

Ben-Tzion, Yaakov

Born in 1928 in Israel

Nickname: Melech

Joined the Palmach in 1945

Joined the Palyam in 1946

This is the Way it Was

Palmach: E Company 1945 – 1946.

Courses: I attended: Sports instructor at Hefzibah/ Ginossar, 1945. Course for squad leaders at Juara, 1945. Advanced course in demolition at Bet Haarava, 1946. Short seamanship course at Sdot Yam, 1946. **Positions I filled:** Sports instructor, squad leader, platoon leader. Missions in which I participated: transferring weapons, helping unload olim from ships, blowing up railroad tracks, the attack on the Sharona police station, the Wingate Night, and others. Arrested by the British and interned in Latrun and Rafiah after "Black Saturday".

Palyam: J Company 1946 – 1948

Courses: 7th small boat commanders' course at Michmoret/ Neve Yam 1946/7, 4th course for naval officers, Yagur/ Haifa 1947. Positions filled: Instructor and commander (of the Maabarot platoon), commander of the "Le Franquis" Camp of olim, in France. Accompanied the ship "Le'Kommemiyut" in February 1948, and the ship that carried war materials – "Maria-Anique", and the ship "Tampa". Commander of the training base at Sidna-Ali, (Palyam, 4th Battalion), in protection and command of the Port Company and in the landing force, saboteur in the "special" unit in Europe (sabotage of enemy Arab war equipment in Europe during the War of Independence).

Missions: Helping receive olim arriving in Palestine, organizing and running a camp for olim in France, accompanying ships with olim or with war materiel, taking and hiding weapons from British ships in Haifa harbor, landing at Ras-el-Baida in Lebanon to blow up railway and road bridges on the night of the 14th May 1948, the eve of the Declaration of Independence) and various missions of sabotage in France and Italy (August 1948 – January 1949).

Special Events: Two weeks imprisonment in the Haifa jail. Eight of us Palyamniks were caught, by the British army, in a boat at the entrance to the bay at Kibbutz Sdot Yam after an attempt to meet the vessel "La'Negev" at sea.

The Navy: January 1949 – May 1950. When our special unit of "sabotage" was disbanded in Europe, Moshe Lipson (Nachshon) and I returned to Israel on the ship "Tempe" and reported to the divers' base of the 13th fleet at the site of ancient Caesarea. When I was discharged from the Navy I joined the cooperative, "Mishor" which had been established by ex-members of the sea commandos and demolition officers of the Palmach, and who worked at dismantling mines in the field since the War of Independence. We also blew up buildings marked for destruction, sunken vessels, and boulders where roads were to be built, etc. In 1953 I started studies at the Haifa Technion in the

Faculty for Mechanical Engineering and joined Kibbutz Maagan Michael, as did several other graduates of the Palyam.

In the service of the Palyam and the Mosad for Aliya Bet:

Toward the end of July 1946 I returned from imprisonment in Rafiah to my platoon in Mishmar Hasharon, and was appointed unit commander. I reorganized the unit and we shortly returned to a normal training schedule. It seemed that we were entering into a period of quiet without much activity. The stories that I heard from Palyam friends in the adjoining kibbutz (Maabarot) about Aliya Bet, aroused my desire to transfer to the Palyam. I talked to my superior officer, Dani Mass, and after some nagging he agreed to let me leave. As soon as I got to the Palyam I tried to get the job of accompanying a ship of olim. I was lucky and within a year of my joining, went to a course for small boat commanders and an advanced course for naval officers. In between these courses I served as an instructor and took part in various operations.

In October of 1947, when I was at the ripe age of 19½, I was sent by the Mosad for Aliya Bet to France. This was my first trip abroad and I was now to come face to face with survivors of the Holocaust and do my best to get them to Palestine. The flight to our first destination, Prague, took two days. We traveled via Egypt, Malta, Naples and Munich. There were twelve of us in all, including seamen, Gideonim, a doctor, a nurse and officials of the Mosad for Aliya Bet. Each one had his task and destination. I was very impressed with Prague, but not before I had visited the concentration camp of Theresienstadt. My traveling companion was Dan Ben Amotz. We left Prague for Paris and from there continued to Marseilles, which was an important center of our activity. Near Marseilles, at Mazargues (which we called Camp Mizra) I met many of my friends from the Palyam and Palmach and that was great!

Immediately upon my arrival I was sent to help load the immigrant ship, "Aliya" at night. It was anchored in a nearby bay. That is how I became absorbed in this type of work very quickly and felt ready to do whatever job would be given me. , One morning I was called to the Hechalutz offices in Marseilles and was given the task of setting up a new camp for 400 people and run it. The camp was to be located about 300 kilometers from Marseilles and out of sight of the British. It was located in an isolated area of the coast in a villa between Narbonne and Perpignan and was called "Le Franquis"

Two months went by and it seemed that people were quite content there and with the way they were treated by us. Then came the order to move. On the 5th of February 1948 we left the camp and boarded the Hagana ship, "Le'Kommemiyut" (Sette Fratelli) and set out for the long-awaited voyage. The day before we were to sail, a truck drivers' strike broke out. We were afraid that we would not be able to move the olim to the ship but the contact between the Mosad for Aliya Bet and the labor unions was so strong that the truck drivers did the job despite the strike. They loaded and moved olim all that night and brought olim to other camps that

were close to the port. A few days later the olim were moved to an area near the Bay of Saint Tropez, where the "Le'Kommemiyut" was waiting. I had been told that I would go along on the ship and was very glad as it would "complete the circle". I had received the olim at the camp, had taken care of them there, and would now continue to do this on the ship. I also had another reason for wanting to sail as soon as possible. Since the UN had decided on the formation of the Jewish State and the Arabs had started armed conflict I wanted to get back and take part in the defense of the Jewish settlements. When we got to the Bay, I boarded the ship to see if arrangements for receiving the olim were satisfactory. I met the senior Palyamnik to be on the ship, Avner Gilad, and the Gideoni Arale Michaeli (Keller), the Italian crew, its captain, and first mate. It took three hours to load all of the olim onto the ship, with the use of rubber and wooden boats.

On the 8th February 1948 we raised anchor at dawn and were on our way. We sailed by way of the Straits of Bonifacio, the Straits of Messina, northern Crete and northern Cyprus, in the direction of Beirut and Nahariya. We had 699 Olim on board, mostly from Europe, and a few from North Africa. All the olim were quartered in the central hold of the ship, which had an area of 180 square meters and bunks were in columns of 7 bunks in height. The ship had been built in 1927 and had three masts. We passed through three storms on our route east but the worse one was when we were between Turkey and Cyprus. The engine broke down and the ship tossed in the high waves, as the sea swept over the deck. All other ships sought shelter but we had nowhere to hide, and no one to help us.

I went to the engine room and found the entire engine crew of Italians working away with gusto. They simply took the whole engine apart and did an overhaul job. Our efforts were devoted to calming the olim and assuring them that the situation was under control. It took 36 hours to repair the engine and get under way once again. The following morning the mountains of Lebanon were seen in the distance and things looked optimistic. Suddenly I was approached by several tough-looking men who demanded to know which shore it was that we could see in the distance. I told them that it was Beirut, Lebanon and they demanded to be landed ashore there. They said that they spoke in the name of all the olim and did not want to sail any further. In the meanwhile, other young men, North Africans who had been in my camp and saw themselves as my protectors, also gathered around. I explained to all of them that Lebanon was an enemy country, was at war with Israel, and we could not land there. I also said that in a few more hours we would be opposite the shore of Israel.

One of the fellows demanded that we sail for shore immediately, and if not he would force us to do so. He put his hand into his coat pocket and drew out a pistol. I jumped at him and gave him a firm slap in the face. My "bodyguards" surrounded the fellow, took away the pistol, and shoved him and his friends toward the bow of the ship. We continued to sail southward, in the hope that we could run up onto the shore near Nahariya under cover of night, and not be discovered by the British.

We had decided earlier to try to disguise the ship in order to avoid being spotted by the British. The idea was to remove the center mast and paint it red so that it would have a greater resemblance to a Turkish cargo ship. When we reached the vicinity of a quiet bay near the island of Scarpanto, northeast of Crete, we anchored, made the changes as planned, and also renamed the ship the "Abdul Chamid"

On the 19th of February 1948 as we continued towards the south, a British plane circled overhead and we could tell that he was suspicious of us. None of the olim were on deck. The plane left and we hoped that our disguise had worked. Not long after however, a destroyer appeared and they asked permission to send people aboard to search our vessel. We had strict instructions not to offer resistance because of the large number of babies and children on board. While still exchanging signals with the destroyer, two more appeared on the horizon. We realized that there was no reason to continue hiding and we entered into negotiations with them. The British agreed that we continue toward Haifa under our own power and when we were close to the port, they would board our ship.

We continued to sail toward Haifa, but let all the olim come up on deck. It was a sight to see them, all excited and somewhat bewildered by the situation, and I will not forget that moment. On the 20th of February we entered Haifa harbor and the olim were transferred to the deportation ships and sent to the Cyprus detention camps. Acting on instructions previously received, Avner, the American volunteer, and I went down to the hideout that we had previously prepared, avoided deportation and managed to remain in Palestine.