

**Ofer, Ruth** (Cheikin)  
Born July 1924 in Jerusalem  
Joined the Palmach in 1944  
Became a Gideonit in 1946  
Codename: Tzafi

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

I was born in July 1924 in Jerusalem, to parents Shifra and Isaac Cheikin, members of the "Labor Battalion". Three years later we moved to Kibbutz Ein Harod near Mount Gilboa, where I spent a very happy childhood full of experiences, friends who were a united and active group, and directed by parents and teachers who believed in ideals of building the country and the kibbutz. At the end of 1944, I joined the Palmach as had friends who were slightly older than me. I was sent to "B" Company at Givat Brenner, and shortly thereafter to a signaling course at Juara with friends whom I remained in radio contact with, when we were working in Aliya Bet. Together with the rest of my company I also took part in a two-week nautical course at Caesarea. I have many pleasant memories of that course, where we swam and rowed in the high waves under the direction of experienced seamen.

The pinnacle of the course came when we helped unload a vessel of Ma'apilim, one of many that began coming to Palestine after the end of WW II. Anyone who has undergone such an experience can never forget it, and I recall it vividly. There was a fear that the British might arrive and cause trouble, and an anticipation of waiting for the silhouette of a vessel to appear during the night; and then running into the cold surf to help the Ma'apilim ashore. We then helped them to scatter throughout various Jewish settlements. When it was over, how good it felt and how we sang! It was a moonlit night and girls and boys went into shower stalls together. The stalls were only an area surrounded by a wall of straw mats. We sang and were really happy! I don't think that I have ever experienced such a collective "high" as on that night, except perhaps on another occasion connected with Aliya Bet, when I was on a vessel of Ma'apilim on my return to Palestine.

After the course I worked as battalion radio operator at Givat Brenner until I went to the transmitting station of Aliya Bet in Tel Aviv. From that time, April 1946, and until my discharge at the end of 1949, I was a Gideonit of Aliya Bet. When I came back to Israel I worked for a time in the special transmitting station of the General Staff.

For one year I worked in various apartments in Tel-Aviv and Holon to keep contact between Aliya Bet vessels on the high seas and Mossad headquarters. The first five vessels which we accompanied via radio were caught by the British and ended up in Cyprus. We looked forward so eagerly to their coming and when they were caught, it was a severe let-down. In October of 1946 I was sent to work in the transmitting station of Aliya Bet in Paris.

The trip to France on the "Transylvania", a Romanian passenger ship, was not a normal voyage. The head of the Mosad for Aliya Bet was also on the ship. Shaul Meirov was traveling with false papers, as were nine Palmachnikim who had boarded as stowaways but were quickly discovered while we were at sea. They were locked in a hold and badly beaten up. There was fear that they would not be allowed to get off the ship in France, but would be placed under arrest in Romania. The voyage lasted seven days and I acted as a go-between between the prisoners and Shaul Avigur, and later to a member of the Recanati family who was aboard ship on his honeymoon. He made contact between our boys in Palestine and Marseilles, and they succeeded in getting our prisoners freed. We all went to the refugee camp near Marseilles where a very emotional celebration was held upon our arrival. It was there that I first met survivors of the Holocaust, and Olim who had been fighters in various Ghettos.

On the following day and after a very long train ride, I arrived in Paris. I got there only days after French police had captured our transmitting station. I was only able to listen to news from Europe, until we found a suitable location to again set up a transmitter. Since Paris was an important center for Aliya Bet and the "Bricha", I was overloaded with work. There were only two Gideoniot, Sara Slotzkin (Zibner) and I. When the War of Independence began, we had even more to do because we would disseminate information and receive orders from other authorities in Israel, and do their bidding, as well. In addition we were still in contact with all the vessels of the Ma'apilim en route to Israel.

In Paris, we had to move our station every two months because the Paris police searched for illegally hidden transmitters. There were many, and some belonged to the Nazis. These apartments were greatly varied. Some were very poor and without heat, and others were very luxurious. Because of all this movement, I got to know the city very well. We did a good job of showing other Israelis the tourist sights of the city. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of May, 1948, we heard the Declaration of the State of Israel. To my surprise, on the following day I was ordered to go to Marseilles and board a vessel of Olim leaving for Israel. On May 19, 1948 we boarded a vessel at Bandol, near Marseilles. This was at night and shortly after we boarded, trucks came with Olim and they too went aboard. There were about 700 of them. The vessel was called "HaMored" (the Rebel). The voyage was uneventful for the first ten days, and then we saw British planes overhead. The Olim were sent below and the deck was covered with a large tarpaulin. When we were only a day's sailing from Haifa we saw a British warship heading in our direction. The Palyam men on the ship brought up a machine gun that we had brought with us, and pointed it toward the warship. I received a helio message from the ship saying: "This is the Israeli warship, "Eilat". Ruthie, go to your station and receive orders for bringing the Olim into Haifa. The sender, Shoshana." (My friend from Kibbutz Yagur).

From the fear and suspense of being a vessel facing attack we had, in a flash, become a protected vessel. We had a warship that was accompanying us into harbor to insure our 'safe arrival'. There were still British in the port of Haifa so we took the Olim to Caesarea and transferred them to shore in small boats. We,

who had accompanied the Olim, and the Italian crew, continued to Haifa with the intention of docking as an ordinary merchant vessel. Matters, however, are never simple and we were held up at the entrance to the port and the Israelis were told to hide. We remained hidden for several hours. A small launch then approached the vessel, removed us, and took us ashore opposite the Kishon section of the harbor. We managed to get ashore before a British patrol boat reached our launch. The boat was too late and we were home safely.

We were filthy but very excited, and were received by Israel seamen with joy. Our vessel, the "Rebel," was the last ship of Ma'apilim to reach Palestine/ Israel, and its Hagana name became: the "Krav Emek Ayalon"(the Battle of the Vale of Ayalon). Only a few days went by and again I was called; this time to go to the transmitting station of the General Staff of the IDF, which was called "The Station for Special Duties". This station contacted stations outside the country and was very important for the Foreign Office. It also contacted ships of Olim en route to Israel, and there were now no British destroyers to keep them out. In keeping with my job then, I was inducted into the army, where I continued to serve for more than a year. I was discharged at the end of 1949 (to the best of my recollection).

I had had 5 years of service in the Palmach and in the IDF, four of which had to do with Aliya Bet and the vessels that brought Ma'apilim. I was very glad to return to Ein Harod and have been there ever since. At first I worked in agriculture and then in industry. For the past 20 years I have been a librarian. I have a son and a daughter and 4 grandchildren. I have only told part of my story, and skipped many experiences and encounters without describing successes and failures. I would like to conclude though, with a description of one small event that perhaps best portrayed the relations between Gideonim.

When my service was over I received a gift of a trip on a ship of Olim to Italy. I traveled all over Italy for a month and for that I thank the Mosad for Aliya Bet. One day when I was wandering around Rome by myself, a jeep stopped and a fellow got out and approached me. I could tell almost immediately that he was a Gideoni whom I had never met but whose handwriting (his style of signaling) I could easily recognize. I did not even know that he was in Italy. "You are Dani Sandlar", I said to him. He answered: "You are Ruth Cheikind". This chance meeting can give the reader some idea of the close bond between members of the tribe of the Gideonim. Each one sat alone with his transmitter on a ship or in some hidden room somewhere in Europe, but the connection between them was so strong that it would be difficult for anyone to believe but them. I was privileged that I and my friends took part in bringing Olim to Israel; these Olim who had survived the Holocaust and made the difficult journey to their homeland. We heard some of their stories and we also heard their fears. We heard these when we were in the camps with them waiting to go, and heard a bit more when we were en route, and each was busy with his own tasks. I have one regret though, and that is that the bonds which we created with them were not strong enough, and here in Israel we did not continue to keep contact.