

Yannay, Shmuel (Poznanski) Samek

Nickname: Armoni

Born 1921 in Warsaw, Poland, made Aliya in 1935

Joined the Palmach in 1941 from Kibbutz Neve Eitan

Joined the Palyam in 1944

This is the Way it Was

Youth and Aliya to Palestine:

My parents were not Zionists. They were Socialists, who fought for the liberation of Poland from the bonds of Russia, and believed that Jews would be peacefully absorbed into an independent Poland. My mother's sister, Esther, made Aliya to Palestine in 1925, and this had a decisive influence on my life. Because of her influence I started to learn Hebrew at age five. I went to a Hebrew kindergarten and learned all of the Hebrew children's songs. I then went to the Tarbut School and continued to learn Hebrew and studied Hebrew literature and Zionism. After my Bar Mitzva and having finished my studies, I made Aliya with the certificate of a student at a technical school connected with the Haifa Technion (known today as Bosmat. I studied there for one year and then went to work with my uncle in the building trades. Two years later I participated in the settlement of Kibbutz Neve Eitan, one of the "tower and stockade" settlements in the Beit Shean Valley, and remained in the kibbutz.

"A" Company of the Palmach:

Many in my kibbutz had originally come from Poland and their families were still there when WW II broke out. We were all very worried about what had happened to them and wanted to do something. Many joined the British Army thinking that they would be used in the war immediately. I did not want to serve under foreign command and in a foreign army, and volunteered for the Palmach instead.

I was inducted into "A" Company under the command of Yigal Alon. My platoon leader was Nachum Sarig and my squad leader was Asaf Simchoni. In May, 1941, the first gathering of "A" Company took place in the grove of Ginossar. Everything about this gathering was "the First". This is where I first met those who were to become my lifelong friends. When I met Yigal he asked, "What's your name? What does your mother call you?" I told him that my mother calls me Samek. He then said that that is what they would also call me from then on, and that is the way it remained to today. Chaim Guri said that all of us at that gathering would be proud of that fact to our dying day. That was the place from which the long trek started.

In 1942 the Palmach stabilized its organization, had bases in various kibbutzim and started the system of half day work, and half day training. Our first base was at Kibbutz Kfar Gileadi. When Yitzchak Sadeh came to talk to each of us. I told him that I wanted to go into a nautical unit. I wanted to learn seamanship and wanted to bring Jews to Palestine. I was in "A" Company for almost three years

and went through many courses in many kibbutzim. We went on long bivouacs and cemented the tradition and mysterious esprit-de-corps of the Palmach, which kept us in good stead when we were in tight situations. I liked my company and had many friends, but still wanted to join a nautical outfit.

A Fighting Unit in Europe:

At the beginning of 1944 I volunteered to parachute into Europe. The plan was to plant small units in various European countries that could link up with partisan forces and fight with them against the Nazis. We took courses in parachuting and sabotage at a British army base in Egypt. For some unknown reason, the British scrapped the whole idea and I went back to Palestine, and this time went to the third seaman's course of the Palyam.

The Palyam:

I arrived at Sdot Yam just as the course started. Berchik stood on the shore, asked no questions, but told me to get into the nearest boat. I put my knapsack on the sand and climbed in. Someone passed me an oar and I was on my way in my new career. The course lasted three months and we learned to row and handle sails. We made acquaintance with the wind and waves. We learned navigation and the topography of the shore of Palestine. Veterans of Aliya Bet, Shmulik and Berchik lectured us about the olim, the immigrants. They told us of conditions on the ships, the problems of distributing food and water, the awfully crowded conditions, and the problem of sanitation. They told us about the problem of getting the people to shore safely. Above all, they stressed that we were responsible for the lives of the people in our care.

At the end of the course, when we were to return to our previous units, the course participants under the leadership of Zalman Perach objected to the breakup and instead demanded that a special naval unit of the Palmach be created. In keeping with the tradition of the Palmach, we would work for our upkeep in the port of Haifa. We were young and were not afraid of hard work. Zalman Perach won the day. The naval unit came into being, and we worked at the port until Davidka Nameri, of the Mosad for Aliya Bet, took us under his wing and relieved us of the necessity to work there. Courses for naval officers were now in order and that offered us further opportunities for knowledge of seamanship and experience. Those who graduated from the course were ready to go to Europe and start work there. They were to prepare ships, organize and train the olim, help the ships' crews at sea, etc. I participated in the second course for naval officers. When I look back at that period, I can see that having experienced and trustworthy sailors on hand, opened new vistas for those in the Mosad for Aliya Bet and altered their way of thinking.

I had my doubts about my readiness for the task at hand. I had a peculiar feeling about being back on European soil, and wondered what my reaction would be to meeting the remnant of the Holocaust. Would these people, who had gone through so much suffering, accept our authority? It would be our job to lead them

to the Land of Israel and to deliver them there safely. Besides the dangers of the sea, we would face the mighty fleet of the British Empire. At the moment we had nothing to do and that was irksome. The war dragged on and we received hazy reports of what was happening to the Jewish people. The whole world was fighting the Nazis and we were waiting. Several of our men grew impatient and found other avenues of activity.

“Hapoel Tel Aviv”:

In 1945, the World War was over and I then learned that my whole family had been destroyed by the Nazis. My father and mother, my brother and sisters, all of my uncles and aunts and all their offspring, had been wiped out.

The Palyam had started sending men overseas but Yigal Alon told me to remain in Palestine and take charge of the Hapoel Tel Aviv nautical activities. The Hapoel shed had gone up in flames and all the equipment had been burned. This could cause a complete halt in all activity of the branch. In order to better fulfill my duties I was given means of transportation by the Palmach, a bicycle, and given private living quarters, a small tent which I could erect wherever I pleased. I chose to place it near the kibbutz seminary on the shore of the Yarkon River. I was sorry that my going to Europe had been delayed but on the other hand I appreciated the importance of the activity of Hapoel Tel Aviv. The youth who were active in this branch were the first to continue in the activities of the Palyam as they grew older.

Europe – Greece:

By the end of 1945 it was my turn to go to Europe. I went to Egypt in the uniform of a British soldier, together with Avraham Lichovski, in order to find a ship that would take us to Greece. After many adventures we finally got to the secret house of the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Athens. Kipi (Aryeh Kaplan), my old friend from the Palyam, met us there. The head of the Mosad in Athens was Levi Schwartz, one of the veterans in accompanying Aliya Bet ships.

This was the first time that I encountered survivors of the Holocaust, with numbers on their arms. They spoke neither Hebrew nor Yiddish. They had very difficult stories to tell but did not tell them, or maybe we were not ready to hear them, and busied ourselves in our work. They knew each other well and had some way of ranking each other, but, to my great surprise; we were an absolute authority to them.

Haviva Reik :

In preparation for the voyage we went to a summer camp near Cape Sounion. There was a cliff near this spot which led down to a bay that had deep water close to shore. This was to be the spot where the immigrants almost all of whom were young people, would board the ship. While waiting, we spent our time in swimming and rowing practice. British agents in the city knew of the camp but could find no justification to close it. In order to make it more difficult for them to

discover our day of departure we made plans for a large Shavuot festival, and had the young people invite all of their relatives. We took off several days earlier. We left in two ships, the larger of which was the "Haviva Reik", of 200 tons and carried 350 Olim. The "Rafi" was 100 tons and carried 120 Olim. The voyage was without incident and when we had only one more night to sail, we moved the 120 olim of the "Rafi" onto the larger ship and the "Rafi" headed back to Greece. The "Rafi" had a Greek crew but on the "Haviva Reik" we had immigrants that we had trained during the trip to take over and run the vessel. The crowding on the ship for that one night was terrible. The people who had come over from the "Rafi" stayed on deck as there was absolutely no room below deck. When we were in sight of shore a plane circled us and soon a destroyer came into view. We tried some evasive maneuvers but were soon caught, towed into Haifa, and bussed to Atlit. We Palyamnikim were told to disappear in the port area and find our way out as soon as possible, which we did.

"Black Saturday":

Davidka and I appeared before the Mosad and I gave an account of the voyage as well as a fiscal accounting. When all was done, I was given a short vacation and went to Degania A. On June 29th the kibbutz was surrounded by British soldiers who searched the grounds and arrested young men, myself included. We were taken to the detention camp at Atlit. The immigrants who were there were moved elsewhere. Several days later we were told that we would be transferred to Latrun, and the immigrants moved back and we seized an opportunity to flee. While there was some excitement about us, we hid behind the double ceiling in the kitchen. There were five of us and we hid there for three days together with a family of rats. When the immigrants returned to the camp, we came out from hiding and I found myself once more in the company of people from the "Haviva Reik". At first they reacted with joy at seeing me but soon understood that it would be better if they took no notice of me. Several days later I made my escape on a truck that removed empty crates from the camp.

"Henrietta Szold":

I returned to Davidka and a few days later a ship was found that could take me back to Greece. Davidka gave me a small suitcase in which to put my things. He told me that one does not usually travel to Europe with a knapsack on his back. I traveled as a stowaway, but had trouble getting off the ship in Piraeus. I finally managed to escape and arrived at our secret hiding place in Athens. I was surprised that when I arrived there, no one showed the least interest in me, but the suitcase became the center of attention. They took it apart completely, and found gold coins that had been hidden in it. I had smuggled gold!

This time, preparations for the ship were entirely different. Yanni Avidov took the place of Levi Schwartz. Yanni's chief aim in life was to save children. He, together with his helper, Shaar Yashuv (Sharik from Kibbutz Bet Hashita), went from monastery to monastery looking for Jewish children whose parents had left them there when they were taken to Auschwitz. They gathered about 400

children and brought them to a special camp. The next ship was to be for them. Even before we had a ship, Yanni had already named it the "Henrietta Szold", in honor of the founder of the Aliyat Ha'Noar. Once again we gathered the children at the cliff near Cape Sounion and once again we departed with two ships. The "Henrietta Szold" was the larger ship with 400 olim from Greece. and the smaller one was the "Rafi" with 150 young olim from Eastern Europe, mostly Hungary. They were loaded very quickly and we left Greece on the 1st of August 1946. While traveling through the Greek Islands we had trouble with our engines and put into a bay on the island of Serena. The inhabitants of the island, one family, forbid us to unload any of the passengers. They told us that during the war a ship had left a load of Jews on an adjacent island and gone away, and a plane saw the Jews there. The plane called another ship to the island and the Jews were taken off and probably sent to an extermination camp. Years later I found out that they had referred to the ship "Pancho", which did not run away but had sunk near a small island. The people had been gathered by an Italian vessel and brought to southern Italy. The Italians refused to hand them over to the Germans and when the Allies freed Italy, these Jews made their way to Israel.

We moved to some uninhabited island and remained there for a few days until our engine were repaired. We, again, put to sea and reached the coast of Palestine several days later. Once again we transferred the "Rafi" passengers to the "Henrietta Szold". A plane spotted us when we were in the vicinity of Ashkelon, and a destroyer once again appeared and towed us to Haifa. We thought that once again we would be taken to Atlit, but this time it was different.

Deportation to Cyprus:

That same night, the ship "Yagur" was also caught and it soon became clear that the British were going to deport us from Palestine. Many stories of the deportation to Cyprus have been told, but I shall now do so looking back fifty years. We knew of the plans of the British government and we knew of the building that was going on in Cyprus. The Jewish Agency had been doing all it possibly could to prevent that moment from coming, but to no avail. The first time we heard of the deportation was as we stood in the port of Haifa. We received the following instructions:

- To organize resistance to the British.
- To sabotage the ship with the explosives that we had been given.
- The Israelis will continue to Cyprus together with the immigrants.

This meant that the immigrants would have to resist the British while the Israelis carried out the sabotage. We carried out the instructions to the letter. It was not expected that we would be able to win in our fight against the British but the resistance was strong and the immigrants put up a good fight. The British finally succeeded in moving us to the deportation ships and we were taken to the detention camp in Cyprus.

The camps, with their barbed wire fences and watch towers brought back terrible memories to the immigrants. This was a new experience for us and for the British officers as well. We still felt fully responsible for the welfare of the immigrants. Among them were pregnant women, children, and people of all ages. They spoke a variety of languages and they all had had terrible experiences. We Israelis were an anchor for them, something to hold onto. We were their last hope. Our orders were to stay with them and to help them. Although we should have gone back to bringing more immigrants on more ships, it was also necessary for us to take care of these people and help them as well as we could.

We saw that it would be better if we ran the camps ourselves, so when the British handed out food we sent everyone back for second helpings, and third. The British asked the "immigrants committee" to help them out. We decided that Kipi should be the immigrants' representative. Kipi told the British that the committee was willing to take upon itself the preparation and distribution of food, arranging living quarters, laundry duties, and health care. All this on condition that the British supply the food products, give the camp inmates autonomy, and not enter the camps. The British agreed and from then on, that is how the camps were run. This was very important in numerous ways, and allowed us to dig the tunnel which ran from within the camp to the shore.

More ships continued to arrive, the population grew, and we continued to run the camps. More emissaries arrived from Palestine to take care of the immigrants. We still felt that we had to get back to the ships and continue our specific job. The number of men from foreign crews and members of the Palyam who were in the camps reached several dozen. At a secret meeting we decided that we had to get the foreign crews and a good number of the Palyamniks out of the camps. I was chosen to leave the camp and work on an escape from the outside, while others would arrange the escape from within the camp. Within a few months we managed to get all of the foreigners out and all of the Israelis as well. At first we used local crews and boats to smuggle them out, but later we used our own vessels that came from Palestine.

"I" Company:

I returned to Palestine and was appointed commander of the nautical unit, which soon became the Palyam. At this time the personnel of the Palyam increased greatly. New units and new bases were created. The stream of Aliya Bet also increased and many more immigrants were sent to Cyprus. Battles between the British armed forces and the immigrants were a regular occurrence. The victory was not in beating the British, but in the fact that the immigrants were willing to defy them, and force a regular army to do battle against the remnant of the Holocaust, dressed in rags and armed with cans of sardines. The immigrants and the Palyamniks also were surprised at the lack of cooperation and participation on the part of the populace as a whole. I recently came into possession of a memoir by a British naval officer who served on one of the destroyers active in the British blockade, and it read as follows: "After we captured several of the

illegal ships we were given leave in Haifa. This was an unusual occurrence. We walked along Herzl Street with certain misgivings about how we would be treated there, and to our surprise we found that the Jewish population was very friendly. Life in Haifa was very normal and we ate a cream cake with our English tea which was served to us at a local café." It seemed that the struggle for Aliya Bet was something that only concerned the immigrants and the Palyannikim.

The War of Independence and Creation of the Israeli Navy:

On the 29th of November 1947 the UN voted to create a Jewish State and an Arab State. The Jews danced in the streets and the Arabs began a war. Aliya continued but was not the first priority now. A large part of the Sea Section, which was the largest company in the Palmach was now sent to keep open the road to Jerusalem, and to the Negev as well. In the battles that raged in these areas many men of the Palmach lost their lives. When the battles subsided, the men who were left went back to their former units and created the naval arm of the IDF. This was in March of 1948. Four ships that had brought immigrants were repaired and outfitted as naval vessels and they were the first ships of the navy. I was appointed commander of this fleet during the War of Independence and in due time we were able to control and protect the shores of the new State.

When the war was over I went to study, first at the Technion and then at M.I.T. in the USA. I returned to the navy in 1954, having completed a master's degree in engineering and management. In 1955 I was sent to England at the head of a delegation which was to prepare two destroyers which had been purchased from England. When they were ready I was appointed commander of the fleet and served in that capacity during the Sinai campaign. It was while under my command that the Egyptian destroyer Ibrahim el Awal was captured, towed to Haifa and joined the Israeli navy. I concluded my service in the navy in 1960 as second-in-command of the navy with the rank of Captain.