

Drori, Bezalel

Nickname: Yashke

Born in Lvov, Poland; made Aliya in 1925

Volunteered for the Palmach in 1943; Joined the Palyam in 1944

This is the Way it Was

I came to Palestine in 1925 with my parents and we settled in Haifa. My parents rented and operated a hotel in the lower part of the city. My youth was uneventful and most of my childhood friends were our Arab neighbors. I learned from then to speak Arabic and that proved of great help to me later in life. When the riots of 1929 broke out we moved to Ra'anana which was still taking its first steps as a Moshava. I studied at the "Megeed" school, which was the first school established in the Moshava. As a youth, I joined the "Machanot Olim" youth movement and this period influenced me greatly, and prepared me for volunteering into the Palyam.

When I completed elementary school there was no secondary school in Ra'anana so I enrolled at the Herzlia Gymnasium in Tel Aviv. Every day I would travel back and forth from Ra'anana to Tel Aviv, as did many other youngsters. When I completed my studies I joined a group that went to Kibbutz Ayelet Hashachar for agricultural training. After a year we were moved to Kibbutz Hulata. At first I worked in various branches of agriculture but then moved to the fishing branch of work. This was the chief source of income for the kibbutz at that time. It was while working in fishing that I received my basic education in working on the water.

In July 1943 I volunteered for the Palmach. I was assigned to D Company and was sent to a number of courses, such as sabotage, etc. At the end of 1944 I was assigned to the Palyam and participated in the 2nd officers training course, which took place secretly at the Naval Training School in Haifa in October, 1945..

Sailing to Italy on the vessel: "Ada"

In April 1946, on the eve of Passover, I was sent on my first assignment, I was to bring immigrants from Italy to Palestine. The other Israeli crewmen included Lova Eliav, the Captain; and the seamen Menachem Cohen "Churchill", Fabby Gaber and I. The Gideonaim (radio operators), were Chaim Goldis (of blessed memory) and Uri Goren. We sailed on the ship, "Ada" and after no little trouble and adventure we arrived at the shores of Italy and planned our landing so as not to arouse the suspicion of the Italian police. Naturally, our being in Italy was illegal. We found cover the first night in a brothel, after paying the usual fee. The "Matron", Lucia proved to be sympathetic and helped us the following day to find another place to hide. We got there by jumping from rooftop to rooftop. Finally, we ended up at the Jewish immigrant camp.

Yehuda Arazi, also known as "The Old Man", who was in charge of the Mosad for Aliya Bet, transferred us to Milan. I was sent to take charge of the immigrant camp "Tardeta", whose occupants were scheduled to make aliya soon. After several months I was given another assignment; to take charge of the immigrant camp at St Jerome, near Marseille, France. When I arrived there I was told that I was to be in charge of taking these immigrants to Palestine on the ship "Hagana".

Those in charge of operations of Aliya Bet were fully aware of the dangers connected with this. The British often caused injury or loss of life to the passengers, and they also tried to damage the ships of the Hagana so that they would not be able to be used again. Mosad headquarters therefore came up with a plan of purchasing small cheap vessels to which the passengers would be offloaded when close to the shore of Palestine, and the larger, better ships would then sail back to Europe for another load of immigrants. According to this plan, the ship, "Biria" was designed to meet the "Hagana" and receive its passengers and make a short, last dash to shore with them. On the 30th June 1946 we started to transfer the immigrants from the "Hagana" to the "Biria".

Both ships floated side by side not far from the island of Crete and about 25 miles from land. The sea was too rough to allow the ships to tie up to each other. The "Hagana" caused some damage to the port side of the "Biria". The captain of the "Biria" was furious and wanted to call the whole transfer off. We had no choice but to overpower the captain and to take charge of the bridge and the engine room until the transfer of the immigrants was completed. First, we transferred the men and after that all the women. Lastly we transferred those who were sick and finally we ended with all the baggage of the immigrants.

Before we had completed the whole operation we spotted a French naval vessel on the horizon. We were of a mind to abandon all the baggage and to move away, but this was all that remained in the world for those immigrants and may have included remembrances and photos of their families etc. We decided that the baggage was too important to them to be left behind, and we took everything with us.

The "Hagana" headed back to Italy and we headed for Palestine. The conditions on the ship were simply atrocious. We ran out of food and water and had no alternative but to send out a cry for help, an SOS. This call was answered by a British destroyer and when it drew close to us I called to it by megaphone and asked that we be towed to Haifa. The British ignored the call and the SOS and turned and disappeared from view. The passengers were in despair and suffered greatly. We had no choice but to continue towards Haifa.

On the 2nd July 1946 Haifa came into view. Everyone broke out in singing Hatikva and for the moment all the pain and suffering, the heat and starvation and thirst disappeared before the sight of our goal, Eretz Israel. The immigrants were taken

to Atlit Detention Camp and I was whisked away from the port area by the Mosad agents who worked there.

Back to Italy in the Anchor Chain Locker.

Several days later I received orders to return to Italy; that is Avraham Zakai, another Palyamnik and I were given orders. We boarded the ship "Transylvania" but the inspection there was so meticulous that we had to leave and board another ship. Naturally, we were stowaways and the only suitable place for us to hide was the anchor chain locker. The only one on the ship who knew we were there was Yaakov Etzion Tzetzis, who was sent to work on this ship as a seaman by the Palyam, so that he could get more experience at sea.

Most of the ship's crew was Arab. This had us a bit worried. The conditions in this small hold were very difficult, as there was not enough height for us to stand normally and very little room to move about in. We had to sit or stand and were bent over during the whole voyage. In addition, this hold was next to the kitchen and the lazy cook would throw leftovers of the meals into this hold, instead of throwing them over the ship's side. Only at night, and with the aid of Yaakov, would we dare leave the hold and go outside for fresh air and to stretch our legst. At the end of this dreadful voyage we reached Genoa. We had some nasty burns on our bodies from the chains and it took a few days of treatment to get cleaned up. From Genoa we were sent to the immigrant camp at Magenta.

Moving Immigrants from the Magenta Camp

This camp was the largest base camp of Aliya Bet in Italy. It had 28 "slicks" (secret places where the Hagana hid weapons, etc.) A large amount of weapons was hidden there, as well as trucks, jeeps, large fuel containers and barrels of fuel for ships. There was also a large supply of foodstuffs for the ships when they sailed with their passengers, as well as an assortment of equipment for the ships, such as lifebelts, etc.

It was at that camp that I met Dina Minzberg who was soon to become my wife, and has remained so to this day. Dina was in charge of outfitting the immigrant ships with food. More of her doings will be told soon. I was in charge of running this camp for four months and at the end of that period the immigrants were transferred to the camp at Metaponto in southern Italy. They were scheduled to leave that camp on the "Susannah" which had been bought in the beginning of 1947. There were very many delays, difficulties and problems in getting this ship to a southern port and to prepare it to take on the immigrants.

Finally, these difficulties were overcome for the most part and in a concerted and smooth operation we loaded 665 immigrants onto the ship in four hours. The crew consisted of the Captain, David Maimon, two sailors; Avraham Rikman and Ossie Ravid; the Gideonai Yair, and me. When the ship left harbor the immigrants were in a very buoyant mood. In Caledonia, Turkey, the ship was

renamed "Hagana Ship Shabtai Luzinski", in memory of an emissary from Palestine who was head of the Committee for Aiding Immigrants, and had been killed in an automobile accident.

Exile to Cyprus

The ship was crowded and conditions very difficult as the immigrants were not allowed on deck for security reasons. According to the original plan the "Shabtai Luzinski" was supposed to sail in the direction of Port Said, Egypt and then turn toward the coast and land in the vicinity of Nitzanim. However, when we neared the coast of Palestine there was a storm and we could not transfer the immigrants to the rubber boats to get them ashore. With the aid of the men of the Palmach who came to help us unload the immigrants, we stretched a cable from ship to shore and started to remove the passengers. Unfortunately, this operation took much too long and the British, who had not been far away, took note of us.

They sent a destroyer to the scene and put two launches full of British Marines into the water. The stormy conditions worked against them as well, and two sailors and a British officer were drowned. The rest were saved thanks to the Palyam men who were on the scene. Under cover of the momentary mess at the site, 720 of the 1000 people who had arrived there managed to get away, including the Israelis who had arrived to help in the operation. All those there made a fire and threw their ID's into it and when the British tried to separate the Israeli's from the immigrants all gave the same reply: "I am a Jew from the Land of Israel". They also resisted physically to arrest by the British but in the end, about 150 were taken and sent to Cyprus. Dina and I spent three weeks there and then we were freed. We were included in the monthly distribution of certificates that the British allowed the camp.

Damaging the Ships Used to Evacuate the Immigrants.

While I was still at a camp in Cyprus I was given my next assignment, which was to damage the deportation ships. I was given this job because of my knowledge of chemistry and because I had attended a course in sabotage in the Palmach. I was to do damage to a deportation ship after the immigrants had left it. This was to be retaliation to the incarceration of the immigrants in Cyprus. This was a complicated and dangerous operation. My girlfriend Dina volunteered to carry the explosives aboard on her body. These were held in a belt that was strapped around her waist. She was to be a pregnant woman so when her name was called she was not even searched and went right on board. Her immigrant's visa was in the name of a 40 year old man, but not even this was checked by the British.

There were also several young men among the immigrants who helped me prepare the explosives. When all was ready and all the passengers had left the ship, I set the timer for an explosion five hours later and left the ship. I gave the safety pin to Yochai ben Nun who had waited for me together with some other

Palyamniks at the port, and we all went to the Carmelia Hotel to wait for the explosion. However, there was none and we learned the next day that the explosion took place at sea several hours later. The ship, Empire Rival, was damaged so badly that it was out of operation for several months.

Conclusion:

Dina and I were married in May 1947. We settled at Kibbutz Hulata and I returned to working in the fishing branch. Our first born, Nimrod was born there. In 1951 we left the kibbutz and three years later we had a daughter, Chana. I started to study economics and business management in Tel Aviv University. While studying I also worked in the Education Ministry and set up Ulpanim (study classes) for new immigrants. In 1968 our son Nimrod disappeared together with the other sailors on the submarine Dakar. He was 19½ years old.

When I completed my studies I went to work for Koor Industries. I worked there for 37 years and in that period filled various important positions. My last position was internal and external company auditor. I retired in 1991.

In my spare time I wrote some of my memories and experiences and wrote the book: "On Stormy Waves" which described my activities in the Palyam. The book is dedicated to my son, Nimrod (of blessed memory). At the moment my wife and I reside in a senior citizens residence in Kfar Saba where we participate in its activities.