

Yona, Amnon

Nickname: Nir

Born 1923 in Poland, made Aliya in 1924

Joined the Palmach in 1942

This is the Way it Was

I am a graduate of the Katznelson Elementary School in the Borochov Quarter and the School of Commerce of Tel Aviv. I belonged to the Kinneret training group as did all the children my age in the Borochov Quarter in Noar HaOved,. I was accepted into the Palmach in 1942 by Uri Yoffe, the commander of "C" Company and placed as squad leader in a platoon of saboteurs and scouts of the Company. The commander of the platoon was Yitzchak Rabin (of blessed memory). I served in the Hagana and the Palmach in Europe in 1946 and until the IDF was created, and served in the IDF until 1953.

My Activity in Ha'apala

I arrived in Rome in December of 1947, and before I had a chance to decide what to do, I was thrown into a flurry of activity connected with the voyage of "The United Nations". From this story one can learn how the Mosad for Aliya Bet worked in Europe.

Ada Sereni, the head of the Aliya Bet in Italy, told me to join the team of Palyamniks who were in the village of Nami, near Rome, and help them organize the refugees there for the journey to Palestine on the ship "United Nations". On the day before sailing, the gate to the camp was locked and no one entered or left. Everyone was busy packing what he or she could put into the one backpack that each would be allowed to take with him. Tension was high among the Ma'apilim as their dream of going to Palestine was on the verge of realization. The desire to make Aliya was stronger than the mishaps that had occurred to other refugee vessels in the past, such as the sinking of the "Patria", the deportation to Mauritius, the deportation of the "Exodus" to Hamburg. and deportations to Cyprus. None of these could stop the surge toward Palestine. The survivors of the Holocaust were concentrated 'en masse' in Italy, France and Romania, and waited to go.

On the eve of the voyage, the Ma'apilim were loaded onto buses and moved to an isolated beach where preparations had been made to load 150 people onto the vessel. On the shore, the men of Aliya Bet worked so that the passengers would be able to board quickly. There were rubber boats and a compressor to fill them with air. There were ropes to move the rubber boats between ship and shore. Although there was much activity, there was absolute silence. I was assigned to help set up the temporary pier.

The sea was far from calm and the noise of the waves breaking on the shore covered the noise of our labor. We establish radio contact with the .the ship that was not far from the coast, and give it our exact location. The sea was not in a mood to cooperate. The boats were inflated and ready, and the Ma'apilim left

the buses and approached the shore. Everything clicked like a military operation. I helped pull the rubber raft to the ship and a rope ladder was lowered for the Ma'apilim to climb up. It was difficult work because of the waves. I went up the ladder and shook hands with David Maimon, commander of the vessel, and with the rest of the Israeli crew which included a medic and a Gideoni. They were ready to handle their end of receiving and organizing the Ma'apilim, so we went down to bring over more people on the rafts.

I stood on our makeshift pier and helped the Ma'apilim into the rubber rafts in which took them to the ship. In the rafts there were two Israelis to row or push the raft along the rope to the vessel. This was repeated for hours until all the Ma'apilim were aboard. The heavy rope was then detached from the shore and the makeshift pier was taken apart and loaded onto trucks. When we had finished there was no sign of what had been done during the night, and the vessel with the Ma'apilim was by then far out to sea. I went back to the Diana Hotel with a wonderful feeling of accomplishment. The Hagana ship "United Nations" succeeded in breaking through the British blockade and reached the shore at Nahariya on the 1st of January, 1948.

The "Lino"

In March 1948 it was clear that we were in a war of life or death. The Arabs declared war and the British Mandatory Government muddied the situation as much as possible, and played a role that was less than neutral. There was a critical lack of weapons at the Hagana's disposal. The Hagana had a few thousand rifles and the Palmach had another 1,500. Shaike Dan, the procurement man for Aliya Bet in Yugoslavia, discovered that an Italian boat named "Lino" was anchored in the port of Fiume, Yugoslavia, and was loading Czech weapons. After talks with Ehud Avriel, our man in Prague, it was determined that these weapons were destined for Syria. The "Lino" was a 450 tonner and was loading 8,000 rifles and six million rounds of ammunition of 7.62 mm caliber. Shaul Avigur, the overall commander of the Hagana, Aliya Bet and procurement in Europe, with an office in Switzerland, received notice from Shaike and Ehud that the "Lino" had left port, and was heading for Beirut at six knots. Shaul decided that the vessel had to be blown up, even if this might disrupt our relations with the Italian government, which had helped in Aliya Bet and procurement activities. Shalom Levin, who was arranging for a course for air pilots in Rome, was put in charge of the operation against the "Lino".

After intense discussion among Ada Sereni, Yehuda Arazi, Munia Mardor, Moshe Zakimowitz and myself, it was decided to blow up the "Lino" from the air. We had planes that came from the United States and made landings in Italy on their way to Palestine. There was a problem of identifying the vessel from the air, and the chances of this mission succeeding did not seem too good. It was then suggested that the vessel be attacked from the sea by a vessel armed with an Israeli crew, which could then continue on to Israel with the vessel and weapons. I was put in command of the operation and allowed to choose my own team. Munia Mardor took responsibility for getting the weapons that we would need, at Formia. Moshe Zakimowitch said that he would prepare the

Mosad's launch for the trip, as this had the speed to catch up to the "Lino". All preparations went forward, the weapons were obtained, and the launch was readied. While we went ahead with our plans, Ada received a message that the "Lino" had put into the port of Molfetta, in southern Italy, for repairs. Ada used her connections to see that the ship would be detained a bit, and the next thought was, why not blow up the "Lino" where she now lay?

We had very little time, so Ada suggested that we use an Italian demolition team with whom she had good connections. These Italian frogmen had acted against British ships in the port of Alexandria during the War. She thought that they would be able to do the job. I objected and thought that we should do this job ourselves and bring Yossale Dror into the picture. He was our sabotage specialist and was in Bari at the time. My suggestion was adopted so I contacted Yossale and sent a letter to Miriam and Yosef Grossman (Goren) in charge of the Diaspora Center in Bari, and asked that they give Yossale complete cooperation. While Yossale was figuring out how to do the job there was also a danger that Italian citizens might be hurt by an explosion. That had happened in the port of Bari during the War, when a ship of explosives blew up, injuring many civilians. Yossale was uneasy about the silence from Rome and sent me the following letter:

"Shalom Amnon!

For God's sake, it doesn't pay to wait until the bird flies away. Big ones have lead in their asses and move slowly. If possible, we should try to do it tomorrow night. If not, we will be left empty-handed. Press all the buttons and don't wait for the "Italians". History won't forgive us, nor will we be able to wash away the blood that will be spilled if we miss this opportunity.

Regards to the others,
Yossale"

This note said exactly what I thought, and although I was the junior member of the group, I fought vehemently for what I thought had to be done and managed to win the others over to the idea. Once approved, I organized the group that was to accomplish the mission; Benny Kravitz and Meir Falik, the Gideoni Avinoam Cooperstein, and the drivers, Avraham Yaffe and Shimon. The team went to Bari immediately to join Yossale, who had set himself up in one of the camps outside Bari. A question arose in Rome over who would be the leader of the operation. Shaul Avigur decided that Munia Mardor and I would be responsible, so we also left for Bari with papers of refugees, and Baruch was our chauffeur. We had the explosives with us and traveled all night. As soon as we arrived Yossale began preparing the delaying detonator, which was to ignite several hours after the mine had been attached to the side of the "Lino". Yossale made a very primitive detonator; sulfuric acid was put into a bottle whose mouth was stuffed with newspaper. When the bottle was turned upside down the sulfuric acid came in contact with the paper and started to dissolve it. Potassium was put around the mouth of the bottle and when the sulfuric acid came in contact with the potassium it made a fire which was hot enough to ignite the explosives. The mine was put into the tube of a motorcycle tire that

was filled with T.N.T. powder in which a delaying wick had been placed. There were two delaying fuses. Vise jaws were attached to the tube so that the saboteur could attach it to the bow of the ship, and everything was sealed hermetically into the tube.

At 21:00 on April 9, 1948, Miriam Grossman and I sat in back of the car that her husband Yosef drove, and we went to our assembly point. We then walked and talked nonchalantly; acting like an ordinary pair of young lovers and at the same time made sure that the spot was clear. A car came from the refugee camp at the appointed time with all the equipment and men. The men wore bathing suits, and had ropes, knives and all they needed for the job, including a rubber boat, a radio transmitter and the explosives. At a signal from us, the driver stopped the car and the men went out with the equipment. The rubber boat went into the water and the car disappeared. The men undressed and with a wave of a hand, were on their way. In the distance, the lights of a British destroyer could be seen. At 03:45 I could discern a boat nearing the shore. They had come back and Yosale said that they had not been able to get close to the "Lino". It was difficult to imagine our disappointment. The men let the air out of the raft and dressed quickly. Miriam and I went back to the boardwalk to tell Munia that the mission had failed. The vehicle was summoned and all of the equipment was stowed away in it. Before we headed back to the refugee camp, Munia sent the following message to Shaul Avigur in Geneva:

To: Or (Shaul Avigur)

From: Ben (Munia)

The group managed to get within 20 meters of the little Blacky but was not able to do what was intended, because it was too light and there were too many bastards (British) watching. We are ready to try again later tonight, after things cool down.

Shaul's answer arrived shortly:

To: Ben

From: Or

Be Strong!

Shaul's short message was a go-ahead signal that greatly encouraged us. On the following day we went out again and repeated everything. The men went out shortly after darkness fell and at 01:30 the boat was back. Yossale jumped out and announced that the deed was done and the mine had been attached to the "Lino". There were hugs and kisses and pats on the back, and then we waited for the vehicle to come and take us, and the equipment, away. Munia arrived with it after a short wait, and we all headed back to our base in Formia, about 400 km from the scene of the action. As we drove along we opened the hiding place in the vehicle, stowed the raft and swimsuits inside, and closed and camouflaged it.

We reached Formia about noontime, but none of our people had as yet heard the result of what had taken place in Bari. Yossale and I took the train to Rome and went to the office of the Mosad for Aliya Bet. There, we heard from Ada Sereni herself that the mine had gone off and the "Lino" had sunk to the bottom of the port. All the weapons went down with it, and there had been no damage to the surrounding area.

After the Discharge from Tzahal

I stayed in the army until 1953. Upon discharge, I went down to Beer Sheva and for three years was administrative director of the chemical company, Machteshim. In 1956, the directorate of Koor appointed me as manager of its subsidiary, Tadir, its first company in the electronics field. In 1962, through my initiative and that of Moshe Kashti, the director general of the Defense Ministry, we established Tadiran, which was a merger of Tadir and Ran. In 1965 Koor loaned me to the Defense Ministry for two years so that I could go to Uganda as assistant director of a military mission. We were there to oversee an agreement between the two governments in which Israel assisted Uganda in building its army and air force,

In 1968 I returned to Israel and managed "Simat" a company in Holon, and for whom I established a second factory in Kiryat Shmona. In 1988 I retired. In 1992 I joined the directorate of the League of the Successors of the Palmach and was given the task of erecting Palmach House in Tel Aviv. I busied myself with this task until January 2000, when the Museum became the property of the Ministry of Defense.