

Tankus, Shmuel
 Born in Neve Shalom, Yafo on 14 November 1914
 Commander of Immigrant ships during the 30's
 Nickname – Shimon
 Tutor in Hagana and Palyam courses
 Commander of the Navy, 1954 – 1960

This is the Way it Was

My Activities as a Seaman

I was born in Neve Shalom in Yafo. I completed studies at the Hebrew high school Gymnasium Herzlia, in Tel Aviv, and then studied biology at the Hebrew University. I joined the nautical branch of "Hapoel" in 1932. This was one of three sea 'clubs' that existed on the Yarkon River: Hapoel, Zevulun and Sea Scouts. These three clubs, and particularly Hapoel, carried out various sea-related activities before the Palyam was formed. Incidentally, commanders of the Israeli Navy; Moka Limon, Shmuel Tankus and Bini Telem all came from the Hapoel Club, Chita (Avraham Botzer) was from the Sea Scouts and Shlomo Erel was from the Naval School at Civitavecchia . All the other Commanders of the Navy started their careers in the Israeli Navy. In Hapoel I served as a tutor, taught courses and also served as co-ordinator of all Hapoel activities in Palestine. I will detail those activities in which I took part.

The Port of Tel Aviv

In 1936 the Arabs revolted and declared a general strike which continued until the outbreak of WW II. As a result of this strike the Port of Jaffa was shut down. This was the only port in Palestine at the time. The Jewish Agency received permission from the British High Commissioner to build the Port of Tel Aviv. I participated in building the port and thereafter worked there as a seaman.

Aliya Bet – Immigration

I took part in Aliya Bet operations from the day they started in 1934 when the ship "Velos" arrived and until it ended when the State was founded. Incidentally, Berchik, (Dov Magen) was an immigrant (oleh) on that ship. In 1938 I was sent abroad to accompany the ship "Atrato" and the immigrants aboard it. I made the trip to Palestine three times. The first two times Catriel Yaffe was the ship's commander and when he returned to Palestine I became the ship's commander. Boats, in which the immigrants were to land on the shore, were brought with us on our ship. These were fairly large metal boats, each of which could carry 30 passengers. The boundaries of the landing area were marked by a green light on the southern side of the shore and a red light on the northern side (this is standard practice at sea. The entrance to an anchorage is marked on the right side (starboard) with a green light and the left side (port) with a red light. The center of the area was marked by a light tower with two white lights, one above the other.

When the ship was close to shore, we would fill one of the boats with immigrants and one Palyamnik to accompany them, and sailors would row the boat onto the shore. Once the passengers were removed another team of sailors would row the boat back out to the ship. Meanwhile, another boat would be loaded with immigrants and so it went. The last boat

picked up all the sailors who had gathered on the shore, and brought them back to the ship. In this manner we managed to bring ashore 300 immigrants in two hours, from the time we dropped anchor at that point, to the time we hauled it up.

On one occasion, we arrived at the shore near Herzlia with the Atrato and, as I had said previously, there was a great deal of unrest and riots in the country at that time. There was a searchlight at the Reading power station, and we notified the men there not to cast the light northwards in our direction. Somehow, the word "Do Not" was lost in transmission and the searchlight was shined on us constantly. This created a good deal of nervousness and tension, until the mistake was corrected.

On another occasion we had a large group of religious Jews on board with us. They had brought their own foodstuffs and all they took from the ship was fruit, vegetables and bread. We arrived at the shore on a Friday night and these immigrants announced that they could not leave the ship because that would be against Sabbath laws. Davidka (David Nameri), who was on the shore, told them that they had permission of the Chief Rabbinate to vacate the ship. Only then did they agree to leave the ship.

After the "Atrato" I was transferred to command the "Colorado". This was a rather small, weak and slow moving ship that had traveled between the Greek Islands. We did not want to sail with it on the open sea because we did not trust it. Instead, we put the passengers on board in port, and then transferred them to the "Atrato" for the voyage to Palestine. We were to pick up 300 Czech immigrants in the Yugoslav port of Suchek (known today as Rieka). The Yugoslavs gave us permission to do so on condition that the Czech government agree that, if the Jews are not allowed to disembark in Palestine they would not be returned to Yugoslavia, but to Czechoslovakia. The Czechs agreed. The day that the immigrants boarded the train in Prague the Germans conquered Czechoslovakia and stopped the train. The Yugoslavs now demanded the same guarantee from the Germans that they had demanded of the Czechs, and to our very great surprise, the Germans agreed. Nevertheless, when the train reached the Yugoslav border it was not allowed to continue and a week of negotiations ensued with the Yugoslavs. I was told that I could not go back to Czechoslovakia or Germany, because I would be arrested and sent to a concentration camp.

Finally, permission was granted and we were able to take on the passengers and to leave port. We met the "Atrato" near one of the Yugoslav islands, and transferred the passengers to the "Atrato". While this operation was proceeding a Yugoslav launch with a number of policemen approached and intended to interfere with the operation. We were able to bribe them and they left us alone and we continued the transfer and set sail for Palestine. We then returned to the port of Split where we took on fuel and returned to Suchek to take more passengers.

At Split, the police opened an inquiry into what had happened to our passengers who had boarded at Suchek. We told them that we had had problems with our engines and we transferred the passengers to another vessel. For them the crux of the matter was whether we had done this in Yugoslav waters or in Italian waters. I was taken into custody and at the jail asked to point out where the transfer had taken place. I pointed at a spot that indicated we

had done the transfer in Italian waters. While I was being questioned, one of the policemen that we had bribed, walked in and pointed at a spot on the map that showed we had been in Yugoslav waters. I was then warned that I could be severely punished if I were lying, so I made up a long story that there is no point in retelling here, but which convinced them that I had spoken the truth and I was finally released. I returned to the ship and after a few more days in port and the smearing of a few more hands we left port. At this juncture I left the ship and returned to Palestine.

The ship: "Tiger Hill":

This ship had cost a lot of money so it was decided not to endanger it by approaching the coast of Palestine, but to transfer her passengers to small Greek ships that would make the run to the coast. There were 800 immigrants on the ship. At the same time there was a ship in the port of Beirut, called the "Pursula". She had 600 passengers on board and had entered the port in order to load supplies. This ship met the "Tiger Hill" at sea and transferred her immigrants to it. The ships came from Greece as planned and were dry above the water line. When the passengers were loaded onto them they started to leak. Davidka and I were in Atlit at the time and waiting to see what would happen. When it became clear that the Greek ships were not seaworthy, the immigrants were returned to the "Tiger Hill" and it was decided that it should make for shore.

There was unrest and complaints on the part of the passengers of the "Pursula" who wanted the "Tiger Hill" to make for the port of Haifa, but as I said earlier, this was a very expensive ship and we wanted to be sure that it would not be captured by the British. A launch left the Yarkon River and came to the ship bringing Catriel Yaffe to take over its command, and the captain of the British launch that surveyed that area of the coast was bribed and asked not to approach the area of what is today the port of Ashdod, where the landing was to take place. This captain betrayed us and was on the spot when the transfer of the immigrants took place. The "Tiger Hill" headed out to sea at full speed but a rocket fired from the launch killed two people on the ship, but the ship managed to reach international waters. It was now decided that the ship should make for the coast and land its passengers so, with all lights showing, the ship headed in and landed on the shore of Tel Aviv. Before it made this run, Catriel Yaffe and other members of the crew, and the Israeli escorts, left the ship in a small boat and reached the Yarkon River safely.

The members of the existing clubs did not number enough men for the work that had to be done, so the Hagana decided to train more men by opening two courses in seamanship. The participants in these were for the most part men from kibbutzim which had a fishing branch of work, and there were also students from the Technion. Catriel Yaffe, (later to become the commander on the ill-fated voyage of the 23 men to Tripoli) and I were appointed as the tutors for these courses. Berchik was a student in the first course and became a tutor in the second one. Yehuda Rotem, who later became the managing director of ZIM, was also a student. After these courses I became a sort of roving tutor who visited the kibbutzim most involved in the fishing industry; Sdot Yam, Hulata, Ginosar and Ein Gev. I was also a tutor for the Jewish Agency and worked with young people in Atlit and Nahariya.

The 23 Who Went Down at Sea:

I was one of the group from which the 23 sailors were chosen for that operation. I was removed from participating in that operation because my superiors wanted me to continue as an instructor of courses.

The Palyam:

During the years of WW II, aliya activities came to a complete standstill. The experience that had been gained before the outbreak of the war and the plans for increasing the activity of Aliya Bet led to the formation of a mobilized unit that would be able to continue this work. Courses were therefore organized in Caesarea for small boat commanders who were chosen from the Palmach. I prepared the agenda for these courses and was an instructor in theoretical subjects such as sails, seamanship and traffic regulations, navigation and meteorology. Berchik was the instructor in practical seamanship and in other subjects, such as dealing with the immigrant passengers and organizing their life while on board ship. Other instructors were Moka Limon and Uri Flantziboim (Neta). The atmosphere at these courses was very close, comradely, and native in reflecting the spirit of the Land of Israel at its very best. There were bonfires and singing and some good-humored pranks. Although our training was held only on small boats the men reached a high level of efficiency and when they had bigger boats to work on, they quickly mastered what had to be done. Very many captains of commercial vessels as well as high ranking naval officers sprang from the ranks of those who had participated in these courses. A good number of the participants in these courses later participated in courses for senior ranking Palyam naval officers. I usually taught astronomical navigation in these courses.

The Navy:

I, together with other members of the Palyam was among those who organized the Israeli Navy. The Palyam command was of the opinion that the Palyam could fulfill all the functions necessary for the Israeli Navy and that no other special force was needed. Ben Gurion decided that a navy was necessary. A group of men of the Palyam, which included Yigal Alon, Avraham Zakai, Samek and I met with Ben Gurion and gave him our estimate of what such a navy would need. We suggested small scout and coastal vessels such as the ones the British used, and ships like the "Chana Senesh" and others. He added destroyers and submarines. I had several jobs in the navy. I was head of the training program, I commanded a frigate. I commanded a fleet of small vessels, I was Chief Operations Officer and finally, Commander of the Navy. That was my position during Operation "Kadesh".

The Naval School:

With the erection of the Naval School adjacent to the Technion in Haifa, I served as instructor and teacher for various naval specialties. This was so even after I had become an officer in Tzahal. If they needed an instructor for astronomical navigation I would still often be called upon. When my career in the navy ended in 1960, I was appointed commandant of the School for Naval Officers in Acre. Even then I continued to teach astronomical navigation. When my term as commandant of the school was over in 1970, I continued as chairman of the school board and taught that same course voluntarily until about 1998. At the end of my term as head of the school, I was appointed Chairman of the Emergency Committee for the Northern Command and served in that capacity until my retirement.