

Porat, Chaim (Fratkin)

Born in 1923 in Kishinev, Romania. made Aliya in 1929

Joined the Palmach in 1941, radio operators' course in 1943

Joined the Mossad Le'Aliya Bet in 1945

Died 7 September 1980

Brought to print by: Rina Porat

This is the Way it Was

Chaim made Aliya with his parents when he was 6 years old. He received his education at the Ben Shemen Agricultural School until 1940. He joined a training group in Kibbutz Beit Alfa and joined the Palmach with the first members of "A" Company. He took a course in signaling in 1943 and worked at signaling in other courses of the Palmach and in the Palmach Headquarters at Mizra.

In 1945 he went to Europe and worked as a Gideoni (radio operator) in Aliya Bet. (On the vessels: "Hannah Senesh", "Max Nordau" and "Hakdosha"). He wrote about these voyages in an article that was published toward the end of the 1950's. Chaim returned to Beit Alfa in 1947. During the War of Independence he served as a communications officer in a headquarters communications company and continued to do so for many years when he did reserve duty. He achieved the rank of Major in the Northern Command.

He married Rina and in 1957 the family left the kibbutz and moved to Kfar Yehoshua. He worked in the treasurer's department of the Moshav. From the 1970's he was Director of the Flower Council and from 1976 he directed the vegetable department of Tnuva (a milk and vegetable cooperative and marketing company.)

On September 7, 1980 he was killed in a road accident in Tel Aviv.

Chaim's Story

In August, 1945, I was called to the headquarters of the Palmach and informed that I had to leave for Italy and come back with a vessel of Ma'apilim. I contacted the Mosad for Aliya Bet and they gave me the papers of a British soldier. I learned his personal details by heart and in the company of another 'real' soldier, left Haifa by train for Egypt. The idea was to go with the first dispatch of men from the Jewish Brigade to Italy. There were eleven "make believe soldiers" like me in this group. All of us were Palmach members and Zionist emissaries. We arrived at the base of the 405th Transport Company and waited there for six weeks. We tried to act like soldiers but did not even look like soldiers. Most of us were far past the age of enlistment. Since there was no sign of this unit moving to Italy, we came back to Palestine in the same manner that we had gone to Egypt. Several days later we left Palestine on the "Pietro 2," that had landed Ma'apilim on the shore and made a getaway without being caught by the British.

In Italy, there were army trucks waiting which brought us to the Dror Camp. Someone decided that I should remain in Italy so I was taken to Milan. From there I went with two others to a camp where Ma'apilim were waiting to board a vessel. At this camp, Magenta, we had to wait several more weeks and, in the meanwhile, trained the Ma'apilim in various things. In that manner their boarding of a vessel would go quickly and efficiently, and life on board would be as organized as possible. We were told to be ready to leave at the beginning of December. The Ma'apilim impressed me greatly. Most of them belonged to youth movements from Hungary and Romania, and there also were partisans from Poland. When the trucks came one evening to take us, we were prepared, loaded quickly, and the trucks were covered with tarpaulins. We had our own MP's to accompany us, and we took off for Genoa.

Several kilometers north of Genoa, at the end of a pier for fishing vessels, sat the ship, "Hannah Senesh". We boarded, everyone took their assigned places, and the vessel sailed out to sea when evening fell. On the following day we made radio contact with headquarters in Italy. I was not familiar with our transmitter as it was only demonstrated to me when I boarded the ship. 265 Ma'apilim remained below deck during daylight hours and were only allowed on deck in the evening. The vessel was well-built, of 250 tons, with an Italian crew and an experienced captain. We, who accompanied the Ma'apilim, and the crew developed good relations. The two other Palyamniks were experienced seamen and had been among the first volunteers in the Naval Company. When we entered the Mediterranean we made contact with Palestine, in accordance with instructions.

The first half of our voyage went smoothly. When we were about a day's sailing from Cyprus, the sea became rough and a storm arose. Many people became seasick. The sea was so rough that the chief engineer, a very experienced seaman, did not think that the ship would hold up. The captain gave all his attention to keeping the ship on course. The situation was bad, our receiver died and we were unable to fix it. We sent messages but didn't know if they were received. We had been told to head for the Nitzanim beach, but didn't have exact bearings. Some mistake occurred in the decoding and for a time our people in Palestine thought that the vessel had foundered. However, there was one Gideonit in Palestine who did not give up trying to make contact with us, caught our signals and informed the others that we were still sailing. The Ma'apilim had been below deck all this time and did not realize the seriousness of our situation. The barometer finally rose and so did our spirits, and matters began to return to normal.

On the morning of December 21st we saw a shore, but did not know which shore it was. Was it Beirut or Alexandria? We thought we had been pushed north by the strong winds. We decided by majority vote to head southward and after a short while we came in sight of the familiar cliffs of Rosh Hanikra. At the same time the receiver returned to normal and we weakly heard a shore station. We were told to prepare to unload the Ma'apilim near Nahariya and when darkness fell we approached the shore. We were directed by lights, came in as

directed, and suddenly felt the vessel's bottom scrape against something. We had settled on a rock, the ship tilted, and we were still some distance from the shore. The sea was quite rough. We lowered two of our boats and they capsized immediately.

The Naval Company on shore pulled heavy ropes between the ship and the shore and with their aid and much effort on everyone's part, the Ma'apilim were brought ashore safely under the very eyes of the British who were drinking in pubs nearby 'in honor of Christmas'. The Ma'apilim were scattered among the kibbutzim in the area and the empty vessel was discovered the following morning, teetering on a rock offshore.

Not long after, a group of Palmachniks left for Marseilles on the "Transylvania". We went as passengers under our own names but did not have French visas; only a stamp which gave us permission to leave Palestine. We were told that preparations had been made in Marseilles to get us off the ship without a visa. At least we were legally passengers on the ship. At Marseilles, there was no one to meet us. We gave our baggage to friends who were going as emissaries to Germany, and found an appropriate moment to make a clean getaway from the ship. We found our friends and our luggage, and after two days in the city set out for Milan, dressed in British uniforms and traveling in a British army vehicle. We had false documents that allowed us to go on leave to Vienna. In Milan we received instructions to go to Romania, again under the cover of being British soldiers. We were now five soldiers in the group; the other three were "real" and we two were masqueraders. We were supposedly on our way to Austria in search of family.

At Innsbruck we rode in a car that belonged to the "Bricha" in Austria (the Jewish underground that brought refugees from inland Europe to the ports.). At the entrance to Vienna we were halted by British Military Police who made a careful search and examination of our papers. It turned out that we two masqueraders had papers that were perfectly in order but those of the three real soldiers were not. We were allowed to continue and they were arrested and shipped back to their outfits. We spent two days in Vienna and then boarded a military train that carried Red Army soldiers from Austria back to their homes. We were two 'English soldiers' on a train-full of Russian soldiers and we definitely felt out of our element. We traveled at night and the Russians eyed our luggage so avidly that we didn't sleep or dare to close our eyes. The trip should not have taken more than several hours but lasted all night and we were thoroughly exhausted by morning. A minor altercation with our neighbors over a loaf of bread almost became a major incident, but luckily, trouble was avoided by the intervention of a Russian Major who looked like he might have been Jewish. At four in the morning we arrived at the wrecked station of Budapest. Our contact was nowhere to be seen and we were at a loss as to what to do or where to turn. My buddy knew Hungarian so we decided to inquire about a Jewish institution in the city, which was still in the first stages of its liberation, and under control of the army. In fact, from time to time the sound of shooting could be heard.

A fellow dressed in civilian clothes approached us and my friend explained what we were looking for. He said he also wanted to go there so we left together. After walking together for half an hour our companion thanked us for our company and left us standing in the street. We felt rather foolish in this tragicomic predicament when another fellow approached us. Having nothing to lose, we asked him where we could find the offices of some Jewish institution. To our pleasant surprise, this was a Hungarian policeman and he agreed to accompany us to the office of the Jewish Community Center. He refused to accept any remuneration for his service.

Our difficulties, however, were not over yet. The guard at the entrance to the Community Center refused to allow us to enter. The gate was to be opened only at the appointed time in the morning and we were left standing at the entrance. We were afraid that more British MP's might show up so we decided to force our way in. A row began, and just at that moment the emissary of the Bricha showed up unexpectedly, and calmed the guard. Several hours later we were on a military train on our way to Romania. We hid for a whole day on a freight train until we arrived at the town of Arad, which was the home town of my companion. We decided to visit his parents, whom he had not seen for 12 years. It is difficult to describe such an emotionally charged encounter.

The following day we left for Bucharest in the company of a local inhabitant. There we heard that the vessel was ready and they were awaiting our arrival. We installed the transmitter, made contact with headquarters in Palestine, and then left Bucharest together with 1,770 Ma'apilim on a transport that took us to Constanza. We boarded the "Smyrna", now renamed the "Max Nordau". The ship sailed as soon as darkness fell. This vessel had formerly sailed on the Danube River and was not really built for the open sea. She did not have proper ballast and we therefore couldn't allow many people on deck at any one time. It was terribly hot and stuffy below deck, and friction was caused with the refugees who were eager to go on deck as often as possible.

When we passed through the Straits and entered the Sea of Marmara, relations between us and the crew became very bad. In addition to the legal transmitter that we had because we had left Constanza legally, we also had a short wave transmitter that we had sneaked on board. It was necessary for us to take over the communications cabin and to install our transmitter instead of the legal one. I had to take over the signaling from the Turkish radio man so that I could reestablish contact with our Gideon network. We had to threaten him with force if he did not agree. I then established contact with Palestine and informed them that because of the instability of the ship we are heading for Palestine by the shortest straight line. We would not go parallel to the Turkish-Syrian coast as was first planned. There were several reasons for this decision:

- a) The weather was good and the sea calm.
- b) Some of the water we brought was not fit to drink and we had to ration everyone to half a glass of water a day. As it was very hot this caused a great

deal of unrest for everyone, especially the young and the old. We were afraid of serious consequences. The captain objected but we overruled him.

When a British plane discovered us, we notified Palestine and were informed that destroyers were already on their way to intercept us. Three British destroyers surrounded us and asked where we were headed. We said we were on our way to Port Said and from there to South Africa. After further exchanges we were told to slow down a bit so that we would get to Haifa by morning. We were then informed by our headquarters in Tel Aviv that in view of our situation, we should not show resistance. We tried to convince the Romanian crew to mingle with the Ma'apilim and that we would extract them from Atlit quickly and send them home, but were unable to convince them. They preferred to hand themselves over to the British. Since there had been bad feeling between us and them during the whole voyage, we realized that continued discussion was futile. Our biggest worry was that they would turn us (the Palyamniks) in.

Early the next morning a police launch came out to our vessel and ordered us to slow down and allow them to board. A large number of detectives and policemen came aboard, as well as several officials of ours. We had thrown the transmitter overboard the previous night and the money that we had we gave to one of our officials, and we then mingled with the refugees. The vessel was tied to the pier and everyone disembarked.

According to an earlier message, we were told that there would be a means of escape prepared on the fifth bus. The ruse was very simple: when hawkers came onto the bus, we were to take their wares and get off the bus in their stead from the exit next to the driver's seat. That was the plan, but the British did not allow its execution and we had to accept the fact that we would have to suffer Atlit for a time. Then we saw that the Romanian radio operator was talking to a British officer and pointing to us. We disappeared into the hold and changed our clothes, I shaved off my mustache, and we disappeared into the crowd of refugees. Then, suddenly I had a brainstorm! Many sick people were being taken off the ship by stevedores, and loaded into ambulances of the Red Cross, One of the girls instantly became very sick and I and another Palyamnik supported her on each side and helped her off the vessel and down the gangway, with soldiers and policemen making room for us on each side. We put her into the ambulance and made our way straight to the Solel Boneh building (a construction company, but also Hagana headquarters at the port) There we were given worker ID's with which we left the port area.

A short time later I was called up again. I went to Paris and met the Mosad for Aliya Bet emissary there. He sent me to Romania. He said that there were two vessels there waiting for men to accompany the Ma'apilim to Palestine. I arrived in Bucharest after having taken the route of the Bricha, via Italy, Austria and Hungary. I then came up against a dead end because the Romanians were not allowing any vessels to leave. We had to move the vessels to Yugoslavia and leave from there. I was in Romania for three months and kept in radio contact with our institutions in Palestine. When the vessels had been moved to

Yugoslavia I left for Zagreb with false papers. There were two vessels ready to leave; the larger one, which we named "Knesset Israel" and a smaller one which was known as "Hakdosha" (the "Saint"). The plan was that these two vessels would leave together for Palestine, and when they were not far from the coast, the refugees on the "Saint" would be taken onto the "Knesset Israel" that would continue, while the "Saint" returned to Yugoslavia to take on more Ma'apilim. The vessels were anchored in the port of Bakar and the Ma'apilim arrived at the port by train and quickly boarded and the vessels set out with the "Saint" leading. The whole coast had been mined and sailing was possible only with a Yugoslavian pilot. We were given a very good one. We did not contact Palestine the first days at sea, but there was good contact between the two ships.

On the third day a terrific storm arose and the same day the engine of the "Saint" died. The ship was being tossed in the direction of the shore. We called for the "Knesset Israel" to come and tow us, and she tried to get closer but it was almost impossible because of the violence of the sea. We were thrown upon a small rocky island about 40 km from the larger town of Split, and the vessel started drawing water. At this critical moment, the discipline and the organization of the refugees is what saved the day. The "Saint" had 400 young people, all from a few youth movements. They had trained for accidents at sea and they were ready now to act. They were quickly deposited on the small rocky coast, but all their luggage was lost as the vessel rapidly filled with water. The "Knesset Israel" had pulled in to a small fishing port nearby.

About midnight, a boat passed and with a simple flashlight I signaled an SOS, giving the name of our vessel and the number of people aboard. As it rained all the time it was difficult for me to understand the reply, but I felt that we had made our presence known; it turned out that the vessel was a Yugoslavian warship that passed our message on to Zagreb and other authorities. Several hours later a small fishing vessel came close and aided us in getting everyone to shore. We were brought to a schoolhouse in the nearest village and there we were able to dry out and rest. The "Knesset Israel" had to leave the small fishing harbor because of the severity of the storm and find a haven in Split, where it dropped anchor. There was a danger, however, that the British consul in the town would intervene to prevent the ship from leaving, so it left Split and returned to the fishing harbor where it found that the passengers of the "Saint:" had been brought. The "Saint's" passengers were taken out to the "Knesset Israel" in small boats, and this ship then took off again for Split where it took on more fuel and food supplies and once again headed out towards Palestine. I, who had been commander of the sunken "Saint", was handed over to the Yugoslavian authorities at Split. I was soon released and made for Trieste. From there I traveled to Palestine under my own name and legally, for the first time.