

Yatir, Reuven (Hirsch)
Nickname: Oded
Born in 1925 in Breslau, Germany
Made Aliya in 1938
Joined the Palyam in 1944

This is the Way it Was

Short Biography

My youth in Germany was spent in a warm, Reform Jewish, bourgeois home. We maintained a comfortable livelihood and took part in the cultural life of the community. I studied in a German elementary school for four years and then went to a Jewish gymnasium. When I was 12 years old I joined the Werkleute Movement, whose members were founders of Kibbutz Hazorea. I was drawn by Zionist ideology and the idea of going to a new land, as well as adventure. Meanwhile, we grew up and lived during the birth of the Nazi era.

My family made aliya in time. For my parents this was being thrown into a foreign land, whereas for my brother and I this was the seeing of history being made. I saw this from the vantage point of the Hashomer Hatzair movement in Haifa and the "Hagana". While still a child, I dreamed of the sea and wide open spaces. Once we were here, there was the reality of making a living and learning the language, education, and family and social obligations. I made do by rowing and sailing within the framework of the sea branch of Hapoel, Haifa (1938 -1940). In 1942 we had the first news of atrocities that befell the Jews of Europe under the heel of the Nazis. The Jewish Institutions called for volunteers for marine training so that survivors of the Holocaust might be saved by being brought across the sea. I had found my niche in life; the sea combined with Zionist activity and fulfillment.

A Transition Period on My New Road

At the end of 1942 I volunteered together with several friends from the Haifa Hashomer Hatzair, and we set up the first national training group. On January 1, 1943 we went to Kfar Menachem. That was all right with me, but only as a temporary measure. I did this until we were organized but still wanted to go to sea, and quickly. In the spring of 1943 I asked Kibbutz Sdot Yam to accept me to work in fishing. In the summer of 1943 I took a course in seamanship at Caesarea with Shmuel Tankus as instructor.

I loved life at the water's edge. I fished on shore and at sea. We worked with Arab fishermen and were like Arab fishermen. If the weather was stormy there was always work to be done within the kibbutz itself. Sdot Yam was home to the Naval Company of the Palmach and was where the first courses were held. I left Sdot Yam for a time to work in the youth movement in the city, and made my living by fishing on privately owned fishing vessels. Among these was the "Amos" which became the training vessel of the Palyam.

At the end of 1944, I joined up. Estherke Charkovsky greeted me: "Nu, Another donkey". The next day we went to work in the Neshet quarry. Before long, I was transferred to the port, to the fishing vessels, and was where I felt at home. In 1945, I took part in Course #4 for small boat commanders, and in a complementary course following that. I was an instructor in Courses #5 and #6 and was also busy with short courses for shore platoons of Palmach battalions. That fall the "Dalin", the first vessel after the end of WW II, arrived. While waiting for it, we rowed far out to sea for two days in our training boats, the "Dov" and the "Tirza". I don't remember what the purpose was of rowing so far out, but it was a wonderful experience.

There had been radio contact and it was known that the ship would come to Caesarea and anchor there. "From the ship to the shore we carried our nation on our back.."(from a poem by the popular poet of the era, Natan Alterman. He was a close friend of David ben Gurion and wrote a number of poems about the Palmach and the Palyam). After this, there were other vessels to unload. Our navy consisted of three training boats and a few Arab fishing boats, all of which were powered by oar or sail.

I loved sailing along the coast and the versatility that I found in sailing. Allow me to say that one can be serious and devoted, and do all that one must, and also love every minute of it! In the spring of 1946 I found myself in the 2nd course for naval officers. We lived at Kibbutz Yagur in tents, and every morning traveled to the naval school in Haifa. We learned all that we had to so that we would be capable of bringing vessels with ma'apilim to Palestine. I was very proud; eight years earlier I had made aliya and now I, a Yeke (slang for a Jew from Germany), had been accepted into this course although I knew neither Hebrew nor English well. I sat with the other students and studied as hard as I could.

While working on the vessels of Sdot Yam I waited for the day when I could sail on really large ships. That is what I worked toward. I bought books in English about seamanship and navigation, and a dictionary, and in the evenings when we had finished working, would sit and study. I picked up English quickly and the seamanship part came to me almost naturally. At the course for naval officers I was no longer a freshman student. Before I could go overseas for work in Aliya Bet I had to complete a course for squad leaders. "Black Saturday" in June, 1946, cut that course short. I had the luck not to be arrested that day. I went to Maabarot to see how many had not been caught and went back to Sdot Yam the same evening. Most of the men there had been arrested and our base had been wrecked. The next day we went back to work. Yochai called me towards the end of the month, and included me in a survey of the coast of Lebanon – second trip to the same place.

We went out on a very windy day, rowed against the wind most of the time and ended up on the beach at Nahariya. We pulled in to rest a bit, and the boat tipped over and all of our equipment came ashore near the Arab village of A-Ziv. After I explained that we were brother fishermen and I could give the

villagers the depth of the water in various places and the kinds of fish that were caught there, they gave us back all of our equipment.

In August 1946 Yochai included me in the sabotage effort against the British deportation ship, "Empire Rival", which was anchored in Haifa bay. As in other trips that I had made with Yochai, my purpose for being included was to give us more authentic cover as fishermen.

In September, 1946, I was sent to Greece, to Yanni Avidov. The aim was to buy vessels for the Mosad for Aliya Bet. These were the "Knesset Israel" and the "Rafiah". Both were intended to leave from Bakar, Yugoslavia, where they were to pick up Ma'apilim. For reasons of expense, the "Rafiah" was sent to anchor temporarily at the island of Sapienza. "Knesset Israel" sneaked out of the harbor of Piraeus and reached Bakar. When the deal with the "Rafiah" was closed, we accompanied her to Bakar. En route we ran up onto a rock and had to be towed. No damage was visible. The British came along to check the identity of the vessel. We vanished on a fishing vessel that we had prepared for such an emergency. When the whole affair was over the Greek Captain received orders to return to Piraeus. We met the "Rafiah" at sea, boarded it, took possession, and took it to Bakar.

I and Yossi Hamburger (Harel) were transferred to the "Knesset Israel", and joined Benyamin Yerushalmi (of blessed memory) who had worked on preparing the vessel for the ma'apilim. In November 1946, 4,000 ma'apilim arrived and Yoash Tzidon, the Gideoni (radio operator), came with them from the transit camp in Zagreb. "Knesset Israel" took on 3,500 ma'apilim and a small vessel, the "Saint", took the other 500. On our way to the open sea the "Saint" ran into a small island and sank. We transferred her passengers to our vessel and continued our voyage in an orderly manner. I took a small group of ma'apilim and trained them in elementary seamanship. Before we left the Aegean Sea we let the Greek crew go and took complete control of the vessel, as had been planned. They went back to Piraeus in a small boat, together with Ben Yerushalmi. For the last 5 days of the voyage I was acting captain of the vessel and responsible for navigation and machinery. I had the help of several good engine room people from among the ma'apilim. These were formed into groups that conducted a normal and orderly regime on the vessel, and we also prepared for the necessity of resistance, if deported from Palestine.

I went with the ma'apilim to Cyprus, when they were deported at the beginning of December 1946. When I returned to Palestine in February of 1947 I was absorbed into the work and activity of the Palyam.

On the 1st April 1947 I was detailed to get a squad of men and equipment into the Karaolos Camp near Famagusta. We left on the small fishing vessel, "Nun" during the night and reached shore at Famagusta. We buried our auxiliary boat, the engine, and part of the equipment, and headed for the fence where men were waiting for us, and made our way into the camp.

At the first opportunity I returned to Palestine. In the summer of 1947, I went as an emissary with a group of friends on the passenger ship, "Cadio", headed for Marseilles. We were arrested at Piraeus. This was my second voyage on the ship. I was probably recognized by someone in the crew, who reported me to a British agent. We were accused of crossing borders with false papers. There was a trial in which we were found innocent, but had to pay a fine, were returned to Palestine and given over to British police. After some delays we were finally released and I returned to action on the beach at Sdot Yam.

After the 29th November 1947, shooting took place on the roads. Some roads were closed and others were blocked. While instructing in Course # 9, we also ran a sea service with fishing boats that went around the roadblocks. We also received more advanced technology; an outboard motor for our felucca. In March, 1948, I again left Palestine. This time I sailed on the "Kedma" to Marseilles. Friends came to say goodbye and told me that the Palyam had been disbanded. This was the prelude to the creation of the Navy. I was out of the country during the two critical months which included the founding of the State of Israel. Since I and two other fellows were needed in Italy, we sailed to Genoa as stowaways on the "Amal", which belonged to the Atid Co. We had to wait for some time in Rome, and at "the Hill", until I was appointed commander of the "San Antonio II" with orders to take it from Naples to Bakar, Yugoslavia. There, we were to receive 700 Ma'apilim. We were three Israelis in all: Aharon Michaeli was the Gideoni and Meir Roth was to accompany the ma'apilim.

I don't remember exactly when we left Bakar, but the voyage was uneventful and we arrived in Israel early in June, 1948. While in Yugoslavia we had been cut off from news of the outside world. We had no idea of what was going on in Israel. When we approached Haifa a plane circled overhead so we had the Ma'apilim hide in the holds, which we covered and camouflaged and wondered what would happen. We telegraphed our authorities for instructions, and asked if we should enter the port of Haifa and if so, what would be waiting for us? The answer was a classic: "You are entering the port of Haifa, the port of the new free republic, the State of Israel. A pilot will see that you are tied to the wharf." I shall never forget that message.

In the bay I was stopped by what had been the "Hannah Senesh", and now in the service of the Navy and captained by Yisrael Auerbach. He was surprised to see a ship of olim and that we spoke Hebrew. After that the pilot, Captain Martin Akdish, came along and pulled us into berth # 4, where the Olim were received by the Jewish Agency. It was then that I received news of the Egyptian attack on Kibbutz "Nirim". I had many friends there from the period when I was at Kfar Menachem. I requested, and received permission, to call my ship the "Nirit". I continued to bring Olim until October, 1948, from France, and with my same two buddies. After my discharge in January of 1949, I entered the merchant marine and worked for the national shipping carrier as a Captain. Now you have my 'calling card' and you can see that I have had many positions of authority, supervision and instruction, both in Israel and abroad. I am married to Yael – Sheri Wankler and we are the parents of Dita.