

**Gal Michael (Getzowitch)**

Born 17<sup>th</sup> February 1928 in Czechoslovakia

Came to Palestine on the Aliya Bet Ship "Nachshon" on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1948

Joined the Palyam at sea on the "Nachshon" in March 1948

**This is the Way it Was**

I was born in a small village in the Carpathian Mountains of Czechoslovakia to parents who were quite wealthy (they owned a great deal of property). The community consisted of no more than 10 -11 families. I studied in a public elementary school and also in a 'cheder'. When the war broke out in 1939 my father was mobilized into the army and after that I only saw him once. My mother remained alone with six children to look after and could not manage all of my father's affairs. Our situation worsened, the Hungarians took over our region of the country, and started hunting Jews. All Jewish males aged 14 and over were forced to work in the forests under very difficult conditions. My mother arranged for my oldest brother (now living in Israel) and me to travel to Budapest, and work in a furniture factory that belonged to a Jew. We spent a year there, until the Germans invaded Hungary and then we returned home. Shortly thereafter we were sent to the Ghetto and from there to the Auschwitz concentration camp, to Brig, Gros, Rosen and to Reichenbach. From there I was liberated in May of 1945 by the Red Army. After the liberation I remained in the town for a time and worked as an interpreter for the Russians, because I could speak Yiddish, Hungarian, Czech, Russian and some German.

When I felt that the Russians were acting towards the Jews, who could not speak Russian, not very much better than the Germans had acted, I left and ultimately returned to my native village. I was unable to find a single Jew there and total confusion reigned. The Russians terrorized everyone and the local inhabitants were not happy to see Jews return because they wanted to keep Jewish property. After a month, I met my brother and we decided to leave everything and join relatives who lived in central Czechoslovakia. It took us a month to get there as we traveled via Romania and Hungary (and had to steal across borders).

We spent about a year there, until 1946, and then I heard for the first time that it was possible to cross the border into Germany, and from there (via the refugee camps) to make our way to Palestine. My brother and one of my uncles were not enthusiastic about this idea, but I decided that I had had my fill of Goyim. I was able, by myself, to reach a refugee camp in the American zone of Germany. The Jews who ran the camp were all disreputable connivers. They received clothes, cigarettes and food from Jewish organizations and UNRRA, sold most of the stuff to the starving Germans and threw us the leftovers. The camp was divided by rival parties and movements. There was Hashomer Hatzair, Gordonia, the Partisans Party and Betar, and each one fought against the others. I joined the Young Betar because they had the nicest looking girls. Since I was now considered a Betar man I was not given priority in the queue for Aliya, and my turn was repeatedly delayed. I then heard of the possibility to

leave the camp if I agreed to work for two years in a coal mine in Belgium. I signed a contract and was taken to Belgium to begin work. The work was very difficult and was more than a thousand meters below ground. We were only given our food and were sheltered in huts.

In this mining camp, I was the only Jew although there were others from many nations. There was a Russian who had gone AWOL from the Red Army, Ukrainians who had been in the German Army, Moroccans, Tunisians, etc. Life was very lonely, the work was very difficult, and after three months I had had enough and refused to work. I was put into prison in the town of Mons, and after some time was sent to a detention camp near Bruxelles, (Petit Chateau). They intended to ship me back to the camp in Germany, but I signed another contract to work at a mine in Liege, (I had a relative living in that city). I spent three months there and then found out that if I could steal across to the French side of the border, I could reach a camp where Jews concentrated for Aliya to Palestine.

After weeks of adventure and misadventure, including a brief period of imprisonment, I finally reached Bandol on the French Riviera. There, among others, I met Avraham Sikoral (Harel) who was responsible for the food supply to the camp. I volunteered to bring milk every morning by tricycle from the nearby village, and became an assistant to him. Toward the end of 1947 I was told that I would go on the next ship that left, and one night we went down to the shore and were put on a ship. This was the "Tadorne", later known as "Nachshon". This was the first time that I was ever on a ship at sea. I saw the crew, and the Palyamniks who were to accompany the ship, and all the action that was going on. I found out who the commander was, Yoske Almog (then Pinchuk). Although he was the shortest, it was he who gave all the orders. I addressed him in my limited knowledge of Hebrew, and asked if I could join the crew. He accepted me warmly. He is to blame that I remained a sailor for the rest of my life.

I was immediately put to work, helping load the Olim onto the ship. The hold was narrow and had no ventilation. The amount of space allotted to each person was too small but no one complained. Many threw up, and I could not understand why, although I myself felt somewhat queasy. I did not realize that many people felt uneasy at sea. When all were loaded the commander gave me the key to the hold that held the food and water. The water would have to be rationed and it was very important to make sure that there was a minimum for each. Most Olim did not complain, but there were some who might have done so. In general, the Olim were well behaved.

When we were ready to sail and untied the rope to the pier, it became entangled in the propeller and we could not sail. The air in the hold was foul, and something went wrong with the boilers. We had to sail to Bastia, in Corsica, for repairs. This was my first exposure to a world completely strange to me, but I was pleased by how Yoske and the other Palyamniks related to me. I had a great deal of trouble speaking conversational Hebrew and Yoske took it upon

himself to teach me. I spoke a sort of archaic Hebrew. Once repairs were completed we returned to Bandol, and once again loaded Olim onto the ship. I think we took some 550 of them. The voyage to Palestine was without incident. I was very busy with the food and water, especially the water. Two days before we arrived at the shores of Palestine we were certain that the British had spotted us, and tensions rose. We soon saw that we were being accompanied by several destroyers but they did not try to take the ship until nightfall. They used a strong force, and it did not take them long to board the ship. We Palyamniks had prepared a hiding place and put it to good use. Although the British searched for us, our "slick" was so well camouflaged that they could not find it.

### **A new life**

After several hours spent in our hideout, men of the Port Company came aboard the ship and we left together with them. A pickup truck took us to the Carmelia Hotel in Haifa. There were many British soldiers in and around that part of Haifa, but we were not bothered. Those first days in Palestine were like a dream for me. It was as if I was born again. I heard everyone speaking Hebrew, even the bus drivers, and there were buses. I thought it would be like the Palestine that I learned about in 'cheder', and that it would be a 'Biblical' Palestine. No one ever told me that it would be similar to a European country.

I spent about a week in the hotel and then I was on my own. Where should I go? What should I do? I knew no one in the country except those Palyamniks that I had come with on the ship. Berchik told me that our Gideoni, Shalom Burstein, was a member of Kibbutz Yagur. I went to visit him and stayed for several days but did not feel comfortable there. After a short time, I joined the Port Company. We were given chits with which to buy food at the Worker's Kitchen, and for sleeping 'somewhere'.

In March 1948, I heard that a Navy was being organized. The mobilization offices were on Kingsway, and the official in charge was Yehuda Hilman, (Ben Ron). There was no camp set up yet, but I went to where it was to be set up, near the Electric Company building and the Shemen factory. A cattle quarantine station had been there previously, and part of the area contained a group of mentally ill people who had been moved from the Acre prison, because it was too crowded. Since there was no empty building, I made my home under a palm tree and the living soul closest to me was a Great Dane dog. After about two weeks the mentally ill were taken elsewhere, and tents were put up for young men who started arriving.

Officers also started to appear on the scene including the commander, Shaul Rosolio. Eddy Shackwell was his second in command, and the third was a redhead whose name I have forgotten. Yehuda Igra was the first sergeant. Work on the camp started immediately. Weapons had to be procured and a place prepared for storing them. I volunteered to work there because I was interested, and not because I knew anything about weapons. In a short time I learned how to operate an armory, including grenades and machine guns.

Before the battle for Tantura (Dor) a group of men were gathered, who were to do the fighting. Menachem Cohen (not Churchill) was to be the leader. I was selected and given a machine gun, (0.5). I was not certain what our role was to be in this attack. We boarded the "Shark", a fishing boat whose captain was named Yigal, and the engineer was Shlomo Grenadier. That evening we sailed for Tantura and at night, when shooting began, our commander, Menachem, was killed by a stray bullet. Yigal decided to sail to Neve Yam and brought a rowboat from there. We used it to bring Menachem to the kibbutz clinic but there was no doubt that he was already dead, so was brought to Rothschild Hospital in Haifa. in the kibbutz truck.

I participated in other military actions in which the Navy played a role. Once the State was established our camp was moved to Bat Galim. My armory was also moved there, where we had a larger storage space for weapons, and I was given two men to help me. That was when we received the rifles from Czechoslovakia, as well as machine guns (these were the MG-34). Some of these weapons were there as a result of the "Pirate" operation. In the course of time I tried to improve my Hebrew and learn other subjects because I had only had six years of formal education. I put in a request to go to an officers training course but probably did not have a basis for doing so. I was sent to a course for artillerymen at Tira. When the course was finished I was stationed on the "K-18" (the "Wedgwood") as a gunner. About a year later I again applied for the naval officer's course and was accepted in 1950. This was very difficult for me as all of the other students had completed their high school educations. A number of them helped me a great deal, and in 1953 I completed the course successfully and was attached to the Fifth Fleet(Torpedo Boats). To my good luck I happened to be stationed on a British torpedo boat and my commander was Mushi Katz, a good-hearted person and a good teacher, especially when it came to seamanship.

On my first ship, the "Owl", a hole opened up in the bottom; probably because I went too fast against a strong 'southwester', (although not very high). 24 hours later I was tugged into port and it was decided to let the ship stay there. This saddened me because I identified with the ship. I learned in the course of time that a ship has a 'soul' of its own, and one can come to love it as one does a person who is close to you. The ship will reciprocate when you are dependent upon it. Three years later I was placed in Fleet Five as commander of the Naval Department. I didn't care for this since it was a desk job, and until the end of my service (28 years later), I did not like desk jobs and much preferred sea duty.

After several changes of naval commanders at H.Q.(Tzvi Keinan, Samek), I was asked by the Naval Chief of Intelligence to go on a mission in the Red Sea area, and I accepted, and went to Ethiopia. Seven adventurous months followed (preparation had been poor) which also took me to Sudan. My first ship in Ethiopia was the 'Negisti Saba", (The Queen of Sheba), which was a fishing vessel. After that I had a small cargo carrying vessel called 'Halkis' which flew the flag of Panama. Both vessels did everything but fish or carry cargo.

When I returned from the African adventure I participated in a course for torpedoes and anti-submarines. This was in Israel and beyond its borders as well. The course lasted 9 months and when it was completed I was stationed on the destroyer 'Eilat' as torpedo and anti-submarine officer. I was stationed on the 'Eilat' for two years after which I again returned to torpedo boats. This time it was in the capacity of commander of Group 915, and I was happy.

While commanding this Group, an accident took place off the Straits of Gibraltar, when the vessel 'Egoz' sank with 52 Olim from Morocco, and the French radioman. The smuggling of Jews from that country was handled by people of the Mosad for Aliya Bet who were excellent people but they had no knowledge of seamanship.

After that tragedy the prime minister appointed a two-man committee, Menachem Cohen and Eliezer Shoshani from Kibbutz Yifat, and it was decided to continue the smuggling, but with trained seamen. The commander-in-chief of the Navy, Admiral Yochai ben Nun (of blessed memory) asked me if I were willing to volunteer for the job, and I did not hesitate and answered in the affirmative. Several days later my travel to Paris was arranged. The headquarters of the operation was located there. While I had been in Israel I had met with Berchik, who told me how the smuggling of people from the shore was organized. In Paris I met with Moshe Rabinowitch (of blessed memory) who was in charge of the sea operations of the Mosad there. Moshe was a very special kind of person and it was easy to work with him. The Mosad then (1960) was headed by Isser Harel, and relations there were like in one big family, in which one could easily find his place. Everyone was utterly devoted and supportive and this gave me the feeling of 'belonging' almost immediately.

Moshe leased a 500 ton vessel in Portici, near Naples, and there I boarded the ship and sailed for Gibraltar. The voyage lasted about a week and I was thrown from one storm to the next. Only when I reached the Balearic Islands did the sea calm down. At Gibraltar Moshe Rabinowitch, Menachem Cohen and Eliezer Shoshani were waiting for me. The first attempt to take Jews on board from Agadir failed, because what worked in the Mediterranean did not necessarily work in the Atlantic. Even when the ocean was comparatively calm the waves that came into shore were so high, that we could not make a connection between the ship and the shore. I returned to Gibraltar and there met, for the first time, the commander of the Mosad for this operation, Alex Gatmon. He was a remarkable man and a commander with whom it was a pleasure to work; pleasant but efficient and productive. We decided on the spot that I should fly to Morocco and try to locate points suitable for loading people onto a ship.

I should point out that, in those days, an Israeli in Morocco was in constant danger. Anti-Israeli propaganda was rife and anti-Jewish sentiment was at its highest level ever. Nasserism was the law of the day. King Muhammad the Fifth had died and the new king, Hassan the Second, was not yet completely in control of the situation. Laws against the Jews were propagated which were similar to the Nuremberg Laws. There were only 135,000 Jews left, spread throughout Morocco and a many of them were far from the coastal area.

During all of 1961 we removed (smuggled out) Jews from Morocco mostly by sea. In the years 1962-3 we used other means as well. I brought the Jews to Gibraltar most of the time. From there onward, they were under the care of the Jewish Agency, and in all we moved 73 000 Jews in this manner.

In 1963 I returned to Israel and received command of the Navy ship "Noga" and in '64 and '65 I served on the Navy ship "Haifa". In '65 and '66 I was in the course for higher command officers and when the course ended I was attached to the "Shalechet" team. This team was created to absorb the new "missile boats" into the Naval service. In that capacity I was sent to the German Navy for training, where I served on vessels that were the prototype of our boats.

In 1967 I received command of the first "missile boat" ("Mivtach"). I ran around the English Channel for about 6 months and performed crash tests with it. On 25<sup>th</sup> December 1967 we finally arrived in Israel and a new chapter began for the Israeli Navy. In 1968 I was transferred to Headquarters as head of the Combat Means Department. At the end of 1970 I requested to be transferred back to the Mosad for the second time and served there until 1975.

After completing my service in the Mosad I went to work for a shipping company and did my reserve service in the Navy. In 1978 I served for a whole year on the vessel "Bat Galim", in the Red Sea.

From 1980 to 1988 I worked in Europe for the Israeli Citrus Board.

In 1989 to 1993 I managed the Amisragas Company in Nigeria.

From 1993 to 1998 I worked for a Russian company as a consultant, and after that I retired.

I raised three great boys in Israel, and two of them completed their service in the Israeli Navy as lieutenant commanders. Today I am a grandfather of eight grandchildren, the eldest of whom completed her army service in January 2001. The second, enlisted in December 2002, and so we continue to serve our country. This is the story of my life in brief. It was difficult to tell the story of a lifetime in a few pages but perhaps it is sufficient.