

Soboliv, Benyamin (Benny)

Born 29 April 1927 in Ein Harod

Joined the Palyam at Sdot Yam in 1945

This is the Way it Was

In 1930 Benny's family moved to the Borochov quarter. His father, Zacharia, because of his past military training (in Russia, in the White Army and afterwards in the Red Army during the Revolution), and because of his Zionist activity from youth, became active in the Hagana as soon as he arrived in Palestine. He was active in that field when he was in the Gdud Ha'avoda, (the Workers' Battalion – organized in the early twenties by Yosef Trumpeldor.), in Ein Harod and later in the Borochov Quarter of Tel-Aviv. He was connected with the underground weapons industry and was responsible for the water supply in the Borochov Quarter. He was also in charge of the mobile forces of the Hagana in that area during the riots of 1936. He was one of the initiators and organizers of the Gadna (youth paramilitary, pre-Hagana training program.) in Tel Aviv and in Palestine as a whole.

His mother, Rivka, was also active. During the riots of 1936 she was active in the women's section of the Hagana, and after that, in the Red Magen David. She did this voluntarily. She taught and created branches of this organization, and was a member of its central committee until she was in her 80's.

Benny was 14 when he joined the Noar HaOved youth movement together with friends in his class. He entered the ranks of the Hagana officially when he went to the Gadna, but had already been active earlier, in various ways. In 1944, it was obvious that there would be an increase in illegal Aliya. Therefore, "the Old Man", Yitzchak Sadeh, introduced the idea of nautical training into the curriculum of the Gadna, especially in those battalions close to the sea. He thought that this would be an aid to the Palyam in time of need. Benny was placed in a platoon that began to study sailing as an addition to the nautical company of the Tel Aviv Hapoel. At the same time he studied in the Max Fein Technical School. There were some boys from the Tel Aviv Noar HaOved movement in his class who were also in the Hapoel nautical company. When the Tel Aviv group was to go for training to Kibbutz Sdot Yam, Benny joined them. The entire group soon joined the Palyam. Benny joined in 1945. After working for a short time in fishing he, and three other fellows, were assigned to participate in the 6th course for small boat commanders of the Naval Company of the Palmach.

In 1946 his group went to Kibbutz Shefayim and continued to participate in Palmach activities. This also included Palyam activity such as helping unload Ma'apilim. Such was the case with the "Shabtai Luzinski" when many of the Israelis were also deported to Cyprus. Benny volunteered to remain there and did not return with the others. As he had formerly been a leader in the Gadna, he was able to fit in nicely as an instructor for the "Ranks of the Defenders" in Cyprus, and worked with the youth in the camps in preparing them for the

Palmach, when they reached Israel. He was interested in photography and took pictures of the daily life of his group and their training. He also took pictures of the Sixth Course and prepared files on various British Army camps and for false papers and passports that the Palmach or the Palyam might need; especially following "Black Saturday".

During the War of Independence Benny's group was earmarked for the reserves at Kiryat Chaim. Most of the members were working in the port as stevedores, or as fishermen, active in smuggling weapons, or in sabotaging British equipment. Some even worked in the metal factory of Kibbutz Ein Harod, and between the manufacture of stainless steel drums and milk pails, they also built armored trucks. Although many of the members of the group participated in activities and fought at various times in various places, the group as a whole was never mobilized into active service. This displeased many of them and they ran away to the Palmach. In June 1948 the group was transferred to the empty Arab village of Tantura where they founded Kibbutz Nachsholim. The kibbutz operated two fishing vessels in its first years.

From 1950 Benny lived in the Borochov neighborhood of Givataim and worked in his home shop at metal working. Benny is now retired and still takes photos.

From his memoirs:

From the moment he joined the nautical group at Sdot Yam he took part in every attempt to unload Ma'apilim. Sometimes we actually unloaded the refugees and sometimes the vessels were caught and the immigrants captured by the British. It is not difficult to imagine how disappointed we were if a vessel was caught and we waited in vain. Because of the arrangement of half the group working to support itself while the other half did training, I did not get the opportunity to participate in unloading until the "Shabtai Luzinski" arrived.

On the morning of 12 March 1947, while we were in Shefayim, we were called from training or from where we were working in the kibbutz, and were told to dress in after-work clothes. We got into a bus and took off, and of course none of us knew where we were headed. We arrived at Kibbutz Nitzanim and took up positions in the dunes. Some of our men joined the force that was guarding our perimeter but I was in the dunes, with the rest. Boats came by sea from Caesarea. The sea was rough and looked as if it would become rougher (and it did). Night descended and this was one of the darkest and coldest nights that I remember.

We waited, and then waited some more; then in that darkness I could faintly discern a shape that was still darker. The vessel had arrived. Seamen dropped inflatable lifeboats into the water but they capsized almost immediately. It did not seem to me that the boats, "Dov", "Rivka", "Tirza" and "Chana" [*editorial note: we are not aware the Palyam had a boat named Chana, and we believe this is a mistake*] or any others would be able to approach the vessel. It was decided to take the Ma'apilim off by rope. However, there was no rope available so Boaz went to get one. When this was brought, a group of the boys went

some distance north of the vessel and then swam out to it. The current helped when they came from that direction but the current and the waves were too much and they could not get the rope to the ship. A second group went out and did succeed in taking the rope to the vessel. The rope was tied as taut as possible at both ends and the group in the water spread along it to help the Ma'apilim move. The waves were now two meters high and the bow of the vessel would rise 4 meters out of the water. Very few were ready to maneuver the length of rope from that height. Fewer were ready to jump into the water. There was a lull in the action and then a plane showed up and circled overhead. Shortly thereafter destroyers arrived on the scene. The British tried to lower boats into the water but their boats also capsized. The men in them were thrown into the sea (and we heard afterwards that two of them had drowned). When the British ships showed up, the Ma'apilim became more daring and many of them jumped into the water while we helped them to get to shore.

I felt that I was going to freeze to death, and was very glad when someone came to relieve me and I was able to go ashore to dry myself and rest for a while. We thought then that liquor was a cure for being cold, and I took a healthy swig, but a warm blanket and a hefty massage by someone was what really warmed me. Feeling much better I returned to the rope. I then saw for the first time what I had heard in stories; the Ma'apilim came out of the water and the first thing they did was to kiss the ground. Only after that, with tears of emotion in their eyes, did they take a glass and drink "LeChaim" – To Life.

By the time the sky was lit by morning light we could see that we were surrounded. It looked as if the whole British army had come to seal us off. Out at sea was a veritable armada of vessels, large and small. Somehow, our fellows who had been guarding the perimeter managed to make a getaway. People from the surrounding settlements had been urgently called to the scene in order to prevent the British from identifying the Ma'apilim from the local population. This succeeded only partially and only several dozens of Olim were hidden in the surrounding settlements. Since we destroyed our identity cards, however, we did make matters much more difficult for the British. Finally, about 800 people, Ma'apilim and Israelis, were loaded onto trucks and taken to Haifa. There, with the British using no small amount of force and we using passive resistance; all were placed on a deportation ship and taken to Cyprus. This was the 13th March*, and according to tradition we raised a toast to all who were anywhere on this night, and to "The Life of the Vessels En Route!" The following day we were in Cyprus and this is the beginning of another story, of: "The Ranks of the Defenders".

The 13th :

It was a tradition of the Palyam to drink a toast to all their members, wherever they were in the world, on the evening of the 13th of every month. This did not mean that they had to abstain from drinking on any other evening.