

Ashkenazi, Reuven

Nickname: The Turk

Born December 1927 in Barcelona, Spain

Came to Palestine in 1943

Joined the Palyam in 1945

This is the Way it Was

I came to Palestine from Turkey, where my family lived since the Civil War in Spain. I came within the framework of Aliyat HaNoar. We traveled by train from Istanbul, through Syria and Lebanon, and arrived at the Bat Galim camp for Olim, near Haifa. A week or two later we were sent to Kibbutz Givat Chaim. For more than a year I worked at various agricultural jobs and learned Hebrew. I was a city type of person and kibbutz life was strange to me. I was also interested in becoming more active in security affairs, so after this trial period, volunteered for the Palmach.

My leader in the kibbutz had connections to the Hagana, so I was lucky to meet Avraham Zakai who was then the commander of the naval unit of the Palmach. That was at the same time that the Palmach had decided to expand the naval unit and create the Palyam. After taking several tests I was accepted into the Palyam and directed to report to Sdot Yam, to participate in the 5th course for small boat commanders. As soon as the course ended, some of the participants, including myself, were sent to a course for squad leaders at Ramat Hakovesh. Following that, I attended a course for sabotage, at Ashdot Yaakov.

After completing all these courses, I returned to Sdot Yam where I acted as instructor for the next course for small boat commanders. While serving as an instructor at Sdot Yam, I lived at Kibbutz Maabarot together with other Palyamniks and we took part in a number of operations:

- We helped take immigrants from ship to shore and to secure the area of the drop.
- We undertook several operations against British forces.
- We acted to protect Jewish workers in the port of Haifa from the Arabs.
- We established the groundwork for a marine landing force at Sdot Yam.

Aliya Bet

What I recall, 55 years after the events, is not too exact, except for two specific occurrences. One was helping in the disembarking of immigrants from the "Shabtai Luzinski" at the shore near Nitzanim, and my deportation with the Olim to Cyprus. The other was: sailing on the Hagana ship "Maria Anick" from Haifa to Marseilles and returning as second-in-command on the "Mala".

Helping unload the Olim of the "Shabtai Luzinski"

This operation was imprinted very strongly on my memory for two reasons: one was that we were caught together with the Olim on the shore, and the second was our being taken with them to Cyprus and only later returning to Israel. I

won't dwell on all the details, but in brief, the ship stood quite high in the water and it was difficult to take the Olim off and get them to shore. Someone, I think it was Berchik, found a solution which made the matter easier. We tied a thick rope from the ship to a boat filled with sand that was on the shore. Once we got the Olim off the ship we put them into little rubber boats which were then pulled to shore with the aid of the rope.

We spent that night on the shore in one large group surrounded by the British. We made a campfire and all the Israelis, Palyamniks, kibbutzniks and others who had come to help and were caught, burned their identity papers so that they could say that all were Israelis, both Olim and old-timers. We spent the rest of the night singing as was the tradition of the Palyam/ Palmach. In the morning British trucks showed up and we were loaded onto them and taken northwards to Haifa. We understood that our declaration that we were all Israelis did not make much of an impression on the British and they intended to ship us all to Cyprus. We had all given the British interrogators the same answer: "I am an Israeli citizen and will only answer to the proper authority."

When we reached Haifa all those arrested showed passive resistance to the British. All refused to move from the trucks and had to be dragged off them. We also refused to board the ships, so each person had to be dragged by two or three soldiers. Once on board the deportation ships we refused to go down into the holds. Leaving Palestine was a severe blow for the survivors of the Holocaust who had gone through so much to get to these shores, and were now being torn away.

In Cyprus we once again refused to move off the ships, and prepared rags soaked in water in case the British used tear gas against us. They did use tear gas and in the end nothing helped and we were moved to a camp on the Island. We then coached the Olim so that when interrogated by the British, they could pass as Israelis. We taught them a minimum of Hebrew and the geography of Israel, bus routes, prices of foodstuffs, etc. We received instructions from Hagana authorities in Palestine to cause as much of a disturbance as possible, and not give the British a moment's rest.

The British began their interrogation and it seemed that our short program of instruction was more successful than we could have imagined. A number of the girls also became the wives of the Israelis, and a number became deaf and dumb or afflicted in some other way, so that they would also be sent to Palestine for care. In the end, a large percentage of the Olim came to Palestine under these false pretenses.

Sailing on the Maria Anick

The "Maria Anick" had brought Olim to Palestine and was returning to Europe at the beginning of 1948. Without warning, I was told to board the ship and go with it to Marseilles. I thought it was some kind of a joke to call that tub a ship. It was

about as big as an oversized tank and had a mixed crew of Italians, French and others. The captain was a retired captain of the French Navy. There were two other Palyamniks aboard; one was Jimmy, whom I never saw again, and the other was "Melech" (Yaakov ben Tzion), who was in charge.

The trip from Haifa to Marseilles should not have taken more than one week, but instead, took a month because every other day something else went wrong with the engine and we would have to put in somewhere to fix it. We put into Cyprus, Crete, Rhodes, Kalmatta in Greece, and a few other places and finally arrived at Bastia in Corsica. Wherever we put in to port, the captain had a story to tell connecting that place to Greek mythology. Our Italian cook was also a unique character. First off, he was a womanizer "par excellence" and we even had a suspicion that he was sabotaging the engine so that we would have to make these stops at ports. Besides buying fresh food at these ports he always managed to also come up with a bevy of fresh young girls. In Crete he spent one night with a mother and her daughter in tandem. In Rhodes he had the company of the widow of a local doctor for a few days.

When we pulled into Bastia where we were to stay for some time, the problem arose of our not having any papers of any kind. Therefore, as the ship went into port and moved along the harbor parallel to the shore, we three Palyamniks jumped off while the ship continued on and docked at a berth some distance away.

The three of us made our way by foot to the town, and Melech had the address of a Jewish family that had lived in Tzfat. This family greeted us with open arms, fed us, and were most generous in their hospitality. They urged us to take their girls down to one of the cafés in town, and to enjoy ourselves. We simply had a good time, and they were hoping to find husbands for their daughters.

As luck would have it, the crew of the "Maria Anick" happened to be there, sitting by themselves in a corner. How surprised they were to see us "illegals" sitting there in the company of the girls while they, the "legals" sat by themselves. I can imagine how jealous they may have felt. In the end, we left the ship and took a plane flight to Marseilles. We were put up in the transit camp of Grand Arenas, and after a stay of several weeks, left as aides to the commander of the "Mala" which sailed for Israel with a load of immigrants.

Life after 1948

When the first truce in the fighting was declared, I left Jerusalem where I had been fighting with the Harel Brigade. I joined the naval service which later became the Israeli Navy, and where the Palyamniks and foreign seamen who joined our ranks all congregated. As I had participated in a naval officers course I was given an officer's rank. From 1951 to 1956 I served in various positions, mostly overseas, and in 1956 I was given the rank of lieutenant.

In 1957-8 I served at Infantry headquarters and then went to courses in gunnery and intelligence. Afterwards, I was stationed on the warship "Haifa" (formerly the "Ibrahim el Awal". I then participated in a course for senior officers when my rank was lieutenant commander. From 1964 to 1971 I served in naval intelligence with the rank of Commodore, and in 1971 was appointed Israel's military attaché for Italy and Switzerland. I returned to Israel in 1974 and after participating in a course for business, retired from the IDF. Since 1995 I have been a pensioner.