

**Nachshon, Moshe** (Lipson)  
 Born in 1926 in Jerusalem  
 Joined the Palmach in 1943  
 Joined the Palyam in 1945

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

I was born in Jerusalem in 1926. When I was two years old we moved to Bat Galim, Haifa and was where I made contact with the sea. In August of 1943 I joined the Palmach and was assigned to "A" Company. This was a company from Kadoorie (the agricultural high school) who were stationed at Kinneret. During the years 1944 -1945 I went to a squad leaders' course and a mukhtars' course. We trained in surveying Arab villages and had long treks.

In October, 1945, I participated as a squad leader in the break-in at the Atlit Detention Camp, and the freeing of the Ma'apilim there. This operation had a resounding effect in Palestine and throughout the whole world. It was clear that our main struggle would be in bringing the Remnant of the Holocaust to Palestine. I volunteered for the 5<sup>th</sup> course for small boat commanders of the Palyam and immediately following that, the 3<sup>rd</sup> course for naval officers. At the same time I took part in retaliation strikes; in unloading refugees from vessels that broke through the British blockade, in blowing up bridges, the attack on the Givat Olga Police Station, and the break-in at the paratroop camp at Kfar Vitkin. We were involved in participating in as many of these acts against the British as possible.

In February, 1946, I volunteered for the nautical sabotage unit under the command of Yochai ben Nun, a boyhood friend from Jerusalem and Bat Galim. My first act of sabotage was with Izzie Rahav, and the aim was to blow up the deportation ship "Empire Rival". This operation was executed in August, 1946. At the end of that year I went to a course for platoon leaders. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of February, during that course, Izzie and I were called upon to sabotage landing craft and coastal patrol boats in the port of Haifa. The success of that mission led the British to increase security for their vessels, so that we could not get near them. They would sail out to sea when darkness fell. From time to time a ship would come into the port area and tie up to a wharf in order to take on fuel. We solved that problem by tying a mine to the wharf with a detonator that could be activated from a distance. This was a rather complicated operation. The British found out what we had done and neutralized the mines. Palmach headquarters then decided to move sabotage operations from the limits of Palestine, and I was sent to Cyprus on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April to take command of sabotage operations in place of Yochai. He had gone out earlier and had been caught and expelled from Cyprus. Before he left, he managed to teach Yossale Dror the entire bible of sabotage and demolition on one foot.

The night that I arrived in Cyprus, Yossale left, and was already on his way to blowing up the "Ocean Vigour". He succeeded in carrying out the assignment but was caught and imprisoned in Famagusta.

We were lucky and also had the opportunity to blow up the "Empire Rival". I gave Bezalel Drori the opportunity to do the job. He had returned from Cyprus with those Olim who arrived on the monthly quota. The "Empire Rival" was blown up after all the Olim had left the ship, and was on its way from Haifa to Port Said. These two explosions caused the discontinuing of immigration from Cyprus, so I had to wait until the British renewed shipments. This period of waiting was spent in digging a tunnel so that we could move people into and out of the camps. We also helped get Yossale Dror out of prison and took care of the American volunteers and Spaniards who were in the camps.

### **Blowing up the "Empire Lifeguard"**

In July, 1947 Aliya was renewed from Cyprus. I intended to return to Palestine on the "Empire Lifeguard" and blow it up in Haifa, after all the passengers had disembarked. There were two important factors to be weighed in planning this operation. One, was that the escape of Yossale Dror had put British agents on alert. They wanted very much to find him from among the Ma'apilim returning to Palestine. The second, was that a Ma'apila had written to her boyfriend in Cyprus describing, in detail, how the "Empire Rival" had been blown up. The envelope of this letter came into my hands, after it had been in the hands of British detectives, and bore stamping by British censors in Jerusalem, Cairo and Cyprus.

We had to figure out a different way of doing the same thing. The biggest problem was how to get explosives onto the ship? I was the only Israeli who was going to board. I had to trust the Ma'apilim or the Americans. With the help of Gandhi (Yehoshua Bernstein) who was a wizard with his hands, we filled tubes of shaving cream with fingers of gelignite. I thought of passing these among the Olim. We put explosives in the wrappings that the Americans carried in their knapsacks. In order not to arouse suspicion, it was decided that people would leave their shirts partly unbuttoned. Two Ma'apilot offered to carry suitcases that had double bottoms, and the spaces between them were filled with gelignite. I counted on young men from the "Ranks of the Defenders" group, who were usually allowed to help the women climb into the trucks, to carry the suitcases.

On the day the ship was supposed to depart the British were extraordinarily careful. The departure time was to be two hours earlier than had been scheduled, and members of "The Ranks of the Defenders" were not allowed to leave the camp. That being the case, I decided that we would not take the two suitcases. One of the girls, a Czech named Malah Salomon (Botzi), gave me a fervent Zionist speech and wanted to continue as planned. So did the red-haired Israeli nurse, Yehudit, who had come along at the very last minute and convinced me to let her take some gelignite on board via the ambulance that was to come from Nicosia. As a result of her ingenuity, she succeeded in getting the material on board the ship.

A hospital tent was erected on the pier and was divided into men's and women's sections. British soldiers made meticulous searches of the bodies of

the Olim and their packages. I was among the last to board and watched to see if those who carried the explosives, boarded the ship. I saw a British soldier stick his bayonet into the knapsack of a girl and it came out with a wrapping of the kind that we had wrapped the explosives in. Another soldier took a tube of shaving cream and smelled it (we had left some cream at both ends of the tube in case of such an event). The detectives wandered among everyone with a photo of Yossale Dror. The Americans sweated out the waiting and I was positive that something would go awry somewhere and the whole plan would explode. Everyone was loaded onto the trucks and the only thing left was one suitcase with explosives that I would have returned to the camp, if I could have. That was now out of the question. Suddenly, Botzi appeared in front of me, walked over to the suitcase, picked it up and walked to the truck. A British female sergeant walked toward her. The two met and kissed, the sergeant congratulated Botzi on her going to Palestine, took the suitcase from her, and put it onto the truck. I began to believe in miracles!

When everyone was on board the ship, I gathered all the explosives together and prepared the detonators. Two of the Americans, Hugh McDonald and Abbie Rosenberg, helped me. We went down to the lowest hold and I fixed the explosives to the outer wall near the engine room. I then covered everything with an empty sack of flour. All that remained to be done was to come back and activate the detonator's timer, so that when the explosion would occur when the ship was empty. Since so many Olim were involved, the operation could not be kept secret. When I came back on deck, all eyes looked in my direction worriedly. I started singing and encouraged others to join me and that broke the tension.

The ship approached the Bay of Haifa and we stood on deck watching the sun light up the Carmel. I thought that we had at least an hour before we were tied to the pier and unloading of Olim began. I went down and activated the detonators that had a delaying time of two hours. I came back to the deck. Suddenly I hear the sound of the anchor descending into the water and my heart skipped a beat. How long were we going to stay in this spot while acid ate away at the delaying switch? I was responsible for the lives of the 750 Olim who were on this ship. I recalled the tragedy of the "Patria", when 260 Olim drowned not far from where we were at this moment. I had no one with whom to consult and had to act as if everything was all right. I had installed a primitive booby trap to prevent removal of the detonators. I almost thought it better that I tell the captain that his ship was about to blow up.

To keep myself from acting nervously, I didn't look at my watch but asked Hugh McDonald to do so for me. There was still a half-hour before we would blow up. A launch came out to the ship and flew a yellow flag. That meant that this was a medical check. The launch was handed the medical files of the ship and we then proceeded into the harbor. The ship tied up at the pier while all the Olim sang Hatikvah. I had the feeling that the "blowout" was going to be a success. I got off the ship with the last of the Olim and instead of getting onto a bus that would take them to Atlit, I sneaked aside and acted like one of the curious

onlookers who were standing near a British officer. He chased me away from the spot. When I had left the port area, I heard the bang of the explosion. The "Empire Lifeguard" sank without anyone being hurt. I have attached here a letter that General Sir A. Cunningham, the High Commissioner, sent to the Governor of Cyprus informing him of the sinking of the vessel.\*

After the sinking of the "Empire Lifeguard", the last ship to be sunk by the unit that operated in Cyprus, I again operated from Caesarea. We worked on developing devices and methods of demolition and sabotage. With the declaration by the UN, the British fleet ceased to be a threat and our sabotage unit was disbanded.

At the beginning of 1948 I was sent to France to accompany vessels of Olim to Israel. In the village of Therets, in Southern France, I set up a training camp for volunteers from English-speaking countries, on their way to take part in our War of Independence. In May, 1948, Shaul Avigur asked me to set up a sabotage unit to work on enemy's procurement equipment in Europe. At the end of 1948 I returned to Israel accompanying Olim on the vessel "Tampa".

In February of 1949 I was appointed commander of the Naval Sabotage unit at Caesarea (Frogmen). I remained in that position until the creation of the 13<sup>th</sup> Flotilla of the Navy and the unification of the 13<sup>th</sup> Flotilla with that of the attack-launch unit. In 1952 I transferred from the Navy to the armored forces, and in 1955, went to a course for commanders of armor companies in France. In 1956 I attended the Course for Command and Headquarters Officers. During this course the Kadesh Operation took place and I participated as Communications Officer of the 37<sup>th</sup> Brigade. I was wounded in the night attack on Um Katef. In 1959 I was appointed Commander of the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade.

In 1963 I was sent to the Congo (Zaire) as head of a mission of the IDF and as military attaché. This was to help Mobutu set up his paratroop school. When I returned to Israel in 1965 I was appointed Chief of Staff of the 41st Division, under the command of Avraham Yaffe, with which I fought in the Six Day War. I was discharged from the IDF in December, 1968 with the rank of Colonel.

\*

E6699

A handwritten signature, possibly 'L. M.', is written above the date '17'.

Cyprus (O.S.P.)

FROM PALESTINE (Gen. Sir A. Cunningham)TO S. OF S., COLONIES.

T. 23rd July, 1947.

R. 23rd " " 14.30 hrs.

HQST IMMEDIATE.

No. 1395. Secret.

Addressed to the Governor of Cyprus No. 145.  
Repeated to the S. of S.

EMPIRE LIFE GUARD was sunk alongside in Haifa harbour this morning by an arsenal explosion. Believed no loss of life. It is thought that the charge was placed on D&M while the ship was loading immigrants in Passagusta.

2. In order to ensure safety of remaining (ships), Commodore Palestine has represented urgently that immigrants still aboard transports in Cyprus should be disembarked there and that ships be thoroughly searched and then brought back to Haifa empty as soon as reasonably possible. This course would entail corresponding delay in departure of the remainder of the monthly quota from Cyprus. How long this delay would continue would depend on the security situation and also the future illegal immigration into Palestine, both of which factors are at present difficult to assess.

3. I appreciate that such a delay in shipping the monthly quota would cause you some embarrassment and I must regret having to add to your difficulties. I feel, however, and S.O.C. agrees, that safety of the remaining ships is of such paramount importance that Commodore's wishes must be met. I trust, therefore, that you will feel able to agree, if so I will inform the Commodore accordingly.

Grateful for reply by immediate telegram.

Letter from High Commissioner to Governor of Cyprus