

Oren, Shaul (Aharonov)

Born 25th October 1925 in Tel Aviv

Joined the Palmach in 1942

Joined the Palyam in 1944

This is the Way it Was

I was born in 1925 to parents who had recently arrived in the country from Russia. They built their house on the sandy shore of North Tel Aviv, near the Yarkon River. My early education was in the educational school of the Worker's Movement. Its wonderful teachers added a very great deal to the character of the children. They taught values of work and social behavior, independence and mutual aid, and love for the Land of Israel. My secondary education was at the Max Fine Technical School. During this period I was also a member of the Working and Learning Youth Movement (Ha'Noar Ha'Oved) and a member of the Hagana.

In 1942 I joined "F" Company of the Palmach and my initial training was at Kfar Gileadi, with Yitzchak Rabin as commander. The same year, I was sent to a course for sport instructors at Ginossar and the following year taught sports in various places of training of Palmach units. In 1943 I attended a course for squad leaders at Juara and then, an officer's course.

In 1944 I joined the Palyam and took part in the 3rd course for small boat commanders, and the 2nd course for naval officers at the Technion in Haifa, which took six months. I started my naval career as a young boy in the nautical unit of Hapoel, on the Yarkon River. The training included lessons in swimming, rowing and handling sailboats. On the 1st of November 1945 I carried out an act of sabotage on two coastal vessels of the British Navy which were anchored in Haifa. This was the first such action of the Hagana that was carried out by a single individual. After that I was an instructor in the 5th course for small boat commanders at Sdot Yam.

In 1945, when Israel was fighting for its independence, I was sent to Italy and I joined the Mosad for Aliya Bet. In this framework, I was active in the immigrant camps in the areas of Bari, Metaponto and Magenta. On the 2nd of August 1946 I sailed as second-in-command of the immigrant vessel "Kaf Gimel Yordei Ha'sira". The vessel was caught by the British and the immigrants and Palyamniks sent to Cyprus. Eight of us Palyamniks escaped from the camp and made our way back to Italy so that we could bring additional immigrant ships to Palestine.

On the 24th May 1947 I sailed as second-in-command of the vessel, "Mordei Hageaot" which carried 1,457 Holocaust survivors. On the eve of Succoth, 1947, I married Chayuta ben Avraham, a girl born in Kibbutz Kiryat Anavim. That same year I commanded course Number 9 for small boat commanders and later that year, course Number 13 for frogmen. Yochai ben Nun, Yossale Dror and I

organized the first naval sabotage unit of Squadron 13th. I was the commander of the first course of the 13th Squadron which has remained the commando unit of the navy to this day. In 1948 I joined Tzahal and in an operation at 'Gaba, near Haifa, was injured in my hand. In 1949-1950 I continued to command commando and the frogmen units at Arab Caesarea.

At the end of the war I became a member of Kiryat Anavim although I continued to do reserve duty and took part in the Six Day War. In 1958 I was appointed second-in-command of the Har Tuv region with the rank of lieutenant colonel. As a member of Kiryat Anavim I worked in the dairy barn, the orchard, and the machine shop. I was also in charge of the building branch and manager of the kibbutz branches of work activity. All of our five children were born in the kibbutz.

In 1954, when there was a wave of new immigrants into the country, my wife and I and three of our small children moved to Charuvit, a transit camp for new immigrants in the Lachish area. In 1964 we left the kibbutz and moved to Jerusalem. I worked for 18 years on the Givat Ram campus of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem as a mechanical engineer, and was responsible for maintenance work of the air conditioning equipment.

In the years 1971-1973 I was sent by the Jewish Agency to Argentina as an emissary, where we facilitated the aliya of students to Israel, and retired in 1993. In 1996 we moved to the senior citizen facility at Neve Efal, where we tend our mini-garden in our mini-villa. We do quite a bit of traveling and are particularly proud of our widening family circle. Our children are all married, we have 13 grandchildren and are expecting our first great grandchild.

The operations that I carried out (in the years 1945 – 1947).

(The sinking of two British coastal vessels in the port of Haifa)

In November of 1945 Yochai ben Nun and I were ordered to sink two British coastal vessels in the port of Haifa. This was to be done in coordination with the blowing up of the railroad tracks. That meant that we had 48 hours to plan, and practice before the actual event.

On the night of the operation we left for Haifa in a small motor launch that belonged to Gordonia–Maapilim. We entered the harbor from the sea as very diligent searches were conducted at the gate entrance. We knew that the boats we were interested in were protected by metal nets that surrounded them. We circled the two boats carefully in order to observe how they were guarded and also to judge where they were exactly positioned.

We decided to use the fishing boat, "Aliza", which belonged to Sdot Yam as our base. The "Aliza" had been ordered to position itself at a certain point in the harbor without telling its crew why. We tied up to the "Aliza" and Yochai climbed aboard and explained to the crew what we were about to do. The crew was

pleasantly surprised. The explosives were put on board, and hidden and guarded while Yochai and I had a few hours' sleep.

At 21:00 hours we started preparing the explosives with primitive detonators which were the product of the Caesarea machine shop. Suddenly there was a loud wail of a siren. We had no time to return the explosives to their hiding place so we put them under the mattress that one of the fellows was lying on. He had a high fever and could not get out of bed. Every one else also got into their beds and snored away blissfully. Eight detectives of the British police came on board to search the vessel. They looked everywhere but luckily did not check the mattress of the sick sailor. They left the ship and we were relieved.

Five minutes before zero hour we heard automatic weapons firing from the area near the train station. Lights went on all over the harbor area, and activity all over the place. Yochai decided to delay zero hour until 3:00 a.m. The harbor area returned to peaceful quiet, and a soldier paced back and forth on guard to the sound of gramophone music. I was dressed in a swimsuit and covered with grease which was to protect me from the cold, but didn't. I was also loaded with explosives which were in salami-like rubber containers. I got into a small rowboat, rowed to a string of barges and in the shadows entered the water and swam towards the police boats. The weight of the belt of explosives was pulling me down and I had to use all of my strength to stay afloat. I was shivering violently and my teeth chattered continuously.

I made for the bow of the boat while the guard was walking toward its rear, and placed the explosives against the side of the vessel.. I could hear the click as the magnet attached the explosive against the side. All this time I was paddling with my legs to stay afloat and to stay warm. It took about a half hour to make sure that all of the explosives were placed where required. When that was done I swam back to the "Aliza". Once on board I was given a towel, dry clothes, hot coffee and cognac. I soon got back into my tiny launch and was away from the harbor twenty minutes before the scheduled explosion.

We headed south toward Caesarea without lights and once there, found Yaakov Salomon, Dov Tsessis and Benny Marshak waiting to hear how we had carried out our assignment. The next morning's papers carried the news:"Two British coastal vessels were blown up by our forces. One was wrecked completely and the other will need serious repairs that will take many months." The port authorities were now aware that the Hagana had modern underwater equipment at its disposal and would have to improve defenses a great deal if ships were to be protected from marine sabotage.

"Kaf Gimel Yordei Ha'sira"

Before I left for Italy, I met Grisha, a member of Kfar Gileadi, and a very devoted, brave and wise person who was active in Aliya Bet. Grisha told me when I was to leave and how I was to get onto the ship on which I was to make passage (as a

stowaway). I had no passport and no identification of any kind. When I arrived at Bari I was given the assignment to find a good place along the coast where we would be able to transfer the immigrants from shore to ship. I thought of laying down a bridge of pipes from shore to ship and experimented with pipes and with a special connection between them. The main problem was to tie the pipes to the sand at the floor of the sea. This was a difficult job but we succeeded after some hard work. From where the pipes ended we took the immigrants by boat to the ship. When the immigrants were transferred successfully to the ship we received many compliments from Yehuda Arazi and Ada Sereni on the job done. The Italians knew what we had been doing but did not interfere.

On the 2nd of August 1946 we sailed for Palestine. The commander of the ship was Yisrael Rotem (Rosenblum) and I was second-in-command. The Gideoni was Yitzchak Hektin and the captain of the ship was an Italian, and a crew of 8 foreign sailors. We had 750 olim on board, most of them from various youth movements. According to the original plan, the olim on board the "Katriel Jaffe" were supposed to transfer over to our ship when we would be at sea. However, two days after we had left port, when we were about 75 miles from Cape Papos, our engine died. We called for help, asked for a tow, and tried to proceed onward with sails, but there was no wind. We stayed where we were for three days.

The number of sick people rose each day and on the third day there was an uprising on the ship. The olim tried to take over the bridge and Yisrael and I had no alternative but to use force to put down the revolt. This we did. At noon of the 11th of August a British plane spotted us and that same evening a destroyer hove into sight. We received instructions to offer passive resistance to their boarding the ship. On the 14th of August the British boarded and took the ship in tow to Haifa. On the 16th of August the olim decided to go on a hunger strike. We lost radio contact with Palestine. On the 17th of August the British started to tow us to the deportation ships and used force to achieve their end. Finally, on the 18th of August, we reached Cyprus and the olim were sent to Camp 55 together with us Palyamniks. Seven olim were injured in the fight against the British.

This is what Gabi Weisman, one of the olim, wrote on page 131 of his book, "The Weak ": "Shaul, one of the Palyamniks, tall and dark and of an athletic build, climbed all over the ship like a monkey, even in the roughest of seas, as if he were on the steps of his home. Everyone called him Tarzan and the girls could not keep their eyes off him, the man of their dreams."

The camp at Cyprus, - and the escape:

My first impression of the camp in Cyprus was a negative one and it was even worse for the immigrants. It had a barbed wire fence surrounding it, just as in the concentration camps in Europe. We organized the olim into groups and started training them in self-defense and in the use of weapons. A few months later we received word from Palestine that eight of us were to escape and return to

Europe. We divided into pairs and each pair was to devise its own method of escape. I was to escape via the sea. We went with a group of women and children to the beach and appointed one of them to see that the British would get fouled up when doing the counting on return. I and my companion hid our clothes behind rocks and swam out into the water. We waited while the others returned to the camp, and when they had gone, came ashore and got our clothes. We then walked alongside the road where we were to meet a Cypriot riding on a motorbike. There was a mix-up in the date and he failed to appear. We stepped off the road and hid out for a whole day, without food or water. The next day when he did appear he took us to where six others had gathered. We boarded a ship which was to take us to Greece, but en route the captain decided that he wanted more money from us but we refused to give him any more. He demanded that we get off the ship on one of the nearby islands. We decided to take him prisoner and arrested his whole crew. We then continued towards Greece and when we were fairly close a canon shot was fired at us, but missed.

It seems that Communist smugglers were expected to arrive at that same spot on the coast and the Greek navy was ready for them. We were captured instead. We were taken bound in ropes through the streets of Athens to the prison. We spent several months in this place until a rich Greek Jew managed to bribe a guard and we were able to make our escape. We boarded another ship that was headed for southern Italy.

The camp at Metaponto:

Yehuda Arazi appointed me commander of the immigrant camp. We were supposed to load immigrants onto a ship that had appeared for the rendezvous when the area, where we were waiting, was surrounded by Italian carabinieri. Our radio contact with the ship was cut. I was told by Yehuda to swim out to the ship and tell her to get away. The sea was rough and I had a very hard time making headway. The men on the ship saw me struggling in the water and sent a motor boat to pick me up. The next day when the sea had calmed down we again rendezvoused with the ship and loaded the olim. One of the women fell overboard with her pack on her back and I had to convince her to let go of the pack because I could not keep her above water with the weight of the pack on her back.

“Mordei Hagetaot” :

On the 13th of May 1947 the “Rebels of the Ghetto” sailed from Bari to Palestine. The commander of the ship was Eliezer Armon (Versh) and I was his second-in-command. The Gideoni was Shalom Burstein. The captain of the ship was Turkish and he had a crew of eight sailors. We were carrying 1,457 immigrants. They had all been loaded onto the ship by 8 rubber boats in three hours, without a hitch. On the 15th of May we were caught in a storm and hid behind the island of Capalonia for 34 hours until the storm blew over. On the 18th of May we were supposed to meet the “Yehuda HaLevi” and take on its 450 passengers. This

plan was abrogated when the "Yehuda HaLevi" failed to arrive because it had run out of fuel.

On the 22nd of May when we were opposite Rafiah we were spotted by a British plane and soon we met a British destroyer. A second destroyer appeared shortly thereafter and ordered us to make for Haifa but we refused. That afternoon the two destroyers ran into us in order to make us change direction. After that we were sprayed with tear gas and streams of water. When the British came on board we silenced the engine and the olim resisted the British fiercely. Three hours later, we were captive and being towed to Haifa. On the 24th of May the olim were transferred to the deportation ship "Runnemedede Park" and taken to Cyprus. Eliezer went with them. The rest of us had orders to hide in the ship with gas masks for two days and to prepare rations for ourselves as well. Two days later the workers who came to clean the ship got us out.
