

Dotan Alex (Schacht) (of blessed memory)
 Born in 1922 in Sambor, Poland and made Aliya in 1938
 Joined the Palmach in 1944
 Joined the Palyam in 1945
 Died 13 March 1989
 Written by Sara Dotan

This is the Way it Was

In 1938 Alex made Aliya all by himself when he was only 16 years old, in the hope that his parents would follow him when they received their visas for Palestine. During his first year in the country he lived with his grandfather in Haifa and studied in the Bosmath Technical School. When WW II broke out, he lost contact with his family in Poland and joined his uncles in Kibbutz Beit Alfa. A year later, when there was a split in Beit Alfa, he went with his uncles to Kibbutz Ramat Yochanan. There in due time he joined the Machanot Olim movement and soon after joined the Palmach's "F" Company. He wandered with his company from one kibbutz to another and joined the Naval Company when it was formed. One of his reasons for joining was that he hoped to meet survivors of the Holocaust, and help them reach Palestine. He was quite certain that his parents and brothers had been killed.

His training in the Palyam included not only theoretical knowledge received in the Naval School affiliated with the Haifa Technion, but also practical training as a seaman with the "Atid" Company, whose ships had been drafted into service for the British Royal Navy. That is how Alex the Palmachnik served as an officer on the ships: "Amos" and "Amal" for the British Navy.

Before he left Palestine to work for the Mosad for Aliya Bet, he helped unload Ma'apilim from ships that had broken through the British blockade. He also worked with Yochai ben Nun in naval sabotage when they sabotaged the Hagana ship "Hagana," to avoid its being sent to Cyprus. This ship later became the "K20" and actively served in the Israeli Navy.

During 1946 Alex was sent to France, where he was responsible for a camp of refugees near Marseilles. He organized study groups and took care of their needs. He also managed to learn to speak Yiddish and that helped immensely in his work with them. In the spring of 1947 he accompanied the Hagana ship "Moledet", which carried 1600 Ma'apilim. The story of this voyage was told separately by Alex and appears here separately.

Alex served in the Israeli Navy until 1969 and in his last post was commander of the drydock. Once while in Portsmouth, England, at the base of the British Navy, he encountered a British naval officer who had been on the destroyer that captured the "Moledet". That sort of closed a circle. He died on 13 March 1989.

The Story of the ship “Moledet”

As told by Alex Dotan (Schacht)

On the eve of Passover, 1947, after a futile struggle the Ma'apilim of the ship “Moledet”, were transferred to British deportation ships and sent to Cyprus. Alex Dotan was the commander of this vessel. He had received command from the Mosad for Aliya Bet. At one time the events told by Alex were reported as if from the mouths of Ma'apilim, but that was done so that the British would not be able to identify who in the vessel had been a Palyamnik.

The day of our voyage was approaching. although we did not know the precise date. One day we received notice to proceed to another camp, where the olim were preparing to leave. There was an evening roll-call and the olim were divided into groups, and individuals appointed to be responsible for each group. The groups in front started to move out.

An order had been issued that there could only be a maximum of 10 kilos in the knapsack that each person carried. People had to make choices that were not simple. One woman chose to keep an old, dilapidated blanket rather than some new clothes that she had to leave out. What memories did that blanket carry for her that were so important? Only she could have answered that question.

We arrived in the darkness on a dreary shore and could scarcely discern a dark shadow out in the water, and small boats moving back and forth. The ship rocked in the water and just the sight of it was enough to cause seasickness. The climb aboard ship on a rope ladder was an experience in itself. One of the small boats capsized, and the people in it were thrown into the water together with their backpacks. Several young men on the ship jumped into the water, cut the backpacks from the people, and brought them aboard the ship. "Finally, we all stood on board, shivering and a bit stunned, and then followed our group leaders who were marked with colored arm bands, below deck.

"The holds were partitioned and divided into ranks and tiers of bunks, so that all of us had to lie next to one another, and one above the other, throughout the voyage. At 03:30 we heard the creak of the chain as the anchor was raised and our last ties to the continent of Europe was severed.

"Our first day at sea was met by a scowling horizon and a rough sea. Most of the passengers, were too sick to eat and were busy vomiting. The air in the holds became foul and hot, and the whole place became a dirty mess.

"But, surprise!! There was a sanitary crew. They were ma'apilim, and sick as they themselves were, went about their jobs. They handed out bags for the sick to vomit into and they cleaned up the filth that had spread on the floor of the hold. Their responsibility to their job did not allow them to give in to their own feelings of sickness. Before noon the group leaders were called on deck so that the

division of food and other arrangements for the voyage could be explained. Despite dizziness and seasickness, all the group leaders or their alternates were there. The various groups were given special tasks to perform. One group provided people to work in the galley, another for work in cleaning, and a third for shoveling coal for the boiler. Others relieved those who had been responsible for keeping order and hadn't had a break since the voyage started. A group volunteered to do the latter, and once they put on armbands they forgot that they had been sick. It was more difficult to get people to do the cleaning up. However, when the commander of the ship himself volunteered to do menial work, others also volunteered to do this job.

"On the second day of the voyage the sea calmed. Those that had been lying down got up, and the general atmosphere improved greatly. There was a feeling of optimism and everyone wanted to come up on deck and breathe fresh air. But things were not that simple. If they all came up on deck, there would not be enough ballast for the ship to retain an even keel. We had to keep the number of ma'apilim on deck under control, to avoid the danger of capsizing. We were 1,600 people on board who had to learn to get along with each other. Every one had his group and each one had his place during this "collective voyage." Everyone had to main self-discipline in order to make life as comfortable as possible for all. A certain life pattern developed. Every morning, those sent to get water for their group, one liter per person, would do so and divide it accordingly. Each one received his food while he was resting on his bunk. The food was good and quite sufficient. In the morning there was sweetened coffee with powdered milk, matzos, jam and cheese. Between 3 and 4 in the afternoon we would have noodle soup, canned beef and canned fish. Although the food was given out twice a day it was sufficient for four meals, and each one could divide what he received as he wished.

Every morning and evening the voices of those who prayed could be heard, although it was not easy for them to find 'the east' when the ship was swaying in a rough sea. They were told that since the ship was always heading eastward they could get the direction right by facing the bow of the ship. People would converse with each other, usually with people of their group, and discuss their plans for after they arrived in their 'new world'. Now and then there was singing in one or several of the groups. We had a violinist on board who had been in one of the east-European symphony orchestras, and he would play for us. Many stories could be written about this voyage.

On the fifth day of our voyage we were able to see the island of Cyprus from afar, and this made us worry about whether we would make it to the shore of Palestine or end up on the 'deportation island'.

It was Sabbath eve and we wanted to have an "Oneg Shabat," but conditions on the ship did not allow all the passengers to congregate in one place, so we had to abandon the idea. We had been traveling for some time and used up much of

the coal which heated the boilers. We now had less ballast below deck and this made the ship even more unstable than when we started on our journey. People got used to walking at an angle as the deck was always tilted to port or to starboard. For that reason each group had its own little celebration; the religious groups prayed and the others sang or prepared cultural programs. That was the mood as we entered the last and critical day of our voyage. Were we to make it to Palestine on the eve of the holiday of our freedom or were we to fall victim of the British naval war machine?

The following morning orders were given that instructions were to be obeyed immediately. We had entered an area patrolled by British planes. At about 11:00 in the morning, a plane was sighted by our lookout and there was a whistle of warning before the plane found us. The plane was soon flying low in the sky above us and examined the ship closely. At 4 in the afternoon another plane arrived, but was not alone. A British destroyer also arrived and approached within 50 meters of our ship. It spoke to our ship by megaphone in three languages; English, Italian and German. It asked who we were and where the ship was headed. At that point we ran the blue-white flag up the mast, everyone came out on deck, and we all burst out singing "Hatikva".

We were issued a warning that if we entered the territorial waters of Palestine we would become prisoners of His Majesty's Government. Thereafter, the warship continued to accompany us in silence. At 9 o'clock in the evening the megaphone came alive once again. We were asked who the captain was, where the crew came from, and how many people were on board. We were also asked why the ship sailed at a tilted angle, if we needed medical assistance, and if we wanted them to contact the Jewish Agency. The questions were asked very politely and we were also given advice which we could not use. We tried to answer to the point, and did not elaborate. We then heard a declaration in the name of His Majesty, the gist of which was that for humanitarian reasons we should not resist the boarding by some marines onto our vessel, once we entered territorial waters. After all, we must certainly know that the Jews had no better friend than the British Kingdom which was ready to help us.

In answer to this declaration we also stated our historic and humanitarian right to the Land of Israel. During this exchange the British sailors stood on deck and we spoke to them. We said, "Why should we believe your soft words and your promises of help when you've used tear gas against women and children? Why should you keep us from the last and only shore of our fathers? Yesterday we were your partners in the fight against the Nazis and today you repay us by using their methods against us!" The commander of the destroyer answered that he hoped that his sailors understood our message, and he wished us a 'good night and see you tomorrow'.

The tilt of the ship grew progressively worse, and we tried to clarify our position between exchanges with the destroyer. The seamen among us were of the

opinion that with the ship off-balance the way it was, we could not do battle against the British. There was danger that our ship might capsize. We were frustrated that we were ready and willing to fight, but our vessel was not in a condition to do so. Would we now allow the British to do with us as they wished? At this point we received a message from the engine room that the boiler was seriously damaged and no sooner did we hear this, than the engine died. That put an end to any discussion as to whether we might need the help of the destroyer to get to any shore. We decided that we would not offer any resistance now, but if and when transferred to a deportation vessel, we would then resist. We all rested or slept for a time and the British destroyer circled us all night to make sure that we did not make a run for shore.

When dawn broke the destroyer approached our ship and asked what was happening. We said that there had been a breakdown and they offered to help, but we refused. We said that we thought that we could fix it ourselves. The ship once more backed off but said that we should keep in mind that if they were to distance themselves from our ship, help might not arrive in time were it to become necessary. We tried for five hours to check what had gone wrong, and at the same time water started to penetrate the ship from the cracked boiler and from outside. As our pumps were driven by the boiler's steam, they were now also useless. Those who were 'in the know' about the situation, kept a tight lip and waited patiently and everyone stayed where he was to avoid tilting the ship any further. Everyone had a lifebelt and a number of people strapped them on. At 11:00 hours we despaired of fixing the engines and sent out an S.O.S. We had a reply from the Admiralty in Haifa that help was on the way. One and a half hours later our 'good friend' the destroyer showed up again. It put a boat into the water with several sailors and pumps, and two officers as well. The sailors were in work fatigues and unarmed. They were very polite and went to work immediately. They were a bit bitter about the situation when they conversed with each other because we had spoiled their day off (all this took place on a Sunday).

Between the sailors and some of our boys, much of the water was pumped out and our vessel straightened up a bit on its keel. Three of our men also took a boat and spoke to the British captain. He said that it would be safest to transfer several hundred passengers from our ship to theirs. Since they had answered our call, it was they who had the right to decide what should be done. We still had a suspicion that they would bring on the deportation ships and transfer the passengers to them right there. This was so particularly as we could see their marines standing in full battledress on the destroyer deck. However, our suspicion was unfounded and only a small coastal patrol vessel and a minesweeper came along to take on the ma'apilim. These two vessels came alongside ours and about a third of our passengers went over to those ships. The minesweeper then tied itself to our bow and towed us toward Haifa. It was now evening and we were about 50 miles from the port. We arrived the following morning. Before we entered the port it irked our saviors that we were still flying the Star of David on our mast, although we were their prisoners. But they could

not find a volunteer who would risk climbing up the tall mast to take down the flag. And so we entered the port. We thought that we had a good sized ship but among the fleet of His Majesty's vessels that thronged the harbor, we did not look very imposing. However we did enter under our own flag.

We were completely surrounded by an armed cordon and trod in the footsteps of the others who had preceded us in deportation. Who knows how many more ma'apilim would be putting their lives on the line in order to reach their Homeland? We put up a hopeless fight, but tear gas took its toll and one by one we were dragged to the deportation ship. So ended the story of one ship, one of many which arrived and which were scheduled to arrive in the future, in an attempt to reach the shores of Eretz Israel.

Twenty years later, in the winter of 1967, Commander Dotan, former Palyamnik on the "Moledet" and commander of the Naval Shipyard, visited the shipyard of the British Navy at Portsmouth, England. There he met by chance a former commander of His Majesty's Navy who had been commander of the deportation ship, "Ocean Vigour", which had captured the "Moledet". It was an emotional meeting between two old friends who had formerly been rivals. Now they were partners in a great historical venture.

Editorial remarks :

- **Alex was 16 years old when he came to Palestine. There was a misprint in the Hebrew version.**
- **With regards to the ship "Hagana": When she arrived in Palestine the Ma'apilim were taken to Atlit and not to Cyprus. Perhaps Alex was sent to sabotage the ship by removing certain vital parts from the engine.**
- **Alex accompanied the ship "Moledet" but wasn't her commander (which was Fabi Gever).**