

Aisen David

Born in January 1928

Joined the Palyam in 1944

This is the Way it Was

I was born on January 1st 1928 in "Little Tel Aviv" and when I was five years old my family moved to Moshav Avichail when it was founded. This Moshav was founded by volunteers of the Hebrew Battalion of the British Army who fought in WW I. When land in Emek Hefer was bought and settled, this Moshav received a parcel of land for which the founders had been waiting for 15 years. My father, Zalman Eisen was an American who had been such a volunteer and after the war he made Aliya and settled in Palestine. My mother, Tzvia Spector made Aliya from Russia in 1907 with her whole family, when she was seven years old.

When a branch of Hapoel Yam was opened in Natanya after they purchased a small boat, I was among the first to join. Sailboats intrigued me and I was completely involved. When I heard that there was such a thing as a naval branch of the Palmach, I joined up. This was the end of 1944 and I was almost 17 when I became a member of "H" Company. I was sent to the work camp of Kibbutz Caesarea which was at Kiryat Chaim at the time. I was waiting for the start of Course No. 4 for launch commanders which was to begin shortly at Caesarea.

Meanwhile, I went to work at the Neshar Cement Factory. My job was to fill box cars with "Debesh", a mixture of stones of all sizes and sand. These had been taken from the mountainside opposite the factory and were brought to the factory to be ground to cement. The workers of the factory went on strike so we became redundant and were sent home. I went back to Caesarea to wait for the start of the course.

Just at that time a boat arrived which was the first to come from Europe since the end of the War. This little boat, "Daline" had 35 immigrants on it. While they were being unloaded from the boat I was given the job of bodyguard of "the Old Man", Yitzchak Sadeh. I was given a .45 caliber revolver and had a grandstand seat in the VIP section. On her way back to Europe the little boat took 23 sailors, Gideonim and Aliya Bet personnel with her.

Just as the course was to start I caught jaundice and suffered from this attack a great deal. I was sick for more than a month. As a result I missed participating in the course and went back to my platoon. We were now a part of "G" Company, and it was there that I awaited the beginning of Course No. 5. I was sent to Kibbutz Ein HaYam near Atlit. I worked in the Salt Company there loading 100 kg bags of salt onto railroad cars. This work strengthened my body which had grown weak from the jaundice. The arrival of ships of Olim broke the monotony and we helped unload immigrants at Caesarea, Shefayim and Tel Aviv. Some of these

ships were able to break the siege laid down by the British. (Others were caught and the Olim were taken to Atlit and later on to Cyprus).

The struggle between the British forces and the forces of resistance became bitterer than ever. The explosions on the "Night of the Railroad Tracks" and of the police station at Givat Olga were witness to that fact. This was our reaction to the ships that had been caught by the British.

Finally, Course No. 5 got under way and it ran for the whole of a very severe winter (and I remained healthy for the duration of the whole course). We studied seamanship, ropes and knots, map reading and navigation, rowing and lots and lots of sailing. We became seamen. Only about two thirds of the students completed the course. About ten of the participants were caught when we were helping unload immigrants from the "Berl Katznelson" off the coast of Shefayim. They were arrested and sent to prison at Latrun.

The next step was a "landlubber's course" for squad commanders at Kibbutz Maabarot. We worked in the kibbutz part of the time and trained for the rest of the day. We were caught by surprise on "Black Saturday". The kibbutz was surrounded by British paratroopers and everyone was rounded up and checked. In the end they arrested about thirty people, among them were 12 Palmachniks from our course. They were also incarcerated at Latrun. I was one of them so that gave me the opportunity to meet the leaders of the Jewish community in Palestine, Moshe Sharet, David HaCohen and Ben Aharon were also there in the same prison. We also met our companions who had been arrested in the "Berl Katznelson" affair and who were already imprisoned for several months (we were in prison for an indefinite length of time). Although we Palmachniks were scattered among the other prisoners we started to organize ourselves for escape, but to our surprise the British decided that we were there long enough and freed us. Our freedom was granted because of a deal made with the British that we would not continue violent resistance against the British authorities. When I was released I had a file (under an alias) but my photo and fingerprints were there.

The course for squad commanders started just after we were freed but instead of its taking place at Juara as originally intended it was split up and was held at the same time in Ein Hashofet, Ramat Hashofet and Mishmar HaEmek. We would work in the mornings and have classes in the afternoon and then go out on various operations at night. This was called the "Owl Course". Each course had several men assigned to keep a lookout on the water towers to see if British Army or police were approaching. In case they were we would scatter in pairs and make our way to Pardes Chana where we each had a family assigned to take us in. When this course was over we had another short course at Ashdot Yaakov. When this was finished three of us were assigned to be commanders of squads at Kibbutz Yagur. While there, we received a group of new recruits of the Machanot Olim Movement and we started to train them.

I was then summoned to take part in the Naval Officers Course No. 4. we resided at Yagur and studied in the Naval School at Haifa. These studies were highly concentrated and included a great deal of theory. We studied mathematics, navigation and astronomy, English, practical seamanship, the anatomy of ships and their conversion when used to carry immigrants. We also learned more of the geography and customs of various countries of Europe and of the organization of the Mosad for Aliya Bet and the "Bricha" movement. When this course was over we sailed to Northern Turkey and then Westwards and back down past Cyprus. From there we headed back to Caesarea. During the trip we changed jobs along the way so as to get the maximum amount of experience out of this trip.

At the end of August 1947 I was called to the office of the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Tel Aviv. I filled out a form with many questions on my personal background, I was photographed and sent to buy a suitcase and a suit and other clothes and came out looking like some elegant citizen. Thus, with five £ sterling in my pocket and a false mandatory passport and in the company of a Gideoni, we flew to Prague. This city was chosen because it was impossible to get a visa for France or Italy from Palestine. The flight to Prague took 16 hours because the Dakota in which we flew stayed very close to the ground.

We saw beautiful panoramas of southern Greece, Rome and northern Italy; and of course the sight as we went over the Alps was terrific.

In Prague we reported to the office of the Bricha where they treated us very nicely. We were given local currency and chits for food. we left our passports so that the visas for Italy could be added to them and were given instructions of what to see in this beautiful and clean city. The citizens were also very friendly. We had no trouble getting the visas but there was an airplane strike so we were stuck in Prague. After a wait of two weeks it was decided that we should go by train via Austria. This entailed getting another visa but that went without trouble. Finally, after a slow and boring train ride we finally reached Milan and were taken in hand by other Palyamniks who had arrived there before us.

In the offices of the Mosad for Aliya Bet I gave up my false passport (for someone else to use sometime) and chose the identity of a refugee of the Holocaust from the plethora of ID's that they had to choose from. I chose a name that would be easy to remember and whose details of age etc were similar to mine. I managed in the course of time to do an immense amount of traveling all over Italy on this ID card. This was a very poor and defeated country after the war, poor and starving. The people in general were sympathetic to our cause and helped us in many ways. We lived in a camp about 30 km from Milan and busied ourselves with "shipping". We would camouflage metal boxes with wood and ship all the explosives and weapons that we could buy to Palestine under the disguise of agricultural machinery or whatever else we could imagine. We also helped load immigrants, the remnants of the Holocaust, onto Hagana ships that brought them to Palestine.

Those responsible for Aliya Bet (the functionaries) did not want the Palyam commander to get near to the ship that he would command, because they thought that he would bring the attention of the British to the ship. However, the commander could not be aware of all that was not proper on his ship and that what was wrong could not be set right at the last minute when he did come aboard. It was already then too late to fix or to change anything, which meant that the passengers, the immigrants, were put in a greater measure of danger than need have been, because of the failings in the preparation of the ship for sailing.

I boarded the ship which was anchored in the port of Naples on the 9th April 1948, just 24 hours before the ship was to sail!! The ship, "San Mikele" was of wood construction and weighed 650 tons. It had been built in 1947 (brand new) and it had a used German diesel engine to power it. Prior to the Mosad having bought it it had made short runs to North Africa carrying agricultural produce. The Italian crew included the captain, a boatswain and two sailors and a mechanic, mechanic's helper and a cook. The Israeli crew was David Eisen – commander, Benny Berkowitz – Gideoni and Teddy Vardi as my assistant. (Teddy was an American volunteer who had been on the Pan York.) we also had a doctor on board who was one of the Olim, and a nurse.

We left Naples and met a small boat at sea that brought us a group of 23 young people from Tripoli who were to help us with the other immigrants and a supply of food and fruit. These kids were really great. We continued onwards and on the 12th April when we were off the coast near the town of Formia a fishing boat brought us loads of 100 Immigrants from the shore each time until we had loaded 700 passengers. We were then ordered to go away from the shore and to come back the next morning. We did come back later and picked up another 70 immigrants; a revolver with 7 rounds of ammunition and 20 £ for use in an emergency!

As soon as we sailed our troubles started. The whole pipe system for the supply of water broke down. There were leaks on the one hand and pipes that were plugged up so that we just took the tops off of all the barrels and drew water from the tops of them with pails, by hand. The idea of using the Tripolitanians as helpers and stewards turned out to be a very bad idea because they spoke Italian and other languages but did not know Yiddish or Slavic languages which were the languages of the immigrants. So we had the Tripoli people help the crew out and chose some likely looking ma'apilim to take care of the other immigrants. Whereas on other ships there was usually a majority of army age immigrants, we had 30 toddlers and babies and 150 children up to ten years old and 100 pregnant women.

Our ship could do 7 knots. When we came to the Straits of Messina we kept the deck clear of passengers so that we would not be recognized as an immigrant

ship. when we left the Straits we entered into stormy waters and the ship was carried in a northeastern direction. As we had no navigational instruments and were blown off course and away from land it was not until the two days later that we saw we had arrived below Greece and were at the entrance to the Adriatic Sea.

It seems that the storm put a heavy strain on the engine and we could not make more than 3-4 knots. We went south of the island of Crete but it took us three days to sail past the island. Two days later we had word from Palestine asking us to give help to the "Tamar" (the Nachshon-HaKastel) that had sailed from France and was three days behind us. She had run out of water and we were told to wait for her to catch up to us. Several hours later we contacted the "Tamar" directly. They wanted to transfer their 550 passengers to us, but we told them that that could only be done when we were less than one day of travel from the shore. That meant that that we had to advance to within 120 miles of the shore. We agreed to do that and to meet them at a suitable rendezvous. We had wasted 3 - 4 days south of Crete but we could not pinpoint exactly where we were because of the lack of navigational equipment.

Our problem was solved in part when a British bomber sighted us and did not leave us. We notified the "Tamar" and Palestine of this development and we were given a new name, the "Mishmar HaEmek". By evening three British destroyers were accompanying us towards Haifa. Soon after they boarded the ship and towed us in. When we arrived the city had just been taken by the Jewish forces but sporadic fighting was still going on here and there. We were transferred to shore and sprayed with DDT and then deposited in the evacuation ships and sailed to Cyprus. Three weeks later came the Declaration of Independence and the creation of the State of Israel and the British left the country.

I spent three months in Cyprus and instructed the immigrants in the use of weapons most of the time. I continued to work in bringing immigrants to Israel and brought ships with Olim from Bulgaria and from North Africa.

In my civilian life, aside from my being a member of a moshav I worked for Mekorot, the water company, with heavy machinery. I worked in the draining of the Huleh and on the Jordan River and in the Ministry of Agriculture.