

Armon, Eliezer (Wersh)

Nickname: Daniel, Danny

Born in 1922 in Arad, Transylvania

Made Aliya in 1941

Joined the Palmach in 1942, the Palyam in 1943

Died 18 December 1995

Written by: Esther Armon

This is the Way it Was

Eliezer's family was an assimilated Hungarian-Jewish one. Only when he was 15 or 16 years old did he attend a Jewish Gymnasium in Kluge (Timishuara) and that is where he first became aware of being Jewish, and of Zionism. The most active youth movement there was Hanoar Hatzioni, so that is where Eliezer went, and through that organization he came to Palestine under Youth Aliya. He had applied for Aliya in 1938 but every month his Aliya was delayed, some times because of his not knowing Hebrew, and sometimes for other reasons. His father had contributed a sum sufficient to send ten boys on Aliya but nevertheless there was this delay. The sum was also sufficient for two years' study at an agricultural secondary school in Magdiel. When he finally made Aliya in 1941, it turned out that the school had not yet been built.

Several months later he volunteered for the Palmach. This spoiled young boy from a wealthy family matured very rapidly in those two years prior to his volunteering. He had no home and no family in Palestine and did not know Hebrew. If he spoke Hungarian, people yelled at him to speak Hebrew, and when he said he didn't know Hebrew, he was told to speak Yiddish. He did not know Yiddish either. He did know how to speak German, Romanian and French.

He was assigned to "C" Company of the Palmach and his commander (and later, his good friend) was Uri Yaffe. He felt that his first home in Palestine was Kibbutz Yagur. He was there for about a year. In 1943 he participated in a short naval course, which consisted of rowing, sailing, and basic seamanship. A month later he was called to the Histadrut Building, where the headquarters of the Hagana was located, and had a long meeting with Enzo Sereni. Enzo told him that missionaries were to be parachuted into Nazi-occupied Europe and he was found suitable for such an undertaking. When asked if he was willing, he agreed. Eliezer was very impressed by Enzo's humaneness and warmth. Enzo asked him about his parents, who would be endangered if he were caught. Enzo told him that Eliezer probably thought that it was easy for him, Enzo, to send a young fellow on such a dangerous mission. Enzo told him that he himself would be going on such a mission. That same day Eliezer also met Eliyahu Golomb, the commander of the Hagana. Eliezer was invited to another meeting at Givat Chaim, where he met Tzvi Yechieli (the coordinator of the parachutist operation), Enzo Sereni and a British Major of the Royal Air Force. The British Major explained to Eliezer what he would have to do when he jumped behind the lines, and the other two explained what this meant for the

Jewish settlements in Palestine. Eliezer waited to be called to action, but the call never came. It seemed, according to what he found out later from Tzvi Yechieli, that there were already two representatives of the Noar HaTzioni in the mission (Abba Berdichev and Chaim Chermesh) and that was all that was required from that organization. It turned out that even in order to jump to death, one had to do so according to the proportional representation of the political parties.

In 1943 the Naval Company was formed and Eliezer transferred to that unit. The unit had to earn its keep by working part-time and training part-time. Eliezer worked for three months as a stevedore in the port of Haifa and in the Neshar quarry. He took part in a short course for naval mechanics and then worked for several months on a fishing boat belonging to Neve Yam in Atlit. After that he spent two and a half months at a course for small boat commanders in Caesarea. In January 1945 he participated in the first course for naval officers, which lasted 8 months. A few days after the course was completed he was again called to Hagana Headquarters in the Histadrut building in Tel Aviv, which also housed the Mosad for Aliya Bet. Four graduates of the course were told that they would go abroad on the first vessel to come ashore since the end of WW II. They were Aryeh Kaplan, Srulik Rosenblum, Tzvi Katznelson and Eliezer Armon-Wersh, plus the Gideoni, Avraham Reis. There was much preparation and excitement in the ranks of the Palyam at the arrival of this vessel, There were four other missionaries to the youth movements who shared their tent. Yitzchak Sadeh came to take leave of them and this was very important to Eliezer.

After the 37 Ma'apilim disembarked from the vessel, "the "Dalin", the Palyamniks boarded it, and supplies were also brought aboard. Yisrael Horev was commander of the vessel; he had gone abroad some time before them. Eliezer then received his first practical lesson regarding conditions under which the Ma'apilim traveled: the beds were hammocks, the hold was awfully crowded and everything smelled of vomit. The Palyamniks cleaned everything and the vessel was readied for sailing. It took them 10 or 12 days to get to Bari, Italy and to the refugee camp there. About an hour after their arrival they were taken in a British truck driven by an Israeli soldier in the British army, to the "Dror" camp. They arrived in the middle of the night, when no one was expecting them. The next day Eliezer met with 180 candidates for the next Aliya who were to go on the vessel "Pietro 1" which he was to command. The vessel sailed on the night of September 12, 1945, and arrived on the night of September 19th, off the coast at Shefayim. This was a new vessel that had been built in 1945, so there were no technical problems. When they approached the shore they were guided by the light of a campfire, and succeeded in approaching the shore, unloading the Ma'apilim, and making their way out to sea again without being caught.

The Ma'apilim were organized according to youth movements, and a high proportion of them spoke Hebrew and were so disciplined that the unloading went very quickly. The boats that were to take them to shore were there and ready, and all went smoothly. More food supplies and fuel were loaded onto the

vessel and 11 emissaries of the Mosad for Aliya Bet boarded the ship and sailed with it back to Italy. On September 28, 1945 the vessel arrived at the port of Taranto.

“Pietro 2” – On October 15, 1945 the vessel sailed for Palestine with 175 Ma’apilim on board. Eliezer was commander of the vessel and the same captain and crew from the previous voyage remained to handle the ship. Gad Lasker was the Palyamnik who accompanied them and the Gideonim was Avraham Reis. The vessel’s route was Scarpanto, Crete, Cyprus and Shefayim.

Sailors believe that dolphins should not be harmed, but they caught, killed, and ate a dolphin, and then their troubles began. There was a fierce storm when they were in the vicinity of Crete and the small boat that they towed behind them, that held much of their food, capsized and sank. The Ma’apilim on this vessel were as well organized as those on the first trip, and many of them were from Lithuania and fluent in Hebrew. In later years the Ma’apilim of the “Pietro 1” and the “Pietro 2” tried to find their commander, Dani, and even broadcast on the radio that they were looking for him, and that is how they eventually renewed their contact.

The Ma’apilim made a special reunion to which Dani, Eliezer Armon, was invited and he came with his wife and three children. He was glad to see that they had struck roots in Israel and lived in the cities, the moshavim and the kibbutzim. They openly displayed their great affection for him and this left him feeling somewhat embarrassed. Among the Ma’apilim of the past there were Judge Beisky, Prof. Dov Levin, Colonel Mendy, and Yitzchak Arad.

On this second voyage Eliezer also succeeded in approaching the beach at Shefayim and unloading all the Ma’apilim safely. It took fuel on board for the return voyage, plus 18 emissaries and 3 Gideonim bound for Europe.

“Hannah Senesh” – This vessel, which had been sunk once when it was blown up, was repaired and refitted at a shipyard near Genoa. It was fitted with sleeping pallets, a food supply for 40 days, and fuel that were taken from British storehouses. Yisrael Horev was the commander of the vessel and Eliezer was his second-in-command. The Gideonim was Chaim Porat. There was also an Italian captain, 3 deckhands, 2 engineroom personnel, and a cook. On December 14, 1945, the vessel set sail from Genoa to Savona and there, 252 Ma’apilim boarded it with the aid of Italian partisans. Most of the Ma’apilim were young and members of youth movements. The vessel was to sail via the Aegean Sea, Crete, Rhodes, Cyprus, the Lebanese coast and then to the coast of Palestine. Conditions on the vessel were very difficult and it was very crowded. Water was scarce, food was poor, and the sea was rough most of the time. The number of sick people rose steadily. Because of some misjudgment, the vessel ran up on the rocks near Nahariya and about 30 meters from the shore. Eliezer jumped into the water and soon boats were lowered to move the Ma’apilim but some of the boats capsized. Reinforcements soon came from

Nahariya and surrounding settlements to aid in unloading the Ma'apilim and disperse them among settlements nearby.

In 1957 Eliezer began a diplomatic career at the Israeli Embassy at Budapest. The British Ambassador invited Eliezer and his wife to a dinner at which there were other British diplomats from East European countries. Among them was a young Englishman who sat next to Eliezer. The young Englishman said to him, "I see that you are from Palestine." Eliezer answered that he was from Israel. The young man then continued that he had been in Palestine in 1945. Eliezer took a guess and asked him where he had been on Christmas night that year. The fellow became red in the face and said that he and other soldiers had been invited for the first time by Israeli girls to a dance, but when they went back on duty the following day they saw that a vessel had come in and was stranded on the beach of Nahariya. The Englishman admitted that he had been reduced in rank and otherwise punished, and was ready to kill the fellow who had brought that vessel in. Eliezer replied, "Sorry, old chap, a bit too late for that. I brought that ship in!" The young fellow stood up, called for attention, and told the whole story to the assembled guests. All the Englishmen there were impressed by this anecdote and came to congratulate Eliezer, saying, "Well done", well done, young man."

Max Nordau – This was the largest vessel so far, and it carried 1,770 Ma'apilim. It had been bought in Romania from the vessel's owner, a Greek woman and been prepared for the voyage in Constanza. Eliezer was commander of the vessel and the Gideoni was Chaim Porat (Fretkin). The captain and crew were Romanian. The Ma'apilim on Eliezer's three earlier vessels had been so disciplined and full of Zionist fervor that Eliezer had been favorably impressed with them, but the Ma'apilim on this vessel were different. Very few of them were members of any youth movements and most were just plain, unfortunate Jews who had come mostly from Poland and Romania, and among them were 220 young orphans and aged folk. Eliezer and Chaim reached Romania via a train that carried Russian soldiers from Austria to Russia. They carried false papers and wore uniforms of British soldiers. They had to be very alert as the Russian soldiers eyed their belongings with interest. There was almost an incident when, during the night, a Russian soldier started yelling that his watch had been stolen and suspicion immediately fell on the English soldiers. The matter ended abruptly when a Russian Major entered their car and cooled things down. Their train had gone via Budapest to Arad, Eliezer's home town. His parents were still living there and he had not seen them in many years. The meeting with his parents was a very emotional one. There was another unfortunate incident in that town when Eliezer met an old school chum and the fellow called aloud to Eliezer by name. Eliezer was forced to deny that he knew him and ignored him. Only many years later, when he met the same fellow again by chance, did he have the opportunity to explain to him that he was traveling as a British soldier with false papers, and he begged his friend to forgive him.

From Arad he went to Bucharest and issued instructions regarding the equipment, lifeboats and kitchen. The "Max Nordau" was a wooden vessel with a diesel engine and had previously sailed on the Danube. She formerly transported soldiers. The midships was raised higher and another deck was built in. She was fitted out to take 800 Ma'apilim but there was an endless amount of problems. The Ma'apilim arrived in Constanza from Bucharest and had been told to bring with them one backpack each. The passengers were given 'collective' passports which meant that there were 150-200 names on each passport. The passport noted that the passengers could also travel to Palestine although the final port of call was designated as Port Said. The vessel also carried letters from the Governments of Costa Rica and of Mexico allowing entry to 1,500 Jews. The first hold-up was in Bucharest when the Russians noted a discrepancy in the documents. The following day the Russians also delayed the sailing because they said that a vessel with so many passengers could not leave port without a transmitter. The Gideoni had one of course, but it was in his valise. It took two weeks before the Russians were satisfied. The sailing date was finally determined for May 4, 1946, and on May 2, 1946 two special trains of Ma'apilim left Bucharest for Constanza. They arrived at the station in the port on May 3rd, but were again delayed by an NKVD agent who wanted to ascertain that they had permission to board the ship. A search was then made of all baggage of the travelers (the search was for gold and silver).

There were four doctors among the Ma'apilim and they declared that they would not be responsible for the health of the passengers on the vessel because of the crowded conditions. When all of the Ma'apilim were on board, an additional twenty passengers were taken aboard and then another 30 Agudat Israel Jews arrived and they were forced onto the ship by policemen. The Romanian seamen came aboard on May 6th and the vessel pulled away from the dock. The Ma'apilim sang all the appropriate songs for the occasion, Hatikvah, the International, Techzakna and the Beitar hymn. A Russian pilot took them out of the port but a heavy fog descended. He said that he could not guide them through the minefields in such weather, so the vessel returned to port. While anchoring, a crazy fellow jumped off the ship and was rescued by a Russian motor launch. He jumped again and this time a Police launch took him to shore. His wife and baby were on the ship, so they were taken off and left with him. This made the other Ma'apilim very sad. There were many attempts by individuals to board the ship who were aided by the Police who took bribes for getting them aboard. On the evening of May 7th the vessel was taken out of the port again by a Russian pilot.

Among the Ma'apilim there were about 100 who came from Poland. They were unorganized and undisciplined. Some of them had been speculators and they continued this questionable trade aboard ship. They tried to buy water and to pay the sailors for cabins. This was bad for morale and the Palyamniks did their best to put an end to this behavior. Even before departure, groups were organized according to Party affiliation and each group had its leader and second –in-command, cooks, a clean-up crew, and orderlies. There was not enough of a check on those who were not well organized. Eliezer was given a

list of all the group leaders. The food had been put on board several weeks before leaving port and a group of 15 Ma'apilim was responsible for guarding it. All the heads of groups were gathered, together with the cook, the stores keeper and the four doctors. Eliezer explained the difficulties involved in seeing that each one received his food and water and placed the responsibility for this on the group leaders. The food was to last for 15 days and water for twenty days. A group of 3 people was chosen to keep order and was called the vessel's policemen. 35 orderlies were chosen to work under them, and they were given white armbands.

The doctors were given 40 orderlies. The kitchen was given 12 helpers and the storage department had 10 helpers. The 3 directors were not elected by the Ma'apilim but were appointed by the Palyamniks, and the Palyamniks were recognized as the highest authority on the vessel. The head of the policing force had been a Major in the Red Army (in later life he was also a writer and Eliezer kept contact with him all his life). There were also difficulties in dividing food because only 400 of the passengers ate meat. There were even difficulties in distributing water. The kitchen cooked all food and groups would appear in turn and then go back to their sleeping pallets to eat. It took 3 days before life aboard became routine and 'normal'. The weather remained good during the whole trip and that was a lucky break for them.

Equipment needed for the vessel, maps, signal code flags, radio equipment etc. were all in good condition. They entered the Bosphorus and encountered no technical difficulties and paid the price per head in Dollars. By evening they had gone through the Dardanelles and were in the Aegean Sea. They did not go near any of the islands and now the Gideoni took out his radio transmitter and readied it for signaling Palestine. Eliezer then announced to the captain and the Romanian radio operator that he should cease to send, and only the Gideoni would operate, and on his own transmitter. Eliezer heard from one fellow that the Romanian crew planned to jump ship when they were close to Turkish soil. Eliezer had such a suspicion of his own, and had assigned a "helper" to each crew member. He also prepared workers from among the Ma'apilim who would be able to run the ship on their own. He also increased guards on the lifeboats so that the Romanians could not succeed in their plans.

Contact with the Hagana in Palestine was made and instructions received regarding behavior if contact was made with the 'enemy'. Instructions were given early to make certain that they were transmitted before there could be an unplanned break in contact. On May 11, 1946, as they passed the island of Rhodes, they noticed that two British warships left port. Eliezer changed direction and hugged the Turkish coastline, sailing within the territorial waters of Turkey. The Romanian captain wanted to enter the port of Antalia, "to take on more water". Eliezer would not allow it and gave orders to reduce the amount of drinking water per person. They changed direction once again and this time headed for Cyprus. The weather was still fine and the sea calm. The Romanians were instructed that if they were boarded by the British. they were to mingle with the passengers and give their documents to Jewish girls to hide.

The Romanians agreed to this unwillingly. The Ma'apilim were told that they would have to remain below deck during daylight hours. The police were put on extra alert and a special guard was put on the radio operator's room. People were assigned to help the Gideoni destroy documents and equipment quickly in the event that the vessel was boarded.

On May 12, they arrived at Cyprus and the documents of all the Romanian crew were given to ten girls who could be trusted. Conditions below deck were very difficult for the Ma'apilim and a number of them fainted. There were also many complaints. The orderlies had to use force to keep order below. At this point, when they were fairly close to the shore of Palestine, Eliezer gave instructions of how they were to leave the ship, and in what order. All were told that belongings must be left behind, and would be last off the vessel; people were to get off first. The Poles and the Agudat Israel did not agree to this arrangement, but were told that force would be used if necessary. These elements still did not agree and the meeting broke up with the Palyamniks saying: "orders are orders". Those who did not agree tried to incite others. As soon as a plane appeared however, all went below deck except for the orderlies and a few others, but they also obeyed the commands and cleared the decks.

It was then the crew's' turn to disagree. They did not want to mingle with the passengers and said that they preferred to take their chances with a British court. They claimed that they could not trust the Ma'apilim whom they were certain would turn them in, and they could not even trust one another. They said that they had been tricked all along the way. They knew that the passengers had visas to South American countries and they also knew that the ship's papers declared they were to put in at Port Said. Eliezer told them that only if he is obeyed will he and the Hagana give them all the support they need. If they do not support him then he will not be responsible for them.

On May 13th a destroyer was sighted and as per instructions, some of the Ma'apilim were left on deck, the Star of David was raised to the top of the mast and two large signs fixed to the bridge. The first said: "We are not armed" and the second: "We are 1,800 refugees on our way to the Land of Israel. If you prevent us then you will be responsible for the ensuing catastrophe." The destroyer circled and asked, "Where are you headed?" They answered, "The Land of Israel". Another question came, "Where in Israel, Haifa or Tel Aviv?" and the answer from them was: "To Haifa or Tel-Aviv" Eliezer considered for a moment and answered, "Haifa".

Eliezer then asked in which direction to sail, so that the British would think that there was no captain on the ship to navigate for them. The destroyer gave them directions. They continued toward Haifa and the destroyer kept up with them, sailing either ahead or behind them. The Ma'apilim had calmed down but the argument with the Romanian seamen continued. At 19:00 hours there was the final contact between the Gideoni and Tel Aviv and then the transmitter was destroyed and the secret codes dropped overboard. At 01:00 the destroyer asked the vessel if she was ready to enter port immediately and the answer was

that they would prefer to wait for morning. The ship slowed down and at this point, once again the seamen decided that they did not want to mingle with the passengers. Only the captain, the radioman and the chief engineer agreed to do so. As they neared the port two small launches headed towards them. One was a police launch and the other belonged to the HaOgen Shipping Company. From the latter launch, Abba Hushi, (the Mayor of Haifa at a later date), Yaakov Dori, (Commander in Chief of the Hagana) and David Shinkrovsky (Active in Haifa port) boarded the vessel. The police launch did not interfere. When David gave the Gideoni the password, the Gideoni took him to his cabin and gave him the gold and silver that he had with him and the Palyamnikim threw what weapons they had with them, into the sea.

Arab policemen then came aboard the ship and British detectives as well. The captain turned himself in and the Romanian sailors who received their papers back made themselves known. There was a suspicion that they would inform on the Palyamniks. On the morning of the 14th of May all the passengers were taken off the vessel indiscriminately. A girl 'fainted' and the Palyamnikim took her off the vessel on a stretcher, put her into an ambulance and disappeared as fast as they could. The Ma'apilim were taken to the Atlit Detention Camp.

“Mered Hageaot” – This was a small, old wooden vessel built in 1917. It had broken in half and been repaired in 1946, prior to her purchase. Eliezer was her commander and accompanying him were Shaul Oren (Aharonov) and Chaim Kaufman. The Gideoni was Shalom Burstein. The captain and his crew were Turkish. There were 1,457 Ma'apilim on the vessel including 37 children. The vessel was organized into zones; there was an eating zone and a sleeping zone, and there were orderlies for the kitchen, the storage room and for cleaning up. The vessel sailed from Mula de Bari on May 13, 1947 and headed in the direction of El Arish Egypt. The vessel was very crowded and two children were born en route.

There was a fierce storm that arose on the 15th and the vessel sought shelter in the isle of Kefalonia and remained there for a day and a half. After 3 more days of sailing the vessel rendezvoused with a small vessel on the high seas and the Turkish seamen left the ship of Ma'apilim. Only the captain remained. On the 18th of May the vessel once again changed course in order to meet the “Yehuda Halevi” and take aboard an additional 600 Ma'apilim from Algiers, while at sea. This plan was abrogated because the “Yehuda Halevi” had anchored in the port of Palermo in order to load additional coal, and because a small child was ill. The Italians reported the existence of the ship to the British, so the plan fell through.

On the 23rd of May the vessel was discovered by a British plane opposite the shore of Rafiah. Several destroyers showed up soon afterwards and rammed and injured their vessel. The vessel was soon overrun by British soldiers and the Ma'apilim who had started to resist with force were ordered to cease by their commanders. The Palyamnikim managed to hide and to make their escape in Haifa but Eliezer went to the camps of Cyprus with the Ma'apilim, as he had

been instructed. The Ma'apilim went to Camp 55, near the summer camps, and Eliezer was smuggled back to Palestine from there.

“Atzmaut” – The last ship that Eliezer brought to Palestine was the “Atzmaut” (the “Pan Crescent”). This was a vessel that had hauled bananas and had been built in 1901 in Newport, USA. In 1947 the ship was repaired and refitted in New York and sailed to Venice. Unnecessary equipment was removed from her and then the British sabotaged it and this took another 45 days of repair. When the repairs were completed the vessel sailed to Constanza, Romania. There, she prepared to carry many Ma'apilim. Ventilation was increased and a large number of toilets were installed and extra kitchens. 45 doctors were brought on board and 150 nurses to take care of the Ma'apilim on that ship and on the “Pan York” .

The Ma'apilim were scheduled to board the vessel in Constanza but because of the pressure that the British exerted on them, the Romanians did not give the vessel permission to leave. The vessel then left for Burgas in Bulgaria after reaching an agreement with the government there. There were 7,736 Ma'apilim on the vessel, including Eliezer's parents. His parents had lost all their wealth but were prepared for the hardships of the journey. They arrived on the train at Constanza and again went by train to Burgas. On the 27th of December, 1947 the vessel left harbor and sailed through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles to Cyprus. On the 29th of December they were met by British destroyers who had had them under surveillance from Venice onwards. Orders for resistance were cancelled and both ships went straight to Cyprus after an agreement was concluded with the British. On 1 January 1948 the Ma'apilim disembarked at Famagusta. Eliezer remained with the Ma'apilim and his parents, and was smuggled out again shortly thereafter. His parents remained in Cyprus until after the creation of the State.

Dr. Eliezer Tal, who was also active in the Mosad for Aliya Bet, had this to say about Eliezer on the first anniversary of his death: As with many others in the Naval Company of the Palmach, Eliezer had no real background or particular interest in the sea. His joining the Palyam stemmed from his strong desire to do all he could to get the Remnant of the Holocaust out of Europe, This was not a political or Zionist force. It was essentially a humane one – saving people's lives. Eliezer, in all his bearing and in all his actions, was the prime example of this approach. He was among the first to volunteer for the Palyam. After completing his sea training and officers' course, he was sent abroad, to Italy and Romania. During the years 1945 – 1948 he brought 6 vessels of Ma'apilim to the shore of the Land of Israel, and on these vessels were more than 11,000 Ma'apilim, men, women and children. That is 16% of all the Ma'apilim who came on vessels of the Mosad for Aliya Bet during this period. This was an extraordinary achievement.

The Palyam consisted of a group of men who were very different, one from another in their character, background, and education, and in this variety of individuals Eliezer stood out. In his quiet and polite behavior and with his gentle

manners; was a person who was mature, who had an ideology, and a political orientation that was fully developed. He was consistent in his thoughts and actions, and could act decisively in complicated situations. He knew how to connect with people and earn their trust. "Max Noardau" under his command, was a good example.

From May 1948 to 1953 he served in the Navy. From 1953 to 1958 he worked for the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Belgium and in Hungary. From 1960 to 1988 he was head of a department and an ambassador in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. From 1988 he worked for the Foreign Ministry under special contract until the day he died in 1995.