

Braker, Yair

Born in 1925 in Tzfat (Safed)

Joined the Palyam in 1945

This is the Way it Was

My parents were members of a group of workers that wandered to the Galilee and to the Valley of Jezreel (Ayelet Hashachar, Yavniel, Tel Adashim) and they finally settled in Haifa in 1927, when I was two years old. In Haifa they worked at whatever jobs were to be had. They worked at paving Herzl Street and at building store houses in the port, etc. until my father obtained a permanent situation. All their lives they were part of what we called "the working Eretz Israel". From second grade until the end of elementary school I studied at The School for Worker's Children and when I was 12 I entered the nautical section of Hapoel. I learned to row in their club which was in the port of Haifa.

In 1938 the naval school was established in Haifa and when I completed elementary school studies in 1939 I started to study there, in the second course held at the school. There were four fields of study in each class; seamanship, mechanics, radio and boat building. In addition to my studies I was also active in the "Hagana" where I was used as a runner to connect between various posts. My training there also involved learning signaling. While studying at that school there were many activities which were a reaction to events of the time. There were demonstrations against the "White Paper" and ships of immigrants that arrived before the war put an end to that. I stood with all the other students and watched as the "Patria" slowly heeled over and sank with 250 olim on board.

In 1941 the World War came closer to us and Haifa was an important British naval base from which ships left frequently to attack the Vichy forces in Lebanon. Haifa also was a base for refitting ships of the Royal Navy or its allies and it became impossible for us to train there. The first course was therefore suspended and things came to a halt for a time until Zeev Hayam arrived at the school as an instructor. We continued our studies at Neve Yam and Sdot Yam. During vacation periods we went to help out Kibbutz Ein Gev, where they had a fishing industry. At the end of the school term of 1942, the second course finished all studies except seamanship, so we joined the first course in order to also complete our studies in that subject. We completed everything in three years instead of four.

Most of the pupils of this first course joined the British Navy, but I and five others who were too young to enlist, looked for something else to do. I got a job as a helper on a tugboat that belonged to the Pardes Syndicate in the port of Haifa. In March 1943 when I was only 17½, I got a job with the aid of Zeev Hayam as a deckboy on the ship "Amal" of the Atid Company. The ship flew under the flag of Palestine and worked for the British Navy in carrying cargo between various

bases of the navy in the Mediterranean. This vessel was 38 years old and had an engine that was coal fed.

The crew consisted of men of many nationalities. The Jews were a minority, the men who stoked the boilers were Egyptian, the gunners were British and the deckhands were Greek. My closest companions were two Palyamniks who joined the crew for a short period in order to get experience in seamanship. and due to their influence I went to the naval branch of the Palmach, whose base was in Kiryat Chaim. This was in 1945. They accepted me but decided that I should continue working on the ship and get more experience. I rose to the rank of able-bodied seaman and transferred to the "Atid", which also worked in transferring ammunition for the British navy. There were other Palyamniks on this ship who were also there to get more experience.

Both the "Amal" and the "Atid" moved ammunition and sank waste ammunition at sea. Some of this we were able to save or salvage and pass on to Jewish soldiers in the British Army, who managed to get some of this to our forces in Palestine. In May 1946 I resigned and reported to the Palyam. I was sent to the 3rd course for naval officers. We studied at the Naval School in Haifa and the instructors were from the school. We lived in tents in Kibbutz Yagur. While the course continued, we took part in helping to unload olim from a ship which did not manage to get through the British blockade. The day before "Black Saturday" we were sent home, or scattered among various moshavim, until things cooled down.

When the course was over, I stayed in Palestine as an instructor for the 7th seaman's course, held at Michmoret, and also as an instructor for instructors at Neve Yam, and several other courses. In June 1947 I was sent abroad and flew to Prague, where I received a visa for France. I then traveled to Paris and from there to Marseilles. A few days after my arrival, the deportation ships with the olim of the "Exodus" on board, came into the harbor at Port de Bouc. I and many others went down to the port area to show our support for them. When the ships left. we went back to Marseilles and to Camp Mizra and waited.

Because of all the publicity surrounding the "Exodus", we could no longer get Jews out of France by supplying them with false visas to South American countries. We had to look for new avenues. We thought that perhaps we could find deserted beaches and load passengers onto ships at night, as was being done in Italy. On one of these excursions we aroused the suspicions of the French police and we sat in jail for two days until the matter was cleared up. In the middle of October, the vessel "Pietro" showed up. This was a small but rather new vessel that had already carried olim. The ship docked in Marseilles, loaded wood aboard, and then we sailed with the vessel to a quiet bay in Corsica where we prepared bunks to take on olim. When all was ready we returned to France, to the town of Bandol. The olim were taken aboard at night between the 4th and 5th of November with the aid of a large rubber boat and we left for Palestine on the morning of the 5th.

The voyage toward Palestine was uneventful. The Italian crew was good and experienced. The olim were mostly young people, and were well organized either according to party affiliation or the country that they came from. When we came closer to Palestine and were approaching from the north opposite Syria and Lebanon, and had not yet been identified by the British, we received instructions from Palestine to transfer all the passengers to the "Kadima". The olim did not agree with this idea and intended to oppose it, but the idea was abandoned anyway because the "Kadima" was being escorted by several British destroyers. We arrived opposite the shore of Nahariya at dawn and saw that two British destroyers were waiting there for us. Their radar had not identified us because we had been traveling close to the shoreline. We went to work quickly and with the aid of teams of Hapoel Nahariya to help us, came up onto the shore with the ship, unloaded all the passengers as quickly as possible, and dispersed them among the surrounding settlements.

Two weeks later, on the 29th of November, the UN voted on the creation of the State of Israel, and we immediately started preparing for war. I participated in a refresher course at Givat Zaid in small arms, and after that I was posted to Haifa as a reinforcement for the tugboats of the Pardes Syndicate. These tugs worked mostly in an area of the port where many Arabs and Haurani were employed. There was a tense feeling at the time. A bit later I was sent to work on the sailboat "Samar," and then on the "South Africa". We sailed to Crete with the idea of trying to intercept a ship with military equipment headed for Syria. When we arrived, we were ordered to return because the ship had already been sunk in an Italian port. When we returned the team was disbanded.

I was then sent to the "Eilat" (A-16) which was the first of the immigrant ships to be refitted and posted to the new Israeli Navy. We patrolled the coastal waters and accompanied ships carrying military equipment as they approached Tel Aviv. We were attacked and chased by 3 Egyptian vessels which were driven off by two Israeli Piper aircraft, one of which was shot down.

I continued to serve the Navy until February 1950 in various positions and on several ships, and took part in a number of operations. At the close of 1949 I participated in a course to obtain a license as Second Mate in the merchant navy. As soon as I was discharged, I went to work for "Zim" on a number of ships. In 1953 I was certified as First Mate and in 1955 as Captain. I was then commissioned to take over the ship "Atlit" which sailed the Mediterranean and northern Europe. This was the first Israeli ship that circled Africa and reached Eilat in May 1957.

At this time I was already married and accepted an offer from the Port of Haifa to serve as pilot for the port. I continued to work periodically on other ships as captain. In 1964 I was among those who built the Port of Ashdod and was captain of the Port. In 1965 I was appointed Captain of the port of Haifa.

In 1970 I began work for the Port Authority as a consultant and from 1980 to 1993 I served in the port of Hadera as a consultant for the Electric Company, that was building the coal jetty for the power station there.