

Reines, Meir & Batya

Meir was born in Manchester in 1923

Batya was born in Poland in 1924

They joined the course for Gideonim in Marseilles and in that capacity they made Aliya as Gideonim (radio operators)

on the Hagana Ship "Aliya" on 17th November 1947

This is the Way it Was

We met 60 years ago. Meir was born on the 22nd of November, 1923 in Manchester, England. He joined the Habonim youth movement in that city. In the early 1940s he went south for agricultural training with the intention of making Aliya to Palestine. In March 1943, he was mobilized to fight against the Germans, in the army of His Majesty King George VI. We had an emissary to the Habonim movement then, who advised the boys to volunteer for the British navy if they were mobilized, because we would be needing sailors in Israel once we have our own State. So it was, and Meir served until August 1946.

I was born on the 30th of May, 1924 in Koty, a small village in Poland, and when I was 5 years old the family moved to Vienna. I studied for four years in the Zionist-Jewish Gymnasium named after Professor Chayut and I was also a member of the "Brit Bilu" movement. In December, 1938 I was sent in the "Children's Transport" to England, for safety; with the intention of continuing to Palestine at sometime in the future. Until the age of 17, I was a member of a youth movement in Scotland and then joined the agricultural training farm of Habonim-Hechalutz in southern England. Several months later, Meir also came to the farm.

This was in a time of war and Great Britain was trying to produce food for its population. We worked for various farmers in the area and learned how to do agricultural work. Some of these farmers had never before seen a Jew and asked us where our horns were. As they put it: "You be Jews, where be your horns?" In 1945, when the war in Europe was over, farms in England closed down as it was cheaper to import farm produce. The members of the training farm scattered and some of them disappeared. Everything was "zeks" (secret), these people were not mentioned, and Aliya Bet had begun.

Meir was in the Far East at that time, where he served as an encoder, and I was house-mother of the Hechalutz House in London. I waited for Meir to come back so that we could go together to France. In the meanwhile some of our friends had already left for Palestine on the "Yagur". The British newspapers had a field day with the news that a ship had been caught and its passengers deported to Cyprus instead of to Atlit, as had been the case up to that time. I, at the Chalutz House, received telephone calls all day, from parents asking where their children were. It wasn't pleasant for me to tell them that I didn't have the faintest idea. Like it or not, I kept the secret.

In March, 1946 Meir returned to England but was only discharged from the Navy in August of that year. We had decided not to go to France before he received his discharge, so that he would not be considered AWOL. After all, both of us were leaving family behind us in England. While waiting for his discharge, we were married and took out passports, so that we would be ready to leave. After the war one needed a logical reason to request a passport. We said that our reason was that after Meir's discharge, we wanted to go to Paris for our honeymoon. (Today, after the turn of the century, we are still on our honeymoon!).

At the end of October we left for Paris and from there we continued to Marseilles. We left letters, for our families, with friends in Paris that were sent one week after we had left the city. We told our families that we had decided to remain in France for a time to help care for children who were survivors of the Holocaust. After all, we were free and had no jobs or obligations that required our early return.

We went to the camp for Olim at St. Jerome, where we met some of our friends who had not as yet left on Aliya. We also met the "Asiatics", that is the Palyamniks who had come from Palestine. We both knew Hebrew fairly well and the Palyamniks heard that Meir had worked in the Signal Corps of the Navy, so we were immediately grabbed and assigned to the signaling course that started at "Zvulun", a beautiful villa that Napoleon had built for his "beloved" Josephine. This course lasted three months, after which we were sworn-in to the Palmach and we became "Asiatics" just like the others, without ever having set foot in Palestine.

When the course was over we were given a week's holiday, so that we could return to England to visit our families. We also visited the Habonin headquarters to see our friends. The Shaliach (emissary) there "ate our asses" because he was afraid that we had blown the secret!! We sat in a restaurant and told our friends about life in the camps around Marseilles. To our families we said that we were returning to work with the orphaned children

We, and the rest of those who were in the signaling course, remained at "Zvulun" to help out there. The transmitting station there had contact with Paris, with ships at sea, and with Palestine. We were there when the "Exodus" sailed and did not return. Among the Israelis there, were two who knew my brother. He had arrived in Palestine earlier. He had been in Vienna where he worked for the Chalutz movement and had managed to escape in a lifeboat that left the city via the Danube, just before the Germans arrived. These same Israelis crossed paths with him later, and were able to give him news of what I was doing.

At the beginning of November it was our turn to go to Palestine. This was the first ship to leave France after the "Exodus". This was a small fishing vessel that had made this trip twice before. The ship weighed 150 tons and 192 Olim were to sail on it. Only 7 children and one elderly man were allowed to sail on this dilapidated vessel. The elderly man had 5 sons with him and they refused to sail

without their father. The ship pulled into a small bay but the Olim were taken to it by a circuitous route, so that they would not know exactly from which bay the ship had sailed, in the event that they were questioned in the future by the British. When the Olim were all on board and the Italian captain was ready to sail, it became clear that I had been left without a bunk. Meir had been on the ship for a week, helping in the preparations for sailing, but I had only boarded the ship that evening. The captain offered us his cabin and said that he and his first mate would sleep in shifts in the first mate's cabin. In the captain's cabin there were two narrow beds, one above the other. It soon dawned upon us that the commander of the ship was also left without a bunk. We gave him the upper bunk in the captain's quarters, and we slept in shifts in the lower bunk. And so we went to sea.

On the second night at sea we ran into a typical November storm, and as a result of the shaking and shuddering of the vessel, the large home-made transmitter conked out. We could hear our shore stations in France and Italy, but they could not hear us. We were also not able to repair the transmitter. We could also hear the BBC weather reports, and they were not encouraging, so the captain decided not to sail in the open sea, but sail parallel to the shoreline. We sailed in this manner for about a week, until we approached Turkey. Here, it was possible to use a small, purchased transmitter and we made contact with Tel Aviv. We received orders to go out to sea and rendezvous with a larger vessel that had set out from Italy. We were to transfer our passengers to the other ship and then sail back to France to take another load.

Just as we received this message a British plane flew overhead. All the Maapilim were below in the holds at that time, and we looked like an ordinary merchant ship. An hour later we received information that our rendezvous with the other ship was cancelled as the British had spotted and captured her. We were therefore ordered to arrive at the beach of Nahariya at dawn under our own power. We were also told that the name of our ship was now "Aliya". I went below deck and told the Maapilim what the new name of the ship was. Some of them started to cry, because they believed that that name would give us away and the British would catch us. I did not know how to calm them, nor did I know what would happen. (The Maapilim did not know that we were also new Olim, just as they were).

At any rate, at 04:00 we arrived opposite the shore of Nahariya. It had been planned that I would be the first one off the ship and I would take the code books and revolver with me. After that the Maapilim would disembark, and the vessel would return to France as quickly as possible together with the commander, Meir, and the Italian crew of course. I disembarked and reached shore where I gave the code books to the people who met me. They took me into their car and we drove off in the direction of Haifa. They stopped at Gaaton on the way, where the command post for the unloading was located. Something extraordinary then happened. I sat in the car with 12 days of dirt from the voyage covering me, and someone approached the car to speak to the driver. The fellow was familiar to me and I yelled from the car: "Shalom Chaim!" It was

my brother, whom I hadn't seen since 1938! Those around us were unable to understand what had happened, but for weeks afterwards the whole Palmach talked about how Chaim had met his kid-sister on the shore of Nahariya. It was decided that it would be better for me to travel to Haifa by bus rather than by car, as I had no identification papers, and would be safer under such circumstances. I figured I would then spend a week at my brother's kibbutz before continuing on to mine, which was then at Kfar Blum. The first of our members were already starting to arrive from Cyprus.

The bus was stopped at the "checkpost" near Haifa, and British soldiers came in to check I D's. I looked the soldier straight in the eye and said in Hebrew, "I forgot" (of course I knew no English at all). Another woman nearby translated for the soldier's benefit: "She says that she forgot her ID". The soldier spoke to me and said: "If you do that one more time we will send you back to where you came from". Since I did not understand him I did not react at all. When we arrived at Haifa and I reached the offices of the Palmach, I was given an ID card and continued on my way to my brother's kibbutz.

I thought that Meir and the ship had returned to France, but before I left the office I was told that the ship had hit a rock and could not be moved in the water, so everyone had disembarked. No one knew where Meir was. One week later we found out where he was and I went to Ramat Yochanan to bring him back to my brother's kibbutz. The following day we traveled to Hagana headquarters in Tel Aviv, gave our report of the voyage and then met our friends. This was on the 23rd November, less than one week before the 29th November. On the 14th of May 1948 we received a message on a small piece of paper: "To Meir, Batya, Marga, Chaya and Shoshana: "You are to report to Sidna Ali at such and such a date and time..." Meir went, but I stayed home as I was now pregnant with our eldest daughter. Meir served in the Israeli Navy for more than a year, during the War of Independence. This was in addition to his service in His Majesty's Navy.