

Perry (Perlson) **Micha** (of blessed memory)

Born in Jerusalem 1 December 1923

Joined the Palmach in 1942

Joined the Palyam in 1946

Died in Tel Aviv 11 June 1998

Written by Nimrod; brought for publication by Tutti Perry

This is the Way it Was

Michael Perry was one of the first to volunteer for the Palmach, in 1942. He was a graduate of a course for squad leaders and one for platoon leaders. In 1946 he was transferred to the Naval Company (Palyam) as head of the course at Ein Hayam for small boat commanders. He worked in Aliya Bet and returned to Israel at the outbreak of the War of Independence. He joined the Harel Brigade and afterwards served in the Negev Brigade. He was known for his part in freeing Ma'apilim from the Atlit Detention Camp, and in events connected with the "Exodus".

A boom shook the port of Hamburg a few moments after the last refugee disembarked from the ship "Empire Rival". This was on the morning of September 9, 1947 and was the final knell in the tragic episode known as the "Exodus Affair". The beginning had been several months earlier when the ship sailed from the port of Sete, France on the morning of July 11, 1947. The story of the "Exodus" has been well publicized and was one of the most heart-rending in the annals of Aliya Bet. There have been articles, books, and movies published in connection with this moving drama.

We have limited our account to the participation of Micha, and the important part that he played in this drama; not only because he was one of the few Palmachniks who continued on the last leg of this voyage, but his being there allowed him to play a role in what developed further. After the fierce battle on the "Exodus", the 4,500 Ma'apilim were transferred to three deportation ships in the port of Haifa, and it eventually became clear that these ships were not going to Cyprus. This was new, and something which caused concern. When the three ships reached Port de Bouc and dropped anchor, it became patently clear that something foreboding was taking place. The refusal of the Ma'apilim to disembark from the ships threw everyone concerned, the French, the British, the Mosad for Aliya Bet, and the Palmach, into a state of consternation.

The Palyamniks knew that, come what may, they would remain loyal to the basic instructions of the commander of the Palmach, Yigal Alon; "Sabotage the British Fleet!" When it was learned that the destination of the deportation vessels was Hamburg, Germany, all doubts vanished. Nissan Leviatan commanded the Palyamniks in France. He and Shaul Biber went to the quarries in the vicinity of Marseilles to look for explosives and detonators. At the same time, he sent a note to Micha (Perlson) Perry:

"Since time is limited, we have decided that we will sabotage without waiting for a confirming order. Our standing orders are those that we received from Palmach Headquarters; to resist deportation and to sabotage the deportation ships. This operation falls into that category. I therefore order you to sabotage the ship if the explosives reach you. The explosion must occur after the refugees leave the ship."

Micha, like many other veterans of the Palmach, had had a course or two in demolition. This fact plus the fact that he had a reputation as a tough fighter and a brave and loyal individual were reasons enough for Nissan to choose him, and the results proved that the choice had been the right one.

Shaul Biber passed the explosives to Micha via a girl named Marga, a refugee on the "Empire Rival".

En route to Hamburg the vessels anchored at the British base of Gibraltar where they took on food supplies and fuel. In that port they were surrounded by numerous ships of the British Fleet. One was the "Ajax", the flagship of the Mediterranean Fleet and the ship that had sunk the "Graf Spee", in a battle near the mouth of the La Platte during WW II. Micha prepared his material and surveyed the vessel for an opportunity. He and the other Palyamniks discussed the technical points of where, what, and how to do the job. Since Micha did not think he was a good enough swimmer he found a volunteer, Elchanan, who would carry an explosive. They were due for a disappointment, because the defense of the Fleet and especially of the "Ajax" seemed impenetrable. Launches patrolled the area constantly, and depth charges were dropped every few minutes. When the moment of decision came and Elchanan stood opposite Micha ready to go into the water, a decision had to be made. They looked at each other and Micha decided: "The mission is cancelled, chances of success are close to nil, and the Palmach will not use 'suicide bombers'". That ended the Gibraltar chapter.

By the time that they reached Hamburg, the "Empire Rival Operation" had been prepared to the smallest detail. An opening was made into a tank in a hold and the explosives were prepared with delaying fuses and detonators buried inside it. All of this was dangerous as the material being used was old and unfamiliar. In such a case it might be difficult to prevent an accidental detonation and they had to be certain that all of the Olim had disembarked from the ship. The fate of the "Patria" weighed on the conscience of every Palmachnik. Micha therefore ordered that the Ma'apilim on his ship leave in a quick and orderly manner, without offering resistance. This surprised them and others as there had been resistance on all other occasions, but his leadership was such that the Ma'apilim did as he said. They had complete faith in him. Micha himself stayed behind to activate the detonators. The British had experience from previous voyages of deportation ships and searched them after all the passengers had left. They therefore searched the ship as soon as the Ma'apilim departed, found an explosive and neutralized it, and thought that their work was done. The British intended to publicize the duplicity of the Jews and display their findings at a newspaper conference, but before the announced time of the conference, a

bomb exploded. There had been a second detonator that went off as scheduled.

Some time later Shaul Avigur invited Micha to his office, and suggested that they take a walk. When they were out of earshot of others, Shaul said to him, "Now, if you didn't know beforehand, you are on trial." Micha was surprised and asked him why. "For attempting to blowing up the "Empire Rival" without a direct order to do so." Micha replied, "The standing orders of Palmach Headquarters were good enough for me". "I know that well enough," said Shaul, "That is why I am scolding you. Can you imagine what would have happened if the bomb exploded with a group of journalists present?" Micha lowered his eyes..

The standing order of Yigal Alon, commander of the Palmach, had been carried out to the letter.

Micha played an active role in the years to come, in the War of Independence, the Sinai Campaign, the Six Day War, the War of Attrition and the Yom Kippur War. He did not miss anything.

Editorial note :

The order to sabotage the "Empire Rival" was not in writing. Nissan gave the order to Micha orally.