

**Shachar, Eliahu (Cushi)**

Born in Palestine 21 December 1928

Joined the Palmach in 1943

Joined the Palyam in 1945

**This is the Way it Was**

My name was Eliahu Yisacharoff, now Eliahu Shachar and in the Palmach I was called Cushi (Blackie). I am a fifth generation Sabra on my mother's side, and a second generation Sabra on my father's side. The Yisacharoffs on my father's side, were the founders of the Bokharan quarter of Jerusalem. I entered the Palmach in 1943 because I was influenced by Abdu, Yisrael ben Yehuda, who was a relative and a founder of the Palmach. I was among the first members of 8<sup>th</sup> Company stationed at Ramat Rachel. At first I served primarily as a scout but later I was drafted by Yigal Alon to be in the Arab speaking unit.

From the time that I was a child I was drawn to the sea, and several times asked for a transfer to the naval unit of the Palmach, which had recently been founded. Once, when I met Yitzchak Sadeh, I asked him to allow me to transfer to the naval unit and he agreed. I began in course No. 5. While at the course, the first shipload of immigrants arrived and I helped the arrivals of the "Berl Katznelson" onto the shore near Shefayim. Upon completion of the course I was sent to a course for squad leaders at Mishmar Ha'emek, and after that was sent to Givat Hashlosha. This served as a base for scouting the surrounding area, and for preparations in unloading immigrants from ships that would break the blockade.

I participated in the attacks on the police station at Givat Olga, at Sidna Ali and a police base at Kfar Vitkin. I participated in the "Night of the Bridges," in blowing up the railroad bridge near Kibbutz Gan Shmuel. On "Black Saturday," Givat Hashlosha was surrounded by the British and we fled through the orange groves to Moshav Kfar Azar. From there we scattered, lay low for a short while and then reorganized. Later, I was stationed at Solel Boneh in the port of Haifa. My job was to go onto the immigrant ships with Arab workers who cleaned the ships after they had been emptied by the British. I would find out where the Palyamniks were hiding and would see that they left the ship safely. Sometimes it was the opposite way around, and I would take Palyamniks onto the ship and hide them so that they could get to Europe safely. There were also occasions when I would smuggle "special delivery" packages off the ships and see that they got to their destinations.

One of the operations that I will never forget was the "Chaim Arlosoroff". In the fight with a destroyer, she ran up onto the rocks at Bat Galim. We were told that the Palyamniks, and perhaps some of the immigrants, had remained on board and would try to get ashore under cover of darkness. The shore was guarded by British paratroopers. We crawled close to the shore, between the paratrooper

stations, and watched the ship and water for hours. We caught sight of a figure swimming to shore in the water and went to meet it. It was Avraham Shavit.

A corner of Haifa harbor was filled with ships of the Aliya Bet, and among them was the vessel "Enzo Sereni", (the "Rondine"). The Mosad for Aliya Bet, as the owner of the ship, was engaged in a law suit against the British in an effort to retrieve it and put it to use. A group of Palmachniks, under the leadership of the manager of the shipyard , Yisrael Laskov, boarded the ship in the guise of a Solel Boneh cleaning crew, and went to work preparing the ship to be fit to sail.

We were an interesting group. There was Moshe the sailor, Gabi Weiss, Chaim Senesh, Chaim Winkler, Yosh Levi, Benny Kravitz, Pinny Ashuach and myself. The ship became our home and we used it as a base for our sorties to other immigrant ships as they arrived. Finally the day came when the "Rondine" was to sail to Alexandria, under the command of Captain Sheinman, to load fuel drums that had remained from the battles of WW II and other metal debris that had remained in the desert. We remained in Alexandria longer than expected, and used our spare time to meet Jewish youth of the city at the Maccabi club house.

One day, while walking along the streets and seeing the sights of Alexandria, two young fellows approached us, identified themselves as Jews, and warned us that the British had identified us. We were told to make a getaway ASAP. The trouble was how to get back into the port area without being seen. We decided to go into the port by way of the "Whores' Gate". We bought some bottles of beer and acted like drunkards and had only a few coins in our pockets. The Egyptian police emptied our pockets and let us through without a fuss. There was a storm at sea but we left port without a pilot. Luckily, no one imagined that a ship our size would go out to sea on such a night.

After a long voyage we arrived in Genoa, Italy. There we were divided up and I was sent to Givat Ada, a camp near Gaeta Bay. The camp was at the shore and served as a base for aliyah preparations. A hotel was not far from the camp which the British used to watch the camp constantly, since they knew that it was a base for aliya. This period that we are talking about was shortly after the "Exodus 1947" incident. An abandoned landing craft, without an engine and in a neglected state, entered the Bay. Ada Sereni, Alon and Avraham Zakai came to the Givah and after some deliberation, decided to prepare the boat for aliya. Six of us worked all night in preparing the vessel and the next morning it was decided where to pick up immigrants. A fishing boat arrived during the evening of September 16, 1947 and towed us to the pick-up point. We loaded the immigrants as quickly as possible and at four in the morning we set out for the islands where we were to pick up food from a supply ship. We transferred the food from one ship to the other at sea, which wasn't a simple task. On September 19<sup>th</sup> we crossed the Straits of Messina and were on our way. We thought that the British might try a repeat of the "Exodus," so we had a larger than usual complement of Palyamniks on the ship. Yitzik Landau was the captain of the

ship, and I was the commander. Yoske Lazarovsky was the Gideoni, with Chaya to help him. She was an immigrant who had been taught signaling. Ossy was the engineer. The immigrants were very well organized and helped at everything. On Yom Kippur we approached Egypt, were flying an Egyptian flag, and called the ship "Farida" (the name of the Queen of Egypt).

On Friday, 26<sup>th</sup> September 1947 at 14:00 hours, when we were about 20 miles north of Port Said, a 4-engined plane approached, circled above us and left. At 16:00 it returned and stayed with us. As night fell another plane joined the first and both of them stayed with us, and from time to time dropped flares to ascertain that we were there. At 19:00 a destroyer appeared and circled us. and we heard someone call us on the bullhorn. Yoske Lazarovsky and I were on deck and we were dressed as, and looked like, Arabs. We asked them in Arabic what they wanted and they asked us where we were coming from and where we were sailing to. We yelled to them in Arabic and later signaled by Morse that we came from Alexandria and we are headed to Jaffa with a load of cotton and onions. We told them that the owner of the vessel was an Arab from Cairo and we gave them an address. We then asked them what they wanted and they told us that they were looking for another small boat. After that they left us.

At 24:00 another destroyer appeared and asked if two officers could come aboard and check our papers. We replied that they could check our papers at Jaffa and we continued to sail. At 2:00 a.m. more destroyers appeared in our wake, and we were now accompanied by four. We decided that there was no sense in making the immigrants stay below deck and suffer any longer so we told them all to come up on deck. On the bridge we hoisted the Star of David and a big sign was also spread across the boat declaring us to be the Hagana Ship "Af Al Pi Chen". At the sight of the Jewish flag on the mast the immigrants broke into singing "Hatikvah".

When we were about 15 miles from the coast one of the destroyers tried to pull up alongside us. The helmsman turned the bow of the landing craft towards it and we plowed into it with force. The destroyer backed away. Later, two ships, one on each flank, came in close while shooting streams of water and small arms fire at the same time. About 20 marines came aboard and overtook the bridge. We had several wounded, two seriously. We asked for medical assistance and they told us to stop the engine. While negotiations were going on the British also took control of the engine room and stopped the engine. A doctor came to examine one of the injured but it was too late, and he was dead. The rest of the injured received a minimum of medical attention.

It seemed that we had a spy on board. She had been a member of the group from Givat Chaim and her name was Betty Fidler. At midnight, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September, a destroyer returned and turned a searchlight on us. Betty was standing near the toilets with a flashlight. After we were captured by the British she approached one of them who had the uniform of a policeman, and spoke to

him. Later, she went with some of the sailors and pointed out the Italian captain of the ship. The captain, the crew, and Yoske were all arrested. When she came to me she hesitated for a moment and I utilized the moment to shinny down a rope over the side of the vessel. Luck was not with me and after swimming for a half hour, a police patrol boat came alongside and invited me to get in. At first I tried to dodge them and get away but two sailors came for me in the water and tried to dunk me. They did not succeed and I got into their boat by myself. They beat me and threw me, unconscious, into a back locker. I woke up when they put me back onto the "Af Al Pi Chen" which was then being towed into Haifa. In Haifa I was interviewed by a detective who asked if I was an Israeli, and I answered in the negative. The spy, Betty, was standing next to him and told him that I was an Israeli and the commander of the craft. I was moved to the lock-up room and there found myself in the company of Yoske the Gideoni and the three Italian members of the crew. I was naked and demanded some clothes. In a moment of confusion that ensued, Yoske managed to disappear and to join Kafkafi and Ossy who were hiding.

While we were in this lock-up we found some photos of Betty and on the reverse side, written in English: "This person works for us. Please give her all the help you can". We passed this photo out to one of the women olim, and told her to hide it and keep it in a safe place. When we reached Haifa and the detective and Betty were leaving the vessel, the immigrants tried to get to Betty and lynch her. The British used force to protect her and several of the immigrants were injured. A sergeant was ordered to guard us until a police van could come to pick us up.

The immigrants were transferred to the evacuation ships quickly, but when there was a switch between the navy's marines who had been guarding us and the paratroopers who took over from them, the paratrooper officer in charge asked us what we were doing, and why we were not with the others. We told him that we had been ill. Some soldiers came and helped us onto the evacuation ship where we mingled with the rest of the immigrants and the ship hurried to leave port because of danger of sabotage. By the time the police came back for us, we were gone, and they thought we had escaped and searched for us in the port in Haifa. As for Betty the spy, it seemed that her mother was married to a British officer who worked in intelligence in Jaffa. She had a sister in a camp of ours in Italy. She visited her to find out when a ship was leaving and managed to get on board and come along. That is how she came to be on our ship. Originally, she had come with a group of immigrants that had been formed in Hungary.

After a short period of stay in the camps of Cyprus, Moka, Dan Ram and I were added to a group that was sent to Palestine with certificates within the framework of the monthly quota. We did not wish to meet the British officials who interrogated the immigrants on arrival at Haifa however, so planned to jump ship and swim ashore the night before arrival. We arrived at the Bay of Haifa in the afternoon and there were launches of the Ogen Company delivering food in the Bay. We moved to a launch and hid in the chain locker but Moka was too tall and

could not fit himself in. He went back to the evacuation ship and swam to the Krayot as originally planned. We got out of the port safely and heard that Moka did as well. On the eve of the decision of the UN to create the State of Israel, we headed back to Jerusalem where we celebrated together with the whole nation, and there was dancing in the streets of the city. On the following day there were riots and incidents. There was a halt to sending people to the Diaspora and we were put to work here in Palestine. I was assigned to set up a training camp for volunteers for the Palmach at Caesarea, and afterwards I set one up at Michmoret.

Riots and attacks took place all over the country. There were such attacks at Kfar Saba and other spots in the Sharon Valley. From Michmoret we went out on counterattacks of many of the surrounding Arab villages. When the convoy at Nebi Daniel was under siege we organized a relief party in Tel Aviv, but while still getting organized, the British pulled them out of danger. We were sent to Hulda where we joined other forces preparing to break the siege of Jerusalem.

Four companies of the Palyam were organized within the framework of the Fourth Battalion of the Palmach. Once it was formed they went forward to Shaar HaGai under the command of Yochanan Zariz and Uzi Narkis. From Shaar HaGai we advanced on foot to capture strategic heights as far as the village of Saris. In the morning, a convoy that set out from Hulda and Naan was attacked and did not succeed in breaking through. Our force was also under strong attack and we retreated to Neve Ilan. From there we went by armored vehicles to Kiryat Anavim and Maaleh HaHamisha.

Two hundred and twenty Palyamniks took part in the heavy fighting for Jerusalem as part of the Portzim(The Breakers Through). One of the battles that I will never forget was the last battle for the Kastel. The Kastel passed from one side to the other a number of times. Abdul Kadr el Husseini was killed by the Palyam machine gunners, Sharabi and Moshe Katznelson, in my opinion. Armored vehicles of ours that had been captured by the Arabs at Nebi Daniel surprised us from the rear and many of the infantry and Palmachniks who were there were killed, including the reinforcements that came up under the command of Nachum Ariely. We were removed from the hilltops we had captured in the attack on Saris and, although we had had no sleep for several days, were also thrown into the battle because the "order of the day" was: "The Kastel must be taken and the siege of Jerusalem broken at all costs!"

Tired as we were, we consolidated our forces and at midnight advanced on the Kastel. The force under my command was ordered to lead the attack on the Kastel. We arrived at dawn and tried to advance toward the house and received a heavy barrage of fire from all directions. We reduced the number of our men and left more of those in the rear and at the sides to cover our advance with more firepower while we, mostly the officers, ran like mad toward the house. We cleared the house of the enemy as well as the surrounding area, while at the

same time a convoy with supplies made its way to Jerusalem and another, of empty trucks, went back in the direction of the coast. That was an inspiring sight! Once the State was founded and Tzahal was established, there was a demand to send the seamen back to the navy, which was also in the first stage of formation. After some pressure was applied on the Fourth Battalion I was told to report to the navy and given command of a ship that was due to arrive. We went out to sea to meet the ship which looked like a fast torpedo boat. We named the ship "Ha'Portzim" in honor of the Battalion that fought to break the siege of Jerusalem.

When fighting was renewed after a brief lull, a landing force was formed together with the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion under the command of Chaim ben David. This force was scheduled to reach the Litany River in Lebanon and blow up bridges. I was to lead our marines to this objective. We took so much explosives with us that each soldier was carrying at least 30 kg on his back. We trained intensively for this operation at Atlit and we went out to sea twice on dry runs. In the end, this mission was aborted and to this day, I don't know why. My next job was at Intelligence Headquarters as commander of a special unit, and in May 1950 I retired from Tzahal. I joined Michmoret in September 1949. As a member of Michmoret and skipper of the fishing vessel "Ophir" I served as second-in-command of a naval unit made up of fishing vessels whose job was to protect the coast. Finally, I became commander of that unit until 1978, when I left the country on a mission with ZIM shipping company.