of them had cases of seasickness. I told the ship's captain to sail in the direction I gave him, and if he would do so, he could get rid of his passengers and go home. Three hours later we arrived where we were supposed to be, but saw nothing. Suddenly he gave a shout, "Tiger Hill".

The Olim on the "Persola" wanted to see what accommodations they would have on the "Tiger Hill" before they would leave their ship. The only accommodations that could be offered was 'standing room only'. At that time a French ship crossed our path and asked us to identify ourselves, but we thought better not to reply to them, and the French ship continued on its way. As night fell we continued on our journey, and during the night approached the shore of Palestine, in the vicinity of Ashkelon of today.

Catriel Yaffe was the captain of this ship. It was dawn even before we were able to lower the first boat. A British coastal vessel headed toward us, so Catriel turned our ship around and headed back to sea. The British fired at us and two people were killed. We received new orders: "When night descends head right into the shore of Tel Aviv with everyone on board" (more than 1,000 people). The "Tiger Hill" came ashore near 'the Red House' where many Tel Avivians waited for it. The Olim descended and dispersed quickly into the crowd. We had descended even earlier with the transmitter as well. No one was waiting for us on the shore where we landed, near Sde Dov (the Tel Aviv Airport) of today. We phoned headquarters and soon friends came and took us to a safe place. We were tired and hungry. We sat at one table to eat and the whole headquarters staff, including my girlfriend Dvora, sat at the next table. I was so covered with dirt and coal dust that she could hardly recognize me. When she did she let out a yell: "It's Menachem!" That same night we heard on the radio that the Second World War had begun.

The Foundry

One day an envoy of the Hagana showed up at Kfar Gileadi and asked for the secretary, Ita. "We need Menachem for the foundry", they told her. This was shortly after my romance with Sara, my future wife, had begun. There were problems at the foundry with the manager, the well known Shkolnick. It was he who once said to me in Yiddish: "He talks too much, we have to outtalk him". I was then taken to Slavin, a big shot in the Military Industry, and that only took a few minutes. I was soon on my way to Kvutzat Shiller, and stood in a small shack hardly big enough for two people. Near it was a much larger shack which was "The Foundry".

I worked like mad there for three months and sold them a large wheel from a motor, that I had taken apart and brought from Kfar Gileadi. They gave me 1000 Lirat for it (at that time this was a huge sum of money). Back I went to

Kfar Gileadi and from there to Beirut to buy aluminium from the remnants of German planes, which had been shot down there.

A transmitter in Beirut

The technician, Tzvika Beit Din came to me with a wireless transmitter built into a radio. I was told to go to Tel Aviv. I was given a British uniform in Tel Aviv and told to go to Beirut, where the wireless operator Rivkaleh would be waiting for the apparatus. The apparatus would be in a kit bag and I would also meet Yerucham Cohen and Akiva Fainshtein there. In the train station of Haifa there happened to be a company of British soldiers waiting for the train to Beirut. Finally the train came in and I got on as if I was one of the company. I sat down next to an MP. I arrived in Beirut about midnight dressed as a British soldier with a transmitter in my kit bag and no one met me. Later I learned that someone had waited until midnight and then left I found a wagon driver and told him to take me to the University. I recalled someone saying that Akiva lived near the University. I knocked on the first house that I came to and Akiva Fainshtein opened the door! I immediately removed my clothes because masquerading as a soldier was a dangerous game. This was shortly after Lord Moyne had been killed by members of the Etzel underground. The next day I went to our transmitting station and where was that located? – above the British Consulate. There was no better location for our antenna than the British Union Jack. I returned home on foot; I crossed the border near Kibbutz Dan and I am not certain now whether this episode belongs in a collection of Palyam stories or infantry stories.

With ambulances to Teheran

I am not certain if there is still someone remaining who can tell this story. During the war, an organization called “The V League” was formed. The purpose of this organization was to help Russia in its fight against the Nazis. Its people raised money, most of it in Australia, and with this money three ambulances were built in Palestine. Each ambulance contained a tent and each could become a self-contained field hospital. The only route to Russia at that time was via Teheran. American machines and equipment went through the Persian Gulf where they would be met in port by Russian Army drivers. The three ambulances went to Teheran in 3 separate convoys and in each one there was a member of Kfar Gileadi: Dov Kroll was in the first, and Grisha Sheinkman in the second. Then, my turn came. There was a transmitting station in the house of a lawyer in Bagdad, but the transmitter was broken. Davidka Nameri met me on the street one day and said: “Go on one of the ambulances and fix the transmitter.”

This was really an unforgettable experience; to travel all the way across the Syrian Desert and through Bagdad, crossing high mountains covered with snow. In our convoy there was one truck full of clothes that had been contributed by Americans. I and Yehoshua Glorman drove this truck. We had a letter with us asking anyone to give us any help we would need. The truck overturned once and we decided to leave everything right there. However, we saw a large truck coming towards us from the opposite direction, and when the people in it saw the Star of David on our vehicle they kissed us. We

understood that they were our kind, so we put everything from our truck into theirs.

When the ceremony of handing over the ambulances to the Red Army was to take place all the big shots of the army were there. This was a gift of the Jewish settlement in Palestine to the Red Army that was fighting the Nazis. I spent one week there. Inside the ambulances there was a great deal of medicines and equipment and it was difficult to open the door of the truck. I gave a mighty kick which opened the door, and opened a vein in my foot. This entitled me to a glass of vodka and to treatment by a Russian doctor.

From “Basqueland” to the “Geulah”

I boarded a ship which was harbored in a Basque port. We prepared the ship there to pick up passengers and when the ship was ready we sailed through all of the Mediterranean and the Dardanelles and ended up with the Palyam in Bulgaria. This was the “Geulah,” with which I sailed from Bulgaria to Haifa. The voyage was a very difficult one, but the Olim took all the difficulties with a good measure of stoicism and understanding.

After the founding of the State of Israel

I returned to Kibbutz Kfar Gileadi and worked as auto-electrician, as a bookkeeper in our guest house, and also in the quarry.

Menachem and Sara Keller raised 3 daughters and one son. Their son was killed when his helicopter was shot down during the first Lebanese War. He left a wife and two children. Menachem and Sara have five grandchildren and two great grandchildren.