

**Gringer Yosef**

Nickname: "Boger"

Born 1913 in Mackó, Hungary

Made Aliya in 1932

Joined the naval courses of the Hagana in 1938

**This is the Way it Was**

When I was 15 years old, I moved to Budapest where I studied at an agricultural/technical school, and also played in an orchestra. In 1932, when I was 19 years of age, I made Aliya and joined the group, "Chugim" in Kibbutz Beit Hashita. There, I also learned Hebrew. In 1933 I had to leave the kibbutz and moved to Haifa to help support my parents and my younger brothers, who had also arrived in Palestine. In Haifa, I enlisted in the naval section of Hapoel.

**The Enlistment**

In 1936, when the riots broke out, I was mobilized and sent to the Tel Aviv port which was still in its infancy. After a short period of time a group was organized under the leadership of Catriel Yaffe (of blessed memory) with the aim of bringing Olim from Europe. Amiram Shochat, whom I had previously known, approached me at the port and suggested that I join. I soon found myself attending courses in Tel-Aviv, such as to learn in Morse code, etc., all under the tutelage of Simcha (later one of the "23" lost at sea).

**Preparations to leave for the Diaspora**

One day at the beginning of 1938, I was called to the executive committee offices on Allenby Street, along with two other men; one of whom I knew very well, my commander and friend, Amiram Shochat, and the other was a young radio operator whom I did not know. We were loaded into Dov Hoz's fancy sports car and taken to Givat Olga. There they pointed to a spot and said that this is where the Olim were to land. We memorized the topography so that we could recognize the spot later.

A short time later, on the eve of the Passover in 1938, I was again called to the executive committee offices, this time by a fellow named Shapiro. I was given a British/Palestinian passport, a railroad ticket to Alexandria, a boat ticket from Alexandria to Piraeus, and ten British pounds.

**Tel Aviv - Alexandria – Piraeus**

I caught the train at Rehovot. in 2<sup>nd</sup> class, as first class was too fancy and Europeans did not dare travel 3<sup>rd</sup> class. At the Suez Canal all of the passengers disembarked from the train and crossed the canal by boat. There we again boarded a train and continued on to Alexandria. In Alexandria it took me two hours to get to the boat! Why? Because as I only spoke Hungarian and Hebrew I could find no one who could give me directions, so went on foot. The trip on the Italian vessel lasted three days. The sea was so stormy that on the first night I

was the only one to appear in the dining hall. Every one else was seasick. Even the pilot could was unable to get off the ship and continued with us to Piraeus. In Athens we were housed in different hotels but with the aid of a fellow called Victor who assisted us in Aliya affairs, I was able to see and meet the others. This same Victor brought us whatever we needed. It was also through him that I met Zeev Shind, who was second in command of Aliya activities in Greece. I only met him shortly before boarding the ship.

### **Voyages**

Shortly after Pesach we were told that the ship was almost ready and that a train was bringing the Olim. We were driven by taxi to a small bay northeast of Athens, where the ship lay at anchor. We were accompanied to the ship by four fairly high-ranking police officers (who, no doubt, had been generously "greased" by Victor). Before we left, they took our passports (for safekeeping?) and gave us some other papers instead. To this day, I have no answer as to why they did so. This was a small vessel of no more than about 300 tons. It was called the "Poseidon" and had a crew of 9 men. We were able to put 90 Olim on board. The ship's owner and skipper was an old Greek named Nicola. This skipper gave directions to his helmsman without the aid of any maps and could navigate anywhere around the Greek islands with total confidence.

After about a week of sailing we arrived safely. When we approached the coast of Palestine we were signaled a code that told us where to land. That was to be at "Mitzpeh Hayam". For some unknown reason, the boats that were to help us unload the Olim did not appear, so we offloaded them with the boats from our vessel. At first the Olim were afraid to disembark, but Amiram and I went first and showed them how to do it. After that, things went more smoothly. As soon as the Olim reached shore, we immediately turned about and headed for Greece again. I asked some of the people on shore to give regards to my girl friend. We were surprised by Nicola when he put in to a small island called Casteloriso, which was then under Italian control. He took aboard two very large boxes and when we managed to peek at what was inside, we saw that they were filled with hats made in Italy. We understood that Nicola not only traded in human beings, but was also not above smuggling merchandise into Greece. We finally made it to Greece, and the first thing we did was to go to the police station and collect our passports.

Once again we were in Athens and had to wait two or three weeks. In the meanwhile the ship "Artimisia" was preparing to take on Olim. This was an old and small vessel of about 250 tons. We had nothing to do but tour the city. We visited Marathon and Corinth with Zeev Shind. Finally, 150 Olim boarded the ship and we were ready to sail. The crew was Greek and very cooperative. The captain was very professional and constantly on the bridge. The voyage itself lasted 5 or 6 days and we had no trouble with the British. When we were past Cyprus we received a message which told us that our landing beach would be at Kfar Vitkin. This time, boats were there and unloading of the Olim went very

quickly, although we were about 300 meters off shore. Once again we turned about as soon as we were empty, and headed back to Greece. I would like to point out that since we did not have a good system for preserving meat, we had a live cow and live chickens on board.

We went back to the same hotel in Athens and waited for the next ship. Now however, something occurred over which we had no control: A large group of young Betar Olim from Austria decided to march proudly through the streets, and they sang songs of their going to Palestine. The bond of silence had been broken and the Greek officials, who feared the reaction of the British, demanded that we leave and return to Palestine immediately. We had no alternative and soon found ourselves heading for Palestine on a Russian ship and without any Olim.

### **The activity in the “Water Gang”**

I returned to work in the port. Then I was put into the “Water Gang” whose job it was to help unload the Olim once they had arrived in Palestine. The procedure was that Amiram or Catriel would come to the Moshavot Square in Tel Aviv where 15 or 20 of us would gather, and we would get onto buses without knowing where we were headed. Once we arrived at whatever beach we were sent to, there would be another wait, sometimes a very long one, until the ship that was scheduled to arrive, would make its appearance.

Sometimes we would arrive at 17:00 when it was still daylight and sometimes we would wait in the dining hall of this or that kibbutz. If there were any questions, we said that we were members of the kibbutz. More than once we were unpleasantly surprised to find that our clothes had disappeared when we returned in our bathing trunks after unloading Olim.

Some time during 1939 a vessel, the “Asimi” arrived. She brought a load of youth from the HaNoar HaTzioni movement in Romania. This arrival had not been coordinated with the proper authorities, probably because they were not from the workers movement, so there was no one waiting for them when they arrived. The ship floundered offshore waiting for some one to help them, and after some delays and negotiations we were sent to unload them. This did not go very smoothly and it took two days to complete the unloading. First, the “Asimi” anchored about 400 meters off shore and the Olim refused to get off the ship. Then they were afraid to leave their baggage.

Matters took a turn for the worse when the British started firing towards the ship. In such a case, standard procedure was for the boats near shore to return there, and for those in the “Water Gang” near the ship, to board the ship and mingle with the Olim. I was in the group that boarded the ship, so we put on clothes and mingled with the Olim. The captain received instructions from the British to make for the port of Haifa. It seems that the British had intercepted messages from the ship the previous day and had followed the ship to its location. However, until the British made their appearance we succeeded in unloading about half the Olim.

We spent the next few weeks on a sort of floating prison with the remainder of the Olim, in some corner of the port.

Our people brought us supplies of food from time to time under supervision of the British. Since I was from Haifa I knew our people and could see their surprised expressions when they saw that I acted like one of the Olim. However, they were smart enough not to say anything. Once our trial was over, orders were to return the ship to Europe. We set out to sea and when we had gone perhaps 15 km from shore I noticed that a launch from Tel Aviv was following us. I asked the captain to stop and when the launch came abreast of us, I could see that Catriel had come with a bunch of other fellows to get us out of this mess. The launch was tied behind the vessel and we directed the captain to head for Tel Aviv. When we were about 8 km from shore, we (about 10 Israelis) said our goodbyes to the captain, crew and passengers, and took the launch back to the Hapoel shack on the banks of the Yarkon.

### **The “Tiger Hill”**

We could wait hours for a ship to come in to the shore. Once, we were driven to the region of Gan Yavneh and from there we continued on foot to the dunes. Finally we just made our way back and did nothing, because there were too many British ships patrolling the area. The following day, a Friday evening, a message was passed among us (as had been done many times in the past) which told us to go to the shore of Tel Aviv, opposite the Mahloul neighborhood, with a female partner. We were to walk along the shore between the Muslim cemetery and the Frishman beach. Zelda, my wife, who was then my girl friend, joined me without question and we strolled along the beach as would a pair of lovers. The other fellows did the same.

Shortly after dark we saw that there was a ship not far away at sea. Suddenly it turned with its bow toward the shore and ran aground at full speed. It stuck in so firmly that it remained upright. Everything happened very quickly after that. We men took off our clothes and ran into the water, which was about 2 meters deep at the spot where the ship was stuck. Those Olim who knew how to swim, swam the short distance to shore, and those who did not know how, had to be helped to shore. Ropes were thrown from the ship to shore as well, and that made it easier for some of the Olim to come ashore. As soon as the Olim were off the ship, they were dispersed throughout the city so that the British could not find them.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of 1940 when the Tel Aviv Port was closed, I returned to Haifa. Until the State of Israel was founded I did a number of things. For instance, there were often small boats that would come into port with stowaways, or Olim who did not have proper papers, and I would smuggle them in under the noses of the British authorities. I had passports and other papers that had been prepared

beforehand. I also had money with which to buy off captains who helped in the smuggling operations.

Later I worked as an instructor for Hapoel and also continued to work in the port for the Ogen Company until I reached retirement age. Zelda and I raised four boys, 11 grandchildren and 3 great grandchildren so far.

I have presented on these pages some of the events that I recall most vividly, but, of course, there is still much more to be told