

Nafcha, Biba

Born 10 October 1922

Joined the Palmach in 1944

Joined the Gideonim (radio operators) Course in Shefayim in 1945

This is the Way it Was

My father came to Palestine in 1909 and studied at the Teachers' Seminary in Jerusalem. He fought the battle of the languages in Haifa and transferred the pupils of the "Ezra" school to the synagogue which, after several convolutions became the "Geulah" school in Haifa. My brother David graduated from the "Reali" school in Haifa with honors and from then on devoted himself to the sea. He became an instructor, translated material from English, and was active in Aliya Bet until he disappeared with the "23 who were lost at sea", near Lebanon. I strongly identified with him and had the urge to follow in his footsteps. There was a war going on and Haifa was bombed by the Italians. We studied in the mornings and in the afternoon had a course in signaling. As we sat at our transmitters we heard the explosion that rocked the port of Haifa and sent the "Patria" and many Ma'apilim to the bottom of the sea.

The Hagana intended that we should man radio stations, but we were active in the scout movement and intended to establish a kibbutz. Some of our members were already in training in Beit Hashita and Ginnegar, and after that at Degania A (Alef).

When I completed my high school studies I did not do as my parents wished and continue to study at the Technion. Instead, I went for training to Degania B. We were supposed to go for training to Ashdot Yaakov, where there was a signal station run by Dvora, David Nameri's wife. We could not keep to this plan because of the incidence of foot-and-mouth disease.

Our independence began when we went to Pardes Chana. We worked in the orange orchards and at the homes of the farmers. We went as work teams to the Dead Sea Industries and to various kibbutzim. I worked with Palmachnikim at Ashdot Yaakov. I worked at tying the cord on stacks of bales as they came out of the baler, on the shore of the Jordan River. It was there that I met Fania, wife of Katriel Jaffe, the commander of the launch of the "23 who were lost at sea", and her children, Tamar and Danny. We became friends and remained so to this day. We then united with a group that had been at Ein Gev and they brought with them the idea of fishing. We then had to send someone to active duty in the Palmach and since I was already a Palmachnik I thought that I should go. Another girl volunteered, so our group took a vote and this ended in a tie. We then tossed a coin and I was chosen to go.

In 1944 I was sent to "C" Company at Ashdot Yaakov. (A rumor spread that they were getting a paratrooper named Biba. Those who knew me wondered when had I managed to do that?) We had very difficult training and treks, and I gathered many kinds of stones that I brought to Tammy and Danny. Soon after,

I was sent to "G" Company at Mishmar Haemek, which was a headquarters company. It included scouts, pilots, naval officers and more *[Editorial note: the G company included also additional units like the Arabic unit etc, excluding the naval unit which became a company by itself – the Palyam]*. Together with the 10th Company, this formed the 4th Battalion.

At Ayelet Hashachar there was a unit that smuggled Olim from across the Northern border, and I was added to that group. A book came out on this subject so I shall not add more about it. In the meanwhile, my kibbutz had moved to a spot in Rehovot where we also guarded an underground factory that manufactured bullets for Sten guns. Some of our members worked there. My situation was not very comfortable as everything about us was top secret. When vessels of Ma'apilim again started coming in, I was called again to Mishmar Haemek.

The "Berl Katznelson" arrived at Shefayim. Most of the Ma'apilim succeeded in getting off the ship, but it was caught by the British. Patrol boats chased our boats and caught two of them after they had brought their Ma'apilim to shore. Twelve of our fellow Palyamniks, under the command of Yossale Dror, were arrested and taken to Latrun.

During the operation for freeing the Olim from the Atlit Detention Camp we were evacuated from our tents near the cave in the forest and bivouacked inside the kibbutz grounds. On New Year's night the "Hannah Senesh" arrived and its olim were taken off. The vessel ran up onto rocks offshore.

I was sent to a signaling course for Gideonim (radio operators) which was aimed specifically to train those working on vessels carrying Ma'apilim. The course lasted three months and was held at Shefayim. When it was over, I was assigned to the headquarters of the 4th Battalion, with the expressed promise that when the opportunity arose, I would be sent to accompany Ma'apilim. I was now radio operator and secretary of the Battalion. I found some notes for lessons there that my brother had written, and that connected me with the Battalion even more than I thought possible. Quite a few vessels came in, but almost all of them were caught by the British. The Ma'apilim were sent to Cyprus. Each vessel was a story in itself that should be told.

When we prepared to receive these ships, it was necessary to plan how to get the olim ashore and how to disperse them among the local population. We had to blow up radar stations, neutralize the patrol boats, and blow up the deportation ships. Sometimes Yochai's bombs would roll under my bed. The ships "The 23 Who Were Lost At Sea" and the "Katriel Jaffe" came in and their passengers were taken to Cyprus. The "Amiram" managed to reach shore at Sdot Yam. I was there with Davidka when the vessel came ashore and we lit lights. This operation succeeded against all odds and we even put a Gideoni aboard who went back to Europe; I envied him. Davidka was responsible for all the activities of the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Palestine, and he was also

responsible when my brother went on his fatal trip. I would go with him sometimes when he went to visit Fania and her children in Ashdot.

Those accompanying the vessels would hide so as not to be sent to Cyprus, and then were freed by the Palmachniks in the port. I would sometimes run into them at my parents' house and receive a report. My mother treated them as if they were all her sons. On Friday, the evening of the 29th of June, there was a meeting in Haifa but I had slept at home that night. When I awoke in the morning and heard the news I was shocked. I rode to Yagur to find out what had happened. What I saw there was truly frightening!

I went back to the railroad station of Haifa so that I could get back to Kibbutz Maabarot. There I met Shaul Jaffe, Nachum Sarig's second-in-command. Nachum was the Battalion commander. Shaul was dressed like a stevedore and told me that the list of "cows" of Kibbutz Hazorea had been found by the British. It seemed that they had cut every wire found in the kibbutz, but had discovered nothing of value. The radio operator, HaVakuk was taken with the others to Rafiah. My transmitter was well hidden but I was told where to look for it. The treasurer had managed to put all his material into the hideaway as well. When I tried to make contact the first time, there was chaos.

We changed rooms and changed names. All the names which I had, were written on a small piece of paper that could fit into a match box.

Vessels continued to arrive. We were waiting in the kibbutz for the arrival of a vessel and suddenly the whole kibbutz was surrounded by soldiers. I accompanied a pregnant woman who was close to giving birth and we went to the hospital in Hadera. Once there I contacted as many of our people as possible and told them not to go back to the kibbutz.

Time went by and the commanders also switched jobs. Uri Jaffe took the place of Nachum Sarig, and Dan Ram took Uri Jaffe's place. The same was true of company commanders. I remained where I was and so did Benny Marshak, about whom there are dozens of stories. Finally, Ada Shwimmer came to take my place, and just as I started passing information to her, the "Shabtai Luzinski" came in at Caesarea. We dropped everything and ran there. She did not stay and left her load of Olim at Nitzanim. We followed all the action on our wireless transmitter. The sea became rough as the Ma'apilim were taken from the ship and crowds came from the surrounding settlements.

There was then a curfew in Tel Aviv because of the explosion at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. We thought that this time things would go easy for us because His Majesty's soldiers were so busy. I hoped that I would get permission from Davidka to visit Fania and her children. He said: "No, no, this time you are traveling a little further." True, this is what I had dreamed of, but so suddenly? Soon we found ourselves surrounded by soldiers. The vessel was captured, together with the few Ma'apilim who were still on board. Some of the olim got away from the scene accompanied by Israelis, and others intermingled with the Israelis. We were also in this crowd and were arrested with all the

others. The Israelis destroyed their ID's and everyone declared that he was a Jew from Eretz Israel. I decided that I did not want to be arrested and said that I was a member of Kibbutz Nitzanim. I was allowed to leave. From Nitzanim I took a bus to Rehovot and once I was home, felt that this whole episode had been a dismal failure.

The following day the newspapers described that everyone had been taken to Haifa and there the British tried to filter out who was who but they all declared that they were Jews from Eretz Israel. Benny Marshak wanted to get to Cyprus but the British did not want him there. In the end, many of our people went to Cyprus and many of the Olim remained in Palestine. This turned the failure into somewhat of a victory.

A period of intensive education and training then began in the camps.

I took a short break and went to a seminar of the kibbutz movement. We organized a trip to Eilat with the Noar HaOved youth movement. I then worked at the transmitting station in Haifa that was in contact with the vessels at sea. I was then transferred to Jerusalem and there was an involvement with the Etzel (the Revisionist underground movement.) This was too much for me and I wanted out. It was suggested that I go to Cyprus so I prepared a passport and a visa.

Here I wish to repeat what I wrote at that time:

“In October, 1947, a group of Palmachniks sailed for Cyprus in the fishing boat Ophir”. We were to switch with those in the camps and were to add to those training the Olim in the “Ranks of the Defenders”. There was a huge potential of manpower in the camps. It was important to train them so that they would be ready for the day of the Declaration of Independence and the struggle that awaited us in Israel. We brought weapons with us and live ammunition for actual use. They were also to learn hand to hand combat, “Kapap,” and use of a knife. They had already had some training and some experience. I, as the Gideonit, had a suitcase which contained very good equipment. I also had a small generator and a battery charger. The batteries were not in my possession.

We landed at night. Some of us swam ashore and others came on a rubber raft that the vessel carried. The raft carried all of our equipment. We went into the camp via an excellent tunnel. This had served us well for a long time. I was put into a tent that has a place to hide the equipment. There had previously been contact from there but contact had been severed and I was to get it going again. There was an excellent antenna that was woven into a cord that was stretched above the tents. Even veteran Gideonim who visited the tent could not make out where the antenna was. Immediately upon arrival I tried to make contact, as had been arranged beforehand. Yossefele, the commander of the 4th Battalion, turned the handle of the generator. I heard the other party well, but they could not hear me. The power supply was not strong enough. With the help of employees of the

JDC and Greek drivers, we were able to obtain more batteries and with them and our agreed signal, "Sour Pickle", we finally made contact.

Charging batteries was a complicated operation. It required an electric charger and we did not have electricity in our camp. There was electricity on the other side of the fence where the people of the "Joint" lived. One night, when there was no one in our tent, we managed to connect to the electricity in the Joint camp. After that there were no problems of contact.

Inside, the camp was like an autonomous state. We felt quite secure. The English controlled the fence, the perimeter, but did not venture into the camp.

Serious fighting was taking place at that time in Palestine. A good number of our friends had been killed in action. It was difficult to listen to the news every day and hear the names of ones we knew listed as dead. The work in Cyprus was important but we wanted to be where the action was. That was also the aim of the Ma'apilim, who were just marking time in Cyprus and wanted to get on with their lives. Those who were in "The Ranks of The Defenders" wanted an opportunity for action. We sent as many of them as we could; as Aliyat HaNoar and clandestinely. They went directly to the Palmach. When they reached port someone with a list of names was there to receive them and direct them where to go. It was sad to see people who had gone through the seven stages of Hell, eager to go to war, go to the fighting that lay ahead of them. Many went straight to Latrun and there fell in action..

One day I was asked, by radio, if "the big ones" had arrived. I had heard that they, the "Pan York" and the "Pan Crescent" had already passed through the Dardanelles. I hadn't thought that they would arrive yet if they went to Haifa and from there to Cyprus. I was very surprised therefore, when I looked to the sea and saw an armada of British warships and two large vessels in their midst. They had come straight to Cyprus without even smelling the coast of Palestine. 16,000 Ma'apilim were added to those waiting in Cyprus and among them were a good number of our comrades who accompanied them. We had to find a way to smuggle a number of them back to Palestine as soon as possible. The Mosad for Aliya Bet was very interested in the ships and their crews. My station was very busy as the time for the British to leave was approaching, the postal service was not too reliable, and I was an alternative. The Joint and the Jewish Agency also made use of our station.

We had many contacts with Cypriot citizens and with the Greek underground. We could roam about the island and look for the best places to land. Fishing vessels would often bring us people else take them back to Palestine. I even had radio contact with some of these vessels. If a Gideoni came to the camp, he would take my place for a day or two and I would take a look around the island. When the week of Passover had gone, we were promised reinforcements and I was to get someone to relieve me. We

had sent some people on the "Kedma" but they were caught and sent back. At about the same time, Chuck, the commander of the camp was arrested as were the captains of the Pans, Ike and Gad. Chuck told the British that he was one of the refugees but the British officer did not believe him. Every one there said his mother was dying to see him, and they would not have let the officer leave with him. Rather than cause a riot the officer let him stay in the camp. I radioed to Palestine: "Sometimes we have more luck than brains!"

We made plans for celebrating on May 15, the day the British were to leave Palestine. We intended to load two battalions onto ships that were waiting and send them back to Israel. We were warned not to hurry as there was a danger that we might be bombed. Meanwhile they sealed off the camps and no one was allowed in or out. I was very mad; I had convinced Benny, who had a girlfriend among the Ma'apilim, to take my place and I sneaked onto the "Pan York" and became one of its crew. It was only a matter of time before others of the original crew and other Palyamnikim were gathered onto the ship. We were anchored off Famamgusta for one nerve-wracking month while I followed what was happening in Israel on my receiver. When the first cease-fire was declared, we sailed to Israel without taking any passengers. When we arrived in Haifa I went straight to my parents' house and was very happy to find my sister there. Orah had been working as a nurse in the Old City of Jerusalem and was there during all the fighting. She left together with the injured that were taken out of the City. With the aid of my friends in the Harel Brigade she was brought to my kibbutz in Rehovot. Tammy was also in my house. She had been evacuated together with all the children of Ashdot and was now studying at the Geulah School."

My mother was glad that I had been in Cyprus all this time as this had saved her a good deal of worry. I was soon called to the Harel Brigade and was put in charge of all of the girls in the Haportzim Battalion, together with Shosh Spector and Rachel Maccabi. I was quite busy jumping from one place to the next. People I met said that they were searching for me in Rome, Paris and all over Europe. I understood that I should go to Gideonim Headquarters and straighten things out with them. Harel wanted me to stay with the Brigade as its radioman. Then Jimmy fell. He had been like a brother to me. His father, the artist Menachem Shemi, and his mother, Rivka, were good friends of my parents. The first time I saw a corpse was when his mother lifted the blanket covering him and his father drew a picture of them. It was a heart-breaking scene, as was his funeral. Since then they brought out the book, "Friends Tell About Jimmy" and they put up a memorial for him in Kiryat Anavim.

The Brigade was relieved for a rest period at Machane Israel, opposite Lod Airport and I had nothing to do there. I returned to my kibbutz and there was plenty of work for me there. When the Brigade left for the "Ain" Campaign I rejoined it. During all the fighting I was Dado's radio operator. We captured an Egyptian command car with a transmitter just like ours that worked beautifully. I

had very emotional encounters with my former commanders, Nachum Sarig and Shaul Jaffe, as we fought our way to A'ouja-el-Chaffir.

As I read back what I have written I realize that there is very much that is missing. Meanwhile, we have settled at Cabarra, are now a settlement by the sea, and have three fishing vessels. Young people from the Nachal have joined us. (An army unit in a rural settlement that works part time and trains part time) We also have many former Palmachnikim and Palyamnikim, and have taken in groups of youths from the cities who have studied and grown up together with our children, and are now members. The idea of a 'shipping kibbutz' has become a reality. I was tempted to join the crew of the "Shio" as radio operator. It flew under the flag of Honduras and brought materiel for the Ministry of Defense. It had to go to Genoa for repairs. At an assembly of the kibbutz, it was said that we did not have to send anyone on this vessel but since Biba wants to travel, let her travel. We wandered about the Mediterranean and hit most of its ports from Tobruk to Casablanca and from Genoa to Port de Bouc, Valencia and Cartagena...

While repairs were taking place, we toured all over Italy and I returned home a year later. Two years after that we received the vessel Palmach and once again I sailed with it as radio operator. I had to take a test and receive an international license so I studied on my own and received a temporary license which was valid for one year. It was enough of traveling, inside and outside Israel. I can enjoy what I have, and can see everything from my window. There is the sea and the fish ponds, the Carmel and the Alligator Stream, and I can walk around with the children who are in my care.

The years have passed and we have dropped the fishing and the shipping in favor of industry. The kibbutz is successful and growing. New members join and children are born. I have also made a wonderful collection of stones and fossils.