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Nickname: Katoni
Born in 1929 in Tel Aviv
Joined the Palyam in 1946

This is the Way it Was

I lived near the port of Tel Aviv, and after completing the "LeDugma" elementary school, went to the "Shevach" Technical School. I was in the United Youth movement and in the Hapoel Tel Aviv marine group. When I completed studies in 1946 I, together with a group of friends, joined the Palyam. We stayed at Givat Hashlosha until the 7th course began. Half the participants in the course were at Michmoret and the other half at Neve Yam. I was in the Neve Yam group. Nimrod Eshel was our chief instructor and Yoske Krieger was his deputy.

Toward the end of the course we were sent, in two boats, to Caesarea to help unload olim. We didn't know that the ship had already been caught and as soon as we hit shore, were arrested by the British. We were taken to Pardes Chana and from there to Latrun, and then to jail in Haifa for a week. When the course ended we were sent to Kibbutz Maabarot where we trained and worked. While at Maabarot, we went to various beaches to unload refugees but they were caught before we were able to get to the unloading areas. We could guess by the activity at our headquarters when a ship of refugees was due to arrive. We would receive orders to dress in clean work clothes and be prepared to move out. We boarded buses and were driven to the shore at Nitanim. When we arrived, we emptied out at some distance from the shore and sought cover behind the dunes. It was dark and we waited for hours but tension was so high that it was impossible to fall asleep.

I asked who was in command of the vessel and was told that it was David Maimon. This time I had the feeling that we would succeed. David came from my section of Tel Aviv and was a few years older than I. He was a member of Caesarea, a fisherman, and knew the coast well. (Our squad, to help with unloading, had some bottles of cognac at the ready, in case we had to warm up a few individuals.) I didn't know what time of night it was, but suddenly we saw a big black shape in front of us. We were so excited that some fellows opened the bottles and drank "Lechaim" right then, and I didn't recall some of them participating in the unloading later on! The boat signaled, moved on, and then returned. The sea was rough, the waves were high, and it didn't seem possible at first that we would be able to use the rubber life boats to take the olim to shore. The vessel came as close toward shore as possible and became stuck. We swam out to the vessel and were given a rope which we took back to shore. We managed to haul the rope and tie it firmly to a stable object so that it was as taut as we could make it. We then waited for the olim to enter the water. I swam back out to the vessel where several of us were ready to help the olim into the rafts, but no one came. Suddenly a young girl jumped into the water and we helped her into a raft. That broke the ice and others followed suit. Others jumped into the water wearing lifebelts. My job was to swim alongside the

vessel and see that the olim reached a raft or the line so that they could pull themselves to shore. The olim were not allowed to take their backpacks with them, but some jumped into the water without their lifebelts and tied their backpacks to the lifebelts.

The backpacks were brought toward shore by the waves, and we brought all we could, close to, or tied to the rope. We swam after those that went astray and brought them in, as well. I saw one olah with a safety belt around him and a pack on his shoulder. The next moment his feet were in the air, above the water. I swam to him immediately and raised his head above water. The backpack had caused him to flip over. I brought him to the rope and he made it to shore by himself.

The olim came ashore at a decent pace, but at dawn a plane appeared overhead and spotted us. When the olim saw the plane, they started to jump into the water in a manner that was difficult to control, as the sea was still quite rough. At the same time people from settlements in the surrounding area started arriving and they directed the olim to places away from the beach. A small group of us had been in the water for about five hours. I came ashore to ask some of the people there to come in and help us, but someone grabbed me and said: "This guy is blue!" A blanket appeared from nowhere and they wrapped me up tightly and I couldn't return to the water.

English soldiers came and rounded up everyone still on the beach. I managed to find my clothes and hide my identity in the sand on the Nitzanim beach. At the camp to which we were all taken, an order was spread around that we should not identify ourselves. When questioned, we were all to say: "I am a Jew from the Land of Israel." We all then passed before a table where British detectives tried to distinguish between the new immigrants and those who had come to assist them. I had hidden the photo of my girlfriend in my shoe, so when a meticulous search was made it was discovered. There was Hebrew writing on the back of the photo and I was immediately classified as suspicious and dangerous.

Toward evening we were loaded onto trucks, 20 men to a vehicle, and driven to Haifa. When we got there we refused to leave the trucks and had to be carried down by the British soldiers. When an English major saw this scene he grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and escorted me personally onto the deportation ship "Empire Rival". He declared to all those standing about that he had supervised the loading of thousands of immigrants, but I was the first that he himself placed onto a ship. The ship stayed in port for 24 hours because Jewish lawyers challenged the legality of deporting citizens of Palestine. Only when legal proceedings had been decided, did the ship move on to Cyprus. When we arrived, we didn't make life any easier for the British there either. When they came to take us from the hold, we gathered all the refuse we could find and threw at the soldiers. They had to use tear gas to subdue us. We were ready for this, but had several pregnant women with us in the hold, so in consideration for

them gave ourselves up. While on our way out, we cut the pipelines of the firefighting equipment.

We were taken from Famagusta to Summer Camp 55, and there I remained until they reviewed us again. Until then, we lived with the olim and told them about life in Palestine, so that many of the olim were classified as Israelis and transferred together with us.

I was an instructor in courses Number 8 and 9 and then went to prepare myself for a squad leaders course at Givat Zaid. My preparations were interrupted because we were called to take part in unloading olim of the "Ha'portzim". We traveled by bus to the "Seminar of the Kibbutzim" in Tel Aviv, not far from the Yarkon River, and waited there until evening. Then we went to the hut that was used by the nautical unit of Hapoel Tel Aviv. We took out rowboats and rowed southwards opposite to where the Tel Aviv Hilton now stands. (At that time there was a Moslem cemetery there.) My folks were living near the Tel Aviv port and didn't know that I had passed within several meters of their home. I was in charge of a large rowboat with four oarsmen. We tied up alongside the pier.

The ship "Ha'portzim" arrived in the middle of the night and all the boats raced to it. I got there first. The sea was calm and we came alongside the vessel to take on the olim. We arranged them carefully and were able to take 35 olim. The gunwales of the boat were only 10 cm above the water so we rowed very carefully to the pier. The olim went ashore and we rowed back to the ship. We took off several more of the olim and three Palyamniks who accompanied them. The ship sailed out and away. We rowed back to the boat shed and went back to the Kibbutz Seminary. We remained there for another day because riots had begun on the Tel Aviv-Jaffa border. We were reservists and were then taken to Nir Am in the Negev, and from there to Dorot, to protect the water pipeline. We spent about a month in the Negev, were relieved by others and I went to the course for squad leaders at Dalia. When the course was over I was stationed at Givat Chaim, where I remained for a short time.

Weapons from Czechoslovakia arrived and it turned out that there were problems with a certain type of machine gun. The weapons specialists at the base in Sharona (Tel Aviv) repaired them and four of us squad leaders shot live ammunition to check 24 of them which were designated for the 4th Battalion, and were sent to the Negev. We checked another 24 of them and took them with us in the last convoy that had free passage to Jerusalem. We left the convoy with the weapons when we reached Kiryat Anavim. I remained and fought with the 4th Battalion at first as second-in-command to a platoon leader and later as platoon leader.

I then had a brief interlude at an officers' training course in Jaffa after which I returned to Neve Yam, of which I was a member. The Kibbutz was then at Givat Olga. I went with a group of friends to Kvutzat Kinneret, from there to Ein Gev, and a month later to the Lido, near Tiberias. Here was a base camp from which squads did duty at Dardara, east of the Huleh and about 70 meters below the

Syrian Army. When the Nachal was established, my group was transferred from the Navy to the Nachal. In 1950 we were sent to Avuka in the Beit Shan Valley, after it had been disbanded. Three years later it was again disbanded and a group of us moved to Hamadia. That is where I live to this day.