

**Nativ, Benyamin (Strasberg)**

Nickname: Bob

Born February 1924 in Haifa

Joined the Palmach in 1943

Joined the Palyam in 1944

**This is the Way it Was**

I was born to Miriam and Yitzchak Strasberg who had made Aliya three years previously. I studied at the "A" elementary school and in 1932 my mother died. In 1933 I studied at the educational school of the Worker's Movement and in 1934 I went to the children's village of Meir Shfeya. That is where my elementary education ended. At that time I also joined the Hagana. In 1940 I went to the Agricultural School at Mikve Yisrael. The 2<sup>nd</sup> World War was now raging and this was felt strongly in everything that happened in the country.

At Mikve, everybody joined the Hagana. Students in the first grade would join and then be active during their second and third years. In the second term they had training in the field and with weapons, and in the summer they went to a course for squad leaders organized by the Tel Aviv Hagana, with which Mikve was affiliated. Heavy fighting was now going on between the British Eighth Army and the armies of Germany and Italy. In the summer of 1942 we went to a squad leaders course in Gadera. Some of the class joined the Palmach and were assigned to "D" Company and others joined the British Army. There were some who did not join anything. As I said, we were affiliated to Tel Aviv and "D" Company was considered a Tel Aviv Company. It was obvious that our class would follow in the footsteps of the class before us and also join the Palmach. During the year we met the company commander, Benyamin Tzur (Goldstein) and other leaders. Do not forget that this was a period when everybody volunteered for something. There were various types of police units, the British army and more, and of course, the Palmach.

In 1943 I joined "C" Company of the Palmach and went to Kibbutz Givat Chaim, which was one of its bases. I worked in the machine shop of the kibbutz and also in the "Gat" factory for juices and jams. In 1944 the Company moved to Ein Harod, in the Jezreel Valley. We were the Headquarters Company and I was a scout. I also assisted the Company armorer. We spent half our time training, which included running every morning from Ein Harod to Geva and back. We also surveyed all the Arab villages in the region. At about Passover we made a trek to Sodom and Masada, which became known as the "Watch Trek". In preparation for this, we transferred our arms and other equipment to Sodom by boats belonging to the Dead Sea Industries and by trucks of the kibbutzim. In the summer of 1944 I was invited to a course for sea mechanics at Kibbutz Yagur, and from there I transferred to the Palyam.

I went to Kibbutz Yagur and we settled down near the Teech School, which was a technical school for mechanics, machinists and lathe operators. There were 16 men in the course under the command of Avraham Zakai. Part of the course

was also at the Technical School affiliated with the Haifa Technion. The course ran for 6 weeks and we learned the fundamentals of sea mechanics. When this ended, we went to a course for small boat commanders at Sdot Yam, together with other units of the Palmach.

When we arrived at our camp at Sdot Yam, we saw fellows in bathing suits, tanned, and obviously in very good physical condition. We were jealous of them. I was very light skinned and when I got into a bathing suit I soon had a severe sunburn. I recall one day when we started our training. The sea was calm and smooth. Suddenly a lively Southwester blew while we were in our boat, the "Rivka", on the far side of the rocks that lay on the sea floor. Big waves came up and hid the entrance to our little anchorage. We received an order to drop the anchor and be ready to use our oars. Our commander, Zeev Fried, arrived on the scene in a small motor launch and hopped into our boat. He took over command and we entered the anchorage without a problem. This was a sudden switch from the life of a student of mechanics, to the life of a seaman and the atmosphere that reigned at Sdot Yam.

This meeting with the power of the sea introduced us to the basic dangers of the sea. With the technical knowledge and the tools that we had, we learned to estimate the dangers that accompanied us as we learned. When the course was over there was a convention of the Palmach at Mishmar Haemek, after which we returned to Sdot Yam. We worked in the kibbutz, mostly in the vegetable gardens. We picked tomatoes, cucumbers and eggplant. We also went fishing at night with strong lights. Several boats would go out together and there would be lanterns that lit up the sea. The light would attract the fish and when we saw that there was a swarm under us, we would cast our net. We were aided in this work by a small motor launch. After several days of this I found work as a machinist on a vessel called the "Ophir". The skipper of the vessel was Leibale. It had an engine with one cylinder and a shell that had to be heated until it would glow red. Then you could start the engine.

We would usually go out to sea for several days and bring back a collection of all the kinds of fish that one finds in Israel. We would bring the net onto the deck, sort out the various species, and put the different kinds of fish into separate crates. We would make a feast out of Calamari and shrimp. I did this for several months and then went to the 3<sup>rd</sup> course for small boat commanders. This was also at Sdot Yam and the commander was Berchik (Dov Magen). Once again I renewed my acquaintance with "Dov", "Rivka" and "Tirza", and also with the "Kfar Vitkin".

There was an interesting incident at the end of this course. We received notice from the shore patrol that a small boat had been abandoned near Wadi Falik (Poleg today). The "Kfar Vitkin" was chosen to tow it back to Sdot Yam. This had been an Arab boat and looked like one. We left Sdot Yam in the evening and there was a pleasant light wind blowing. We found the abandoned boat and started to tow it back to Sdot Yam. The Sharakia had grown much stronger and this made it difficult to go north. We angled our course from side to side and by

morning had hardly gone as far as Natanya. By noon we had reached as far as Givat Olga. By evening the wind and the sea calmed down and we made it to Sdot Yam. We shoved the vessels onto the shore and within minutes a strong southwestern storm broke. We were pretty lucky with the weather.

When the course was over, Menachem (RIP), Samek and I were stationed on a small boat named "Trita" that belonged to Gordonia Ma'apilim. This boat was used by the nautical department of the Jewish Agency for research in fishing. We sailed from Atlit in the direction of Tel Aviv. The fishing that was tried was with a stationary net. We were not very successful. We would go out at night and return in the morning with everything that had been caught in the net. We were so ashamed of our results that we would tell bystanders nearby what they were; we would say, "tonight we caught seven". They would think we meant boxesm but we meant fish. When these experiments were over Menachem and I went onto the "Amos", which belonged to the Atid Company. I went on as the coal stoker. This was a fishing boat that had been made into a cargo vessel, and was run by a steam engine. The ship was run by the Office of Marine Transportation in the Eastern Mediterranean, for the war effort. We traveled to the ports of Beirut and Mercine, Cyprus, Alexandria and Port Said. Of course we also called at Haifa and there were also other men of the Palmach on the vessel. There was Yoske Almog, Yisrael Auerbuch, Ossie Ravid and Alex Shacht (RIP).

Our service on this vessel gave us professional experience in running a ship. At the end of 1945 we the vessel and started the 2<sup>nd</sup> course for naval officers. We were quartered at Kibbutz Yagur. Every morning we would travel to Haifa, to the Naval School adjacent to the Technion. Our instructors were Shmuel Tankus and Captain Sheinman (RIP). The course was lasted six months. All this time the movement of illegal Aliya was growing. This was the time of the drama of La Spezia. The two vessels involved in that episode, the "Dov Hoz" and the "Eliyahu Golomb", came into Haifa and deposited Ma'apilim. A number of Palyamniks left on the vessels for Italy. We hid in the holds until we were out at sea and then came up on deck to get some fresh air. We tried to integrate ourselves into the work of the crew during this voyage. We left Palestine at the beginning of June, 1946. The fields of wheat were yellow and ripening. Now, as we reached Europe, we saw how green everything was, and how plentiful the water in Italy. We went through the Straits of Messina and onward to the port of La Spezia. In the evening we left the vessel and met "The Gang" who were waiting there with their trucks. We traveled all night in the direction of Milan and arrived at Magenta. In the morning we met the other Palyamniks there and met the Ma'apilim.

About 3 days later I was sent to Savona to go with the "Wedgwood" which was preparing for a voyage. On the ship I met Berchik, Yisrael Rotem (RIP), Yisrael Auerbach, Tzvi Katznelson and Eliezer Tal. We also met the crew of the ship of course; most of whom were seamen and volunteers from the USA and Canada. The "Wedgwood" was a corvette that had been outfitted at another level. The standard of living of the crew on that ship was not the same as that known to us

on other vessels of Ma'apilim. Italy in those times was a starving country. Basic foods were sold according to chits. On the Wedgwood there was no lack of food or of other equipment. We worked on preparing the bunks and the toilet facilities for carrying 1,300 people.

At the beginning of June, 1946, the "Wedgwood" left Savona and traveled northwest. There, at a place where today there is a power station and a pier for loading bulk products, we anchored and waited for the Ma'apilim. They were to come from several distant places in Italy. Early in the morning Italian police showed up and took up positions around the ship. Meanwhile, the Ma'apilim boarded the vessel, and as long as negotiations went on between the representatives of the Mosad for Aliya Bet and the police, the Ma'apilim kept coming and filling up the ship. When they were all on board, lines to the shore were cut and the ship moved out and sailed to the south leaving the police helpless. While continuing on our way, we dropped our friends Eliezer Tal and Yisrael Rotem (RIP) into a lifeboat and they went back to shore.

The daily life on the ship ran smoothly. The Ma'apilim were well organized, the various facilities worked all right, and the food and water and health conditions were satisfactory (according to the standards of that era). Tzvi Katznelson and Yisrael Auerbach did good work with the Ma'apilim and the crew handled the ship satisfactorily. On June 26<sup>th</sup> when we were in the vicinity of Atlit, the ship was discovered and towed to Haifa. From there the Ma'apilim were taken to the Atlit Detention Camp. While they were being transferred from the ship to the buses, we stepped aside and disappeared from sight, and later managed to leave the port area. After a short meeting of the Palmach men with the Mosad for Aliya Bet people, it was agreed that I should tell the story of the Wedgwood to the Palyamniks in Kibbutz Yagur that Saturday. I awoke in my parents' house on 29<sup>th</sup> June as the announcement of the curfew was made. Naturally I cancelled my trip to Yagur and the full weight of the "Black Saturday" was felt by the Yishuv (the Jewish settlements in Palestine). On Sunday I went to clear out material from the offices of the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Haifa. We received an order to disappear, but keep in touch.

I went to Shfeya and worked in the quarry there. Sometime about August, 1946, I was called to Haifa and told that I was to go to Europe. The following day I boarded a vessel flying a Panamanian flag but owned by a Greek named Claudio. Besides the regular passengers, there were five of us including two Gideonim and Gedda Shochat (RIP). We hid every time the vessel came into port. In the evening we were able to mingle with the other passengers. We went to several Mediterranean ports and finally arrived at Marseilles. There we were met by two men of the Mosad for Aliya Bet and they explained to us how to get to the camp in St. Jerome. When we arrived there, we put up a tent for ourselves, and got clothes for ourselves from the JDC, which were like the clothes of the refugees. This allowed us to be mobile.

The vessel that was destined to leave from that region next, was the "St. Dimetrius", a motor vessel that burned coal. We made some last preparations before it sailed from Marseilles to La Ciotat. It was to carry 1,300 Olim. The day

the Olim were to board there was a wind, and the sea was a bit rough. The Olim boarded during the day. The crew consisted of Spanish Republicans and the commander was Uri Goren, who was also the Gideoni. The other man to accompany the Ma'apilim was Shalom Schwartz, and I was busy with the running of the vessel. I was helped by the organization of the Ma'apilim, who took care of distributing food and water and handled other services. Two days later the sea calmed and life on board was pleasanter. As the vessel used up its water and its coal, it started to lose its stability. The name of the vessel was changed to "Latrun". After about 10 days of sailing the vessel was discovered and surrounded by British destroyers. A fight ensued and several of the Ma'apilim and several of the Marines were hurt. The vessel had also been damaged and listed to one side. We were towed into Haifa, transferred to a deportation ship, and taken to a camp near Famagusta in Cyprus.

Three months later I was back in Palestine and was given leave so that I could study. I intended going to the Technion. I worked at odd jobs just to earn my keep. When the vessel "South Africa" was purchased, I went on board as machinist. While the rest of the crew was being assembled, the preparations were under way for the "Pirate" operation. The commander of the operation was Samek and his second-in-command was David Maimon. The commander of the attack unit was Eskimo, (Aharon BenYosef) and I was to lead the unit that took over the engine room.

As is generally known, the "Lino" was sunk by our men in the port of Ancora.

We sailed from Haifa and reached Crete. There we received orders to return to Palestine. When we arrived back, we were told to proceed to Italy to load anti-aircraft artillery. This time our commander was Moshe Rabinowitch (RIP). We sailed to Italy and celebrated Independence Day in the Straits of Messina. From there we continued to Naples. We loaded 3 cannons and then sailed back to Israel.

When we arrived, repairs and refitting had begun on Aliya Bet vessels thought satisfactory to be in the Israeli Navy. Among them were the "Wedgwood" and the "Hagana". I went to the "Wedgwood" as Chief Engineer and served with it until the end of the War of Independence. While I was in service we completed the "Pirate" Operation. The vessels "Wedgwood" and "Hagana" participated in overtaking the vessel carrying the sunken "Lino's" weapons and ammunition, sinking her, and bringing her cargo to Israel.

In 1949 when the War of independence was over, we sailed to Italy for repairs in the drydock of Naples. I, as chief engineer, and together with my friend Dave Baum, checked the work that was done by the shipyard crew and then we returned to Israel. The then Navy commander in chief, Rear Admiral Shlomo Shamir, decided that his higher officers should have higher education. This was my opportunity to realize an old dream. I studied at the Technion from 1951 – 1955, received an M.Sc. degree and was certified as a mechanical engineer.

I was back in the Navy and now served at Headquarters and in charge of organizing the base at Eilat. I was also in charge of repairing and selling the frigates to Sri Lanka. We sailed to Sri Lanka with the "K-32" and had an interesting trip. From 1961 to 1964 I served with the 13<sup>th</sup> Flotilla as technical officer, after which I was discharged from the Navy.

In 1962 I married my wife, Shula, and in 1963 our daughter Miri was born. In 1970 our son Noam was born. In 1964 and 1965 I worked at the Hadera Paper Mills.

In 1966 I started work in the Port and Shipping Administration of the Ministry of Transportation as Chief of Technical Services. After that I became Acting Manager and remained in that position for three years. During this period we were busy trying to introduce automatization into the Israeli merchant marine. I also received an MA degree in Industry and Administration from the Technion in 1975. I was on the committee that chose the port of Hadera as the coal port for the power station there. When the Peace Agreement with Egypt was signed, I was on the committee that discussed matters of transportation and shipping. I was a member of the Directorate of Israel Shipyards for more than 20 years. From 1977 until I retired in 1992 I dealt with the subject of the Port of Hadera as chairman and executive officer. In 1995 I left government service as Manager of the shipping company that worked within the framework of the Ministry of the Treasury.

One must make note of the contacts and the friendships which were formed during those years. From school days and through the period of the Palmach, the Palyam and the Navy, the ties of friendship grew stronger with the years and withstood the strains of time. Relations were developed with the second generation of friends and their families. Today, in my family there are four children. Three of them are married and we have six grandchildren (may their numbers grow). At the conclusion of this concentrated review, we should value the opportunity that befell us, that made us partners with that great undertaking of bringing tens of thousands of Ma'apilim to Israel. We also took part well in the military and political struggle for this land by being its spearhead in our work of Ha'apala (illegal immigration).