

Graif Pnina (née Norkin)

Born 22nd December 1928 in Tel Aviv

Joined the Palmach in 1945

Joined the Gideon network in 1948.

This is the Way it Was

In July of 1945 I was mobilized to the Palmach and was put into the group training at Kibbutz Gvat at my request, as I was a member of the HaNoar HaOved movement. I was then only 16½ years old. After a short period of training I was sent to a course for radio operators at Kibbutz Shefayim. The R & R home of the kibbutz was our training base because it was not occupied in the winter months. Many things that I had not known previously now became clear to me. Firstly, that the Hagana used something called Morse code, and secondly, that it was a secret way of communicating efficiently. Thirdly, this particular course was a bit longer in duration than others and those who completed it were destined to be the Gideonim (radio operators) of the Palyam and were to work in Aliya Bet.

The course was very intensive and there were 18 people participating. I was now 17 years old and felt very adult. To my dismay, when the course was over I was not sent overseas to work for Aliya Bet but was sent back to my outfit, the 1st battalion and later still to my company, "A" Company, at Kibbutz Yagur. I did not have too much time to be sorry because life for our outfit was then very stormy as we were in the midst of the fight against the British; there was "the night of the bridges", the blowing up of the radar station, stealing weapons from the trains, the break into Atlit and then the British search at Yagur, (only three Palmachnikim were left there at the time). My friends finished their period of service and I remained as the 15% of my group that had to remain for a longer period.

I was discharged a short time afterwards, but not for long. We founded Halutza in the Negev and I was called to be the radio operator, and also radio operator at Bir Asluge. However, because of a severe personal problem it was suggested that I go to the Diaspora and work in France for Aliya Bet. This was in November of 1948. The transmitting stations were operating illegally (the founding of the kibbutz was also illegal). I was given proper clothing and I was supplied with the credentials of a waitress on the "luxury liner, San Antonio" which was then called "Nirit". My cabin was the size of a small closet and there was another Israeli on the vessel. To my astonishment, after the credentials were checked and we went out to sea the engine was cut out and we became a "yacht", with sails flying. Before we reached Naples the engine died and we were forced to anchor off the coast of Italy for several days. I was put up at a hotel and each night in a different one in order to stay out of the sight of the Italian police. (They were searching for smugglers and whores.)

Finally, we went out to sea and soon after we reached the port of Marseilles. We were met by Viko who was the radio operator there. The station was at a place which we called "Mizra", and the house was in the middle of a forest where there also were hunting lodges and pools. During this period the Aliya of all the remnants of the Holocaust was completed and most of the Olim were now North Africans who were housed at a camp called Grand Arnas. I and my companion at this station maintained contact with Israel and with other stations in Europe, and when I had some free time I would spend it at the hospital for the children of the Olim nearby. I would help take care of them and tell them stories and give them candy.

We would also take part in the cultural life of the camp. Because of my close contact with the sick children I caught a very bad case of the mumps and my recovery was very slow. At that same time radio stations were being closed down. Some of them were put to use in embassies and others were shut completely. We were then given the choice of going to work in the department for special functions or of going home. Both Viko and I chose to return home. I was sent back to the 8th Battalion of the Negev Brigade and afterwards to the minorities outfit in Nazareth. That was where my military career ended.

The short period in which I worked in Aliya Bet had a strong effect upon me and its memory has stayed with me all my life. Perhaps that is what turned me towards educational work, in which I saw my fulfillment.