

Cohen, Solel

Born in 1927 in the Soviet Union

Made Aliya in 1929

Joined the Palyam in 1945

This is the Way it Was

I was born in the Soviet Union in 1927, and was the first child born in the training group "Amal" of the Hechalutz movement, in the city of Leningrad (St Petersburg). In 1929 the Hechalutz movement was declared illegal. It had been semi-legal until then, and its members had been allowed to make aliya to Palestine. Since I was only two years old when I reached Palestine, all of my impressions and memories are those of a native-born Israeli. At first we lived in Tel Aviv, and then we moved to the Workers Quarters near the Borochov Quarter (which in later years became Givataim). I completed my elementary education in 1941 in the Borochov Quarter, and in 1945 my secondary education at the Herzlia Hebrew Gymnasium, in Tel Aviv.

As was usual for the youth of those days, I joined HaNoar HaOved in the Borochov Quarter, and during my period of studies was also a leader in the movement. At the same time, I joined the Gadna and Chish (the two paramilitary youth movements of the "Hagana", the underground defense organization of the Jewish settlements in Palestine, of which the Palmach and the Palyam were an integral part).

In 1945 I completed the exams of my secondary school. I then joined the training group that united with the Noar HaOved group of Tel Aviv, the aim of which was to set up a kibbutz based on the sea. We were assigned to the 10th Company of the Palmach (the Palyam) at Kibbutz Sdot Yam, Caesarea.

This was the period of illegal Aliya and of revolt against British mandatory rule (the Night of The Bridges, the attack on the radar sites at Givat Olga and Sidna Ali), I and my friends found ourselves in the midst of intense and turbulent activity. The company of veteran Palmachnikim and their stories and celebrations of the 13th of the month by the Palyam, added color and spice to our lives. When things were quiet, we worked in the various branches of work in the kibbutz. One of these was carting sand from the beach near the Hadera streambed and bringing it to the kibbutz on camels. We also had military training, and I remember my platoon leader, Bill Bar-Atid (Wilenchuk), and my squad leaders, Ezra Glon and Chaim Poznansky (Poza). Besides the training in the field we also had sea training, and went out to sea on the "Dov", the "Tirza" and the "Rivka" (if I remember correctly).

I remember two things connected with the subject of illegal Aliya:

1. We left Kibbutz Yagur at the end of December, 1945, for Kibbutz Evron, and took with us weapons that had been in a hideaway. Our job was to secure the beach at Nahariya because a vessel, the "Hannah Senesh", was scheduled to come into shore there. A storm came up that night so

its arrival was delayed. The British sensed activity in the area, so we had to leave and return to Yagur. As is known, the vessel did come in the following night and ran up onto the shore. Not all the reinforcements that were necessary, were able to get to the scene.

2. I also recall securing the area of arrival of another vessel, the "Amiram Shochat", which arrived in secret at the shore of Sdot Yam in August, 1946. It dropped its Ma'apilim on the beach and immediately sailed back to Europe.

In 1946 our group transferred to Kibbutz Shefayim and is where "Black Saturday" found us (29 of June, 1946). We left before dawn and went through the fields to Ramat Hasharon. We were divided among the Moshavnikim there, and worked in the fields and gardens until things returned to normal. In the summer of 1946 I went to a course for squad leaders in the Hills of Ephraim, and our base was at Kibbutz Ramat Hashofet. Two other platoons were at Ein Hashofet and Dahlia. Most of this course was conducted at night because the British were still on high alert for some time after "Black Saturday:"

I completed this course and for some reason or other, failed to go to a course for small boat commanders. This led to my falling into jobs that had to do with land more than with the sea, within the Palyam. I was made squad leader for a new group of trainees that settled at Kibbutz Yagur. The platoon leaders were Idel (Yehuda Drexler) and Arie Shwarzman (Shachar). Other squad leaders were Motke ben Porat and Moishela Klein. This was a great group of young people which later went to Kibbutz Maoz Chaim and fought in the War of Independence in the Yiftach Brigade. It was a pleasure to work with them and we became good friends.

One 'side job' that I had in the Palmach, was to obtain fuses and detonators. From time to time I would make the rounds of the quarries of Nesher and from one of the managers who was a member of the Hagana, would get fuses and detonators that I would hide on my body and bring to a temporary hideaway in Yagur. Chaim Zinger (Ron), the chief demolition expert of the Palmach, would come along periodically and pick them up. Since the British would stop buses and make sudden searches every so often, I found myself in unpleasant situations as a result.

Something peculiar happened when I was a squad leader at Yagur. At the end of 1946 there was a soccer game in Haifa with a well-known Hungarian team, M.T.K. and a group of us went to see it. Toward the end of the game, the British Army surrounded the whole field and arrested every healthy looking young man. After examining everyone's ID, about 60 young fellows were taken to the local lock-up. It turned out that all those arrested were those whose IDs showed that they lived in Ramat Gan or Petach Tikva. These towns were then strongholds of the "Etzel", a small underground Jewish military organization not under the jurisdiction of the Jewish Agency. It seemed that the British wanted to make a pre-emptive move against some plan of the "Etzel" or to catch some of its

members. We spent the night on a rug full of lice on a cold floor, and after a short interrogation were set free. Since the archives of the Palmach had been caught shortly before that soccer game, on “Black Saturday”, I had to change my identity, and had false documents on me. I was now Ilan Zilber. .

At the end of the summer of 1947 I went to a course for platoon leaders at Kibbutz Ginnegar. Half of the course was at Kibbutz Sarid. We had an encounter with the British in which we prevented them from capturing four heavy machine guns (Schwartzlose) of the Palmach. This had been in the Balfour Forest, above Ginnegar. We had to break up and scatter among the moshavim in the area. When matters quieted down, we renewed the course at Juara (a forested area between Mishmar Haemek and Ein Hashofet). This was the last such course of the Hagana and the Palmach, as there were already discussions in the UN regarding partition and creation of the state.

When this course was over I was given a temporary assignment of preparing a course for squad leaders for a chosen group of Palyamniks. This course was to be held near Kibbutz Givat Zaid and was intensive. We were rather cut off from the world in that locale and transistors had not yet been invented or hadn't yet reached us. In any case, as we were going to sleep, we heard loud noise from settlements all around us, and singing as well. I sent a messenger to inquire what the racket was about and he brought the news of the 29th of November – the Declaration of the UN regarding the creation of the State of Israel.

I woke everyone, assembled them in line, and told them the news. We celebrated for only a few minutes because there was to be a hard field exercise the next day. That was the extent of our celebration of that great event. Several days later we were called to the beach at Tel Aviv to secure it for the arrival of “Haportzim”. This little vessel managed to break through the British siege, something that had not happened for some time. Most vessels were caught and the Ma'apilim deported to Cyprus. All the Olim were unloaded and dispersed throughout the city. Instead of going back, we were told to spend the night at a girls' school in the northern section of Tel Aviv. The following morning we were surprised to learn that we were going down to the Negev for a “few weeks or a month”.

We were told that the situation there was bad and that people had already been injured. It was necessary to protect the water pipeline and the roads, and reinforcements were needed there. This did not suit our Palyam interests too well, but our motto was: “We are at the nation's command!”. We went to Kibbutz Dorot and were assigned to the company of David Klein (Ram). His company was attached to the 2nd Battalion under the command of Moshe Netzer. Our main task was to protect the pipeline that went from Dorot – Ruchama – Shoal – Mishmar Hanegev. About two months later (we knew that the 2 weeks to a month was very tentative) I was given a new assignment. I was to take my men to the Beit Eshel – Nevatim area, which was an isolated bulge in the Negev, south of the location we were at. It took us two days to get there, going by way of Dorot, NirAm, Gvulot, Tze'elim, Chalutza and Revivim. We went around Arab

populated Beer Sheva and arrived at Beit Eshel. I was put in command of the platoon. In addition to the platoon, they had an armored vehicle called a 'sandwich', and we were supposed to safeguard an area of two settlements. We were attached to the 8th Battalion which was created for the southern Negev under the command of Chaim Bar Lev. This was February-March 1948, just before the invasion of the Egyptians and the area was then quiet. There were a few incidents, sometimes with Bedouin and sometimes with the Arabs of the Hebron hills, and at times there were even casualties

In March 1948 I received orders to move to Kibbutz Ruchama and to take command of the "Depot", a base for recruits of the Negev Brigade. The Brigade was being organized under the command of Nachum Sarig and had started to receive recruits. I left Beit Eshel by plane so that I could save myself a two-day journey. I was now not only separated from the sea, but also from my companions, the Palyamnikim. I was now an infantryman of the Negev Brigade. I must say that I loved the wide expanses of the Negev. I think that some of the fellows I left behind did go north later, and joined the Navy when it was created. I should mention that I was relieved of my command at Beit Eshel by Moshe Albert Yitzhar, a son of Kibbutz Ein Harod, who was killed the first time that Beit Eshel was bombed by the invading Egyptians. The campaign for capturing Beer Sheva during the Yoav campaign was named the Moshe Operation, in his honor.

Since this collection of articles is meant to deal specifically with Aliya Bet, I will not elaborate on my activities in the army following my stay at Ruchama. When the Egyptians invaded and the War of Independence was in full swing, the "Depot" was abandoned and the men there spread all over the country. I was suddenly unemployed and was assigned to the 7th Battalion as a platoon leader. This was a new battalion that was commanded at first by Yochanan Zariz and then by Uzi Narkis.

In an attack on the Arab village of Hulikat in July, 1948, our company captain, Dicky, was killed. He was a member of Kibbutz Givat Brenner and the commander and friend of the poet Yehuda Amichai, who served in our battalion. I was given command of "A" Company of the 7th Battalion and continued in this position during the Campaigns, Yoav, Lot and Horev by the Negev Brigade.

When the War of Independence was over I remained in regular service until October, 1962 and filled various positions in instruction, headquarters and command. This included command of the 106th Battalion of the 10th Brigade during the Kadesh Campaign.

I was discharged with the rank of Lt. Colonel and continued to serve in the reserves in the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War.

In 1950 I married Miriam Rakowitch who had been a student at the Herzlia Gymnasium. Her studies were cut short in April, 1948, when the students were mobilized into the Palmach and the 7th Battalion in the Negev. As a civilian I

worked for the National Council for Research and Development for 5 years. This was a department connected to the office of the Prime Minister in Jerusalem. In 1967 I worked in the Directorate of the institution that established Ben Gurion University of the Negev. We moved to Beer Sheva in 1968. I continued with the University in the position of Assistant Manager and Manager of the Financial and Supply Department. While working, I completed a degree in economics in 1973. In 1991 I retired, but continue to work at a different institution part-time. I am the father of two boys and a girl, and grandfather of six grandchildren (so far). The memory of those difficult times in the Palyam and the Palmach serves to remind us, in our present difficulties, that we can believe in our efforts to overcome them.