

Eshel, Nimrod  
 Born the 27<sup>th</sup> of July, 1925, at Ein Harod, Israel  
 Volunteered to the Palmach in the summer of 1942  
 Volunteered to serve in the Palyam in 1945

### **This is the Way it Was**

I served in C Company and D Company (of the Palmach) and in 1945 switched to the Palyam. I participated in the 5<sup>th</sup> course for small boat commanders and following that, completed the 4<sup>th</sup> course for naval officers. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 1945, after the immigrants had disembarked from the ship "Berl Katznelson" opposite Kibbutz Shefayim, two boats of the Palyam were caught by a British destroyer and the twelve crewmen including Nimrod Eshel were sentenced to 6 months imprisonment at the Latrun prison camp.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 1947 the ship, the "29<sup>th</sup> of November" was caught by a British destroyer and all of its 680 passengers were deported to Cyprus. Nimrod, who was one of the Palyam men on the ship, went to Cyprus along with the passengers. We, the generation of 1948, were "Lucky Bastards" because it was our good fortune to have participated in the War of Independence of our country. That usually happens only once, even if later there are many more wars. For us, our personal biographies coincided with the history of the establishment of the State of Israel, and for that we should be thankful.

*[Editorial note: the following is a fictitious story by Nimrod, inspired by various Aliya Bet events]*

#### **I would not have recognized you –**

One day as we set out on one of our cruises, the purser informed me, as a matter of course, who would be dining at my table that evening. He pointed out one name and announced that that woman would be celebrating her birthday. I said 'fine', and that we will give her due recognition. That evening a birthday cake with lit candles was set down at our table and properly extinguished. The young woman then announced that she was a daughter of olim and that she was born in just about this area, by Caesarean operation, which almost cost her her life. "Therefore, I and my husband wanted to celebrate this occasion in this manner and in this place. My parents were Holocaust survivors on an Aliyah Bet ship traveling from Italy to Palestine, and my mother had to give birth just as the ship was in this area, not far from Crete. The doctor, who was also an immigrant, said that the operation was necessary but that he did not have the proper equipment. The doctor informed the ship's captain of the problem, who in turn decided to ask for help from the British Navy. So, it seems, I am probably the only immigrant whose life was saved thanks to the British Navy, which at that time was engaged in a war against immigration."

"Your story is really unique, but the truth is that I can add to it and will whisper into your ear exactly how old you are today," I said. She looked at me in astonishment. "You are forty years old and you look remarkably well for your

age," I whispered. "Forty years ago when I was a young seaman on an immigrant ship, we were called to the deck by the captain to hear a report by the ship's doctor, an old German. We could understand almost nothing of what he said, but a young nurse described it all in layman's terms, including the necessity for a Caesarean birth, and that we did not have the equipment or the conditions for such an operation."

Nimrod continued, "When this report ended there was complete silence as no one knew what to do next. It was the radio operator who suggested that we send a message and perhaps some passenger ship in the vicinity would answer our call. This course was followed and a message was sent and repeated several times. There was no answer for some time and the doctor was very worried as time was running out. A naval station in a corner of the coast of Crete not too far from us received the message. This was the enemy whom we were trying to avoid and how could we ask them for help? This sounds rather incongruous, but naval tradition has it that when a ship calls for help and you receive the call, you answer it.

Yoske, the ship's commander, who had served in His Majesty's Royal Navy during WW II affirmed that that was the British custom. We were not prepared for this type of emergency, and the recent problems that had arisen with the ship "Exodus" were also still fresh in our minds. The captain tried to get the nurse to admit that this was not a problem of 'life or death' but the nurse stood her ground that an operation was absolutely necessary.

Yoske ordered the radio operator to send an urgent message to the British station giving the position of the ship and the nature of the emergency. The British commander sent a destroyer at full speed towards the immigrant ship and told the ship to prepare a room for the operation; they carried all the instruments necessary for the procedure. Everyone was now tense with expectation and looked to the north to spot the arrival of the destroyer. The officer on duty spotted the ship through his field glasses. He cried out, 'Ship ahoy!' and who would have thought that we would be so glad to see a British destroyer heading in our direction,

As the destroyer approached, a motor launch was hoisted over the side with its motor running, and when it was only about 100 meters distant from our vessel, the launch was dropped into the water. A team of doctors was on the launch dressed and with the necessary instruments packed in bags that they carried. Our doctor and nurse met them as they boarded and they all made their way to a corner of the ship that had been prepared for the operation. They entered the room and closed the door behind them, and the silence of expectation and waiting took over. The captain turned the ship's bow into the waves to reduce the ship's movement, and cut the ship's engine to low speed.

The silence was penetrating and tense, until a baby's loud cry was heard through the ship's intercom. This was answered by the cheers and cries of all on board. It seems that our radio operator had also gone into the operating

room to help, and had taken a microphone with him. This publicly announced a successful conclusion to the operation. Before the British left our ship their senior officer said to our captain; "We enjoyed doing this. Saving a life at sea is one of the nicer sides of our duty. During peace time, it is our chief duty. I am sorry that during our visit we've seen who you are. May God be with you, and I also fear that we shall soon meet again. We will do our duty and prevent you from reaching Palestine, whether we enjoy that part of our task, or not". That was the first time I heard a British officer discuss this loaded issue.

It was the first time, but not the last. Many years later I heard very pronounced opinions not given in the usual tone of understatement. Naval officers who had been in many bitter battles against the German Navy said that the fight against the Aliya Bet ships was a dishonorable one that besmirched the British Navy, and it was the most difficult part of their many years of service.

After this encounter with the other, more humane, side of the British we could no longer maintain an attitude of hatred nor did they wish to display any animosity towards us. This led to a very peaceful takeover of the ship by them and our transfer to a ship that would deport us to Cyprus. The whole transfer was as distasteful to the British as it was to us.

"So it turns out that we are old acquaintances," said the woman who was celebrating her birthday. "Yes, we know each other forty years", I replied.

A group of newspapermen were with us on this voyage and good publicity is good for any company. The senior journalist suggested an interview with this incident as the central topic. The whole thing went off very well and the story became widespread.

The journalist then asked me, if now that I was a veteran and experienced seaman, weren't some of the things that I and other Palyamniks did during the days of Aliya Bet, bordering on irresponsible adventurism. I wrote the question down and pointed to a second journalist. He asked me what would be my view now of the sanitary conditions that there were then, under which the refugees traveled on their way to Palestine. I had heard these sorts of questions previously so I knew what to expect. The third question was a very direct one, "Weren't the refugees nothing more than a pawn in the hands of slick politicians who forced them to sail to Palestine, even though many would have preferred to have gone elsewhere?" "Why weren't these immigrants allowed to choose for themselves the country to which they would like to immigrate?" Another question that was asked was, "In what forum were decisions taken regarding the policy and behavior of each ship?"

These were all leading questions pointing in the same direction. There was a hum of disagreement from a few of the more elderly journalists. There was also a reaction to these questions from a fair number of the passengers who filled the room. I stood up and said I would answer everything. "Regarding the first question," I said, pointing in the direction of the one who had asked, "let me be

perfectly clear on that point. I would recommend to everyone not to sail on an immigrant ship; it is much more preferable to sail on a decent cruise liner, and even then, to sail 'first class'. People were amazed at my response. With regard to the second question, the world lay open before the hundreds of thousands of immigrants, the survivors of the death camps. They could have been willing guests anywhere; had they only chosen to go. And what could we have done? But they only wanted Eretz Israel and they wanted to travel there on the least seaworthy of ships." I felt anger swell inside me so I halted and drank a glass of water. "As for the third question: our illegal immigrants had to choose, just as any immigrant – legal or illegal – must choose, and freely, between the various alternatives that lay open to him. For some reason, the immigrants chose to sail on dilapidated ships to the only destination that was ready to receive them, Israel.

As for the last question, I am not in a position to answer as I was not among those who made the decisions, I was only a young sailor, an officer of the watch and I tried to do what was required of me. As Admiral Nelson said to those members of his fleet before the Battle of Trafalgar, "England expects each one of you shall do your duty." I found it important to clarify that I was the captain of a passenger ship and out of courtesy to my passengers, and in view of my position, I did not express my opinion as blatantly as I might have done under other circumstances.

The basic question was; "What were the alternatives"? What were the **practical** alternatives? Any one of these homeless refugees would have much preferred to travel in a comfortable train rather than cross the Alps by foot in winter, knee deep in snow. Every woman there would have loved to have worn warm winter clothes in the latest fashion rather than the rags that they wore because they had nothing else. Every homeless person that traveled with us would have given their right arms for a hot and tasty meal served on fine china on linen-covered tables, rather than the poor tasteless fare that we served them in dirty mess kits, and even this was sometimes lacking. No doubt, every single refugee who traveled in our collection of ancient and decrepit vessels would have much preferred to travel in a modern ocean liner. None of this is even a matter of argument. It is understood, and yet, there was a rush for every single place available on every single ship that we put to sea, and each ship took many more passengers than they were built to carry. Why did these unfortunates do their utmost to get onto one of these ships and make this dreadful journey? The answer is obvious.

Our lady guest requested permission to say a few words. "My mother cried and begged that she be taken on the voyage," she said, "At first they would not allow her to go because her pregnancy was obvious, but she would not let up. "Where shall I give birth to my baby?, Where shall my baby grow up?" she asked, and no one could give her a satisfactory answer. She was not the only one. There were old and sick individuals, there were children and disabled persons, and all preferred the alternative of the difficult voyage to the prospect of remaining in Europe. As the captain said, Europe was a graveyard of hateful

memories and anything was better than remaining there. That, I heard many times from my parents and I believe them.”

Another old man also volunteered to add a few words and he said, “I also heard that we, the survivors of the Holocaust, were mobilized and forced to join some paramilitary organization before we made the journey to Israel. To us that sounds like an insult. Why should only Israeli youth have the right, the honor, to volunteer to fight for Israel’s independence? Why should that not be our right as well? We say, “Thank you for the opportunity that was given us, to fight for Israel’s independence”. We could not have wished for anything better.”

There was some commotion after this exchange and I felt like some protagonist whose work had been done by others. Are there people who really believe that we enjoyed putting these refugees through all these difficulties? We helped them arrive in Israel by the only means we could and we did not do that for any personal gain. Only people with evil intent would think otherwise. All those who helped the Remnant of the Holocaust to get to Palestine/ Israel went through all the stages of difficulties that the refugees themselves went through, and that goes for every stage of the journey and involved the Palmach, the Palyam, men of the Jewish Brigade, men in the Royal Corps of Transport , and those of the Organization for Illegal Immigration. All went with the immigrants and suffered all the difficulties of the road that the immigrants suffered. They ate what the refugees ate and starved with them when there was no food to be had. They lived in the camps in Cyprus together with the immigrants and they fought with them, side by side in the War of Independence. They also danced side by side when the State of Israel was founded. When the war was over they all started anew from the same starting point, zero.

Maybe we weren’t always very nice, or very polite. We were not perfect, but we tried our best. We gave all we had, even if that was sometimes not very much. There was nothing more to be said and, one by one people dispersed to their quarters. I invited the woman guest and her husband to come up to the bridge for some fresh air. We enjoyed some pleasant conversation and with that the events of that memorable evening came to a quiet end.