

**Biber, Shaul**

Born in Tiberias in November 1922

One of the first members of the Palmach in 1941 in the Mishmar Haemek Forest.

Joined the Aliya Bet activities in 1946

Commander of "The Ranks of the Defenders" in the detention camps, Cyprus

The following is Shaul's story about working with Micha Perry (of blessed memory) on an operation related to the "Exodus" (see an editorial note at the end).

**This is the Way it was**

Three ships were anchored for more than twenty days off the coast of Port de Bouc, a small and unimportant port that had come to the center of world attention. Hundreds of newspapermen, photographers, and movie photographers came to the port every day, as did hundreds of demonstrators. With this noisy and turbulent background, the men of the Palyam and the Gideonim did their job with discretion and devotion, disguised as chemists and representatives of fishing companies. We came close to the deportation vessels in fishing boats, and thereby kept contact with our men. I can recall Nissan Leviatan, Yair Braker, Gad Hilb, Uri Goren, Marga and perhaps Zaki, Gideonchik, Miko, Willie Rostoker and others.

Nissan and I were disguised as French doctors and went onto the ship to check the health of the Ma'apilim. I went toward the bridge but was stopped by armed soldiers. I spoke to them in a sort of 'French-English' and the Captain ordered them to let me on to do my "humanitarian" work. A British soldier accompanied me but I managed to lose him below deck. In two enormous holds of the ship there were about 1,500 people. The air was foul and the British soldier who went with me remained near the air vent. I used the opportunity to disappear into the mass of Ma'apilim. I gave the code word "My people", and two big fellows took me to a short squat fellow who was the leader of the Ma'apilim, Mordechai Rosman.

He looked me up and down and saw someone in the white apron of a doctor who had a stethoscope around his neck as proof of his authenticity. He asked me in Yiddish, "Do you speak French or Yiddish?" I gave up my secrecy and said, "I prefer Hebrew!" He, in his typical sense of humor which had not been destroyed, remarked: "Can you hear the coming of the Messiah with that thing around your neck?" I pulled a physician's reflector from my pocket, placed it on my head and answered: "I can't quite hear the Messiah but I can, with some difficulty, see his 'trials and tribulations'". He smiled and patted me on the back, and we have been close friends ever since.

I was brought to a far corner and there saw Micha, whom the Ma'apilim knew as Gad. In their eyes he was the next thing to God. They had a favorite expression; "Either God or Gad". He was dressed in rags, his hair was wild and his beard was a month old. Micha didn't waste time and said. "I have no one with whom to consult so I consult myself. I try to figure what Yigal (Alon) would do if he were here. We will not leave the ships of our own accord and the British will have to remove us by force. There is no point in bringing us weapons with which to open fire on them because if we shoot they will shoot back, and they will be the victims. My suggestion is that you

bring me explosives so that I can blow up the ship if they remove us by force.” He paused here and then added, “I am certain that that is what Yigal would do, or would tell me to do, if we could contact with each other”. There was nothing for me to add. I left the ship and a launch took me back to shore.

I discussed our conversation with Nissan Leviatan and we decided to try to fulfill Micha's request. There were rumors from day to day of what awaited the deportation ships. Some said they would sail with the Ma'apilim to the Seychelles, and others said to Mauritius. Others said the British would run the ship aground and leave the problem in the hands of the French. I went to our base in Marseilles and to our secret radio station there, which was run by Miko. We thought that we would need delaying fuses for at least four hours, that we would have to find somewhere. The delaying time was indicated by the color of the fuse.

I had participated in an advanced course in demolition at Mishmar Haemek in 1941. That was six years before the “Exodus” crisis. Even today I can remember the order of colors for the various time delays; R-G-B-P etc. red, 5-15 minutes; green, 15-45 minutes; blue, 45 minutes - 2½ hours; pink, 2½ - 6 hours; etc. But still, if I made a mistake, somewhere the vessel would blow up with all the Ma'apilim on board. We recalled the fiasco of the "Patria", a ship blown up by Hagana men in Haifa port. By mistake they blew such a big hole in the ship that it sank with 300 people still on board, and many were drowned.

As a security check, I asked Miko to signal “Fat Chaim”, the chief sabotage officer of the Palmach, and ask him for a list of colors and their time values. Miko, a veteran Palmachnik, was also a Gideoni, and they are like ‘a tribe unto themselves’. For them, secrecy was of top priority. He told me that he could tell who was signaling back to him from Tel Aviv, and when another Palmachnik was at his side, he would send the message. Four hours later the answer came followed by the question: “Why do you ask?”

During this period we were given additional help by members of “Resistance”. These were young Jews who had fought in the French underground movement, and with their help we received 5 kilos of explosives and a package of delay fuses of the proper color, the following day. We returned to Port de Bouc and wrapped the package into a sack of presents that were sent to the Ma'apilim from all over the world.

Three days later the three deportation ships sailed for Gibraltar. There, they took on food and fuel and again set sail. The Ma'apilim were certain that they would head south into the Atlantic, in the direction of Africa,

Several days later they were astonished to learn that the British were returning them to Germany, to Hamburg which was in the area under British control. Upon arrival, fierce resistance took place on the first two deportation ships and the British had to carry the Ma'apilim off the vessels one at a time. To the surprise of the British, the third ship which had always been the best organized and the most resistant was the most compliant. The Ma'apilim usually took their blankets with them but now all the blankets were piled up neatly in a corner of the hold. This was very suspicious to the

commander of the vessel and he ordered the blankets to be cleared away. Sure enough, explosives with detonators were discovered and deactivated by British sappers. There was another detonator that they did not find. The British called a press conference to inform the assembled newspapermen that they were not dealing with poor refugees but with a gang of terrorists. The press conference was to be at 16:00 hours, but at 15:00 hours the last detonator set off a bomb. No one was hurt but the building was destroyed.

I returned to Israel on a Czech vessel carrying arms from a Yugoslav port. There were 30 000 rifles, 3000 rapid fire machine guns and 300 heavy machine guns. I went down to the Negev Brigade and received a jeep company from Micha, and he became second-in-command to Chaim Bar Lev (of blessed memory), commander of the 9th Battalion. The war finally ended and I signed on for extended service. Micha went to study architecture. From time to time I heard from various people that Shaul Avigur was looking for me, but I had no reason to think that it was important. Once, however, when Micha returned from the USA he told me that I must report to Shaul Avigur, but could not tell me why.

I went to the government compound in Tel Aviv where his office was located in one of the little wooden shacks there. At that time he was working on a "top secret" project, illegal aliya from the Soviet Union. His son Gur fell during the War of Independence and that is when he changed his name to Avigur (father of Gur.). When I was in the Palmach at Kineret I had been Gur's leader. His sister Rutha was a Gideonit on vessels of the Ma'apilim. Gur was a very nice young man and died in one of the battles of the Jordan Valley.

Now, I stood before his father, Shaul Avigur, who was a man respected by everyone. He left me standing for a while, looked up and down at me, and finally said: "Young man, you did not ask anyone if you could put explosives on the ships with Ma'apilim. Who said you could make war at the expense of the Ma'apilim? There was no bravery or glory in your act, 'Exodus' played itself out in the effort of the Ma'apilim to reach Israel". He said all this in a rather dramatic fashion. His last sentence hung in the air. He continued to gaze at me steadily and I was obviously somewhat confused and embarrassed. The expression on his face softened, his tone of voice changed and he asked me to sit down. Then he got up and came up behind me and said: "I pinched Micha on the left ear, as punishment, I'll pinch you on the right ear." He did that and returned to his seat. He then got down to the business at hand and proposed that I become active in something that has no relationship to this book, and which is better left for another time.

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### **Editorial note:**

**During a meeting between the two Palyamniks Nissan Leviatan and Micha Perry on board the deportation ship in Port De Bouc, it was decided to sabotage the ship. The decision was based on Palmach's standing order, and there was no need for a written approval.**