

Magen, Dov (Lifshitz) Berchik
 Born 1915 Panza, Russia; Came to Palestine in 1935
 Tutor and commander in the Sea Companies of the Hagana
 Nickname: "Boorke"
 Joined the Palmach in 1942, Tutor and commander in the Palyam

This is the Way it Was

I was born in Panza in Russia, the thirteenth child of my brave mother. There were wars, pogroms, starvation and wandering but we survived, I don't know how. After the October revolution we returned to our family in Lithuania. Until I was 15.5 I grew up in a Cheder and Yeshiva. I left Torah and Mitzvot behind me and turned to a secular life, joined Hashomer Hatzair and went to a training farm on my road to Israel.

In 1934 I was sent as an immigrant on the ship "Velos" on its second voyage to Palestine. Our journey was not successful and we wandered around in the Mediterranean for months. In the end, we returned to Europe and made Aliya with certificates and arrived in Palestine in 1935. In our months of wandering we experienced the travails of aliya, hunger and sickness. The emissaries with us suffered exactly as we did. I learned from this experience and it helped me understand the Olim (immigrants) whom I later carried on my ships.

1935 was a year of prosperity and I even managed to see the "Ad Lo Yada" (Purim Carnival) and the parade of the "Flying Camel", the Maccabiah and the Hapoel Convention. We sang songs of liberty in the streets; and Catriel Yaffe, our commander on the "Velos", brought me to the Yarkon River where I met the other men who were active in Aliya Bet. I joined them and was accepted into the "Hagana".

In 1936 the Arabs revolted against the British and shut down the port of Jaffa. The Jewish Yishuv was given permission to build a jetty and the men of the Yarkon went out in their boats to unload cement from the ships anchored opposite Tel Aviv. The slogan was born: "The sea is also a source of bread"! The bread came with a great deal of sweat, but we hitched up our pants and went to work. That is how we worked and that is how, by the time WW II came along, we had built the Port of Tel Aviv. Three sailboats were built at the port and named after the family of Dov Hoz, Rivka and Tirza, who were killed in an automobile accident. These boats were used to train newcomers who would be working for the Hagana in Aliya Bet (illegal immigration).

We mobilized two courses for seamanship. The participants were kibbutznikim, fishermen or students. I was a trainee in the first course and an instructor in the second. After the second course I went back to working in Aliya Bet. Vessels with immigrants arrived and we carried immigrants on our shoulders, from boats to the shore.

Ten foreign seamen, who had been caught and ended up in Atlit with the Jewish immigrants, were repatriated through the ingenuity of Davidka. They had been promised that they would be sent home, but this was difficult because very few ships sailed to Greece or Italy during the War. Dimitros, in command of the Greek seamen, was confined in Acre Prison. When his ship had been caught by the British, he refused to disembark as an immigrant, but put on his captain's uniform with its gold stripes, and cap, and stood proudly on the bridge. He was sentenced to two years in prison. Dimitros, a wise and experienced individual, knew how to "win friends and influence people". He and a Corporal at the prison became good friends, and he often received a pass to get a haircut or for some other reason. On one occasion, as he and the Corporal stood outside the barbershop watching the girls go by, the Corporal was suddenly aware that Dimitros had disappeared. A taxi had taken Dimitros to Café Atara, where he was met by Dr. Sternberg. He was then transferred to an ambulance, and the sick man soon found himself free in Tel-Aviv.

In a citrus packing shed in Kfar Azar, ten Greek seamen longed to get back to Greece, and Davidka searched for a way to get them there. When no satisfactory way could be found, he turned to the "Yarkon Boys" who had a small vessel with motor and sails called the "Trumpeldor". It had been out of service for a long time, but was repaired and refitted within a short period. The seamen were taken from the shed and, via the Yarkon River, boarded the vessel and taken to Turkey. Once there, Dimitros sold the vessel, and with the money obtained, bought train tickets to Greece. That was the last mission of the "Yarkon Boys"

The Jewish Agency established the Organization for Aliya Bet (the Mosad). With the outbreak of the Second World War, the work of the Mosad remained low keyed. Very few ships of olim came and our men were mobilized, at the initiative of the Jewish Agency, primarily for the British Army, as well as other activities. The "Group of Twenty-Three" went out on a sabotage mission and never returned. Others went on missions to Greece and Cyprus and did return.

I was sent by the Jewish Agency to work on a British ship with Greek and Yugoslav sailors who had fled their countries. I trained them at Atlit and on the Carmel in seamanship and in landing tactics, and we used our boats for that purpose, and British camps as well. When a British camp was broken into and ransacked, I was the first upon whom suspicion fell and I had to go underground.

In 1943 we were told by the Palmach to establish the Palyam and went to Sdot Yam, next to Caesarea. We went back to our boats to train the Palmachnikim so that they would be able to bring the remnant of the Holocaust back to Eretz Israel. We taught and we learned. The War ended and we left the country by devious means so that we might bring back ships full of immigrants. At first, I helped Davidka in receiving ships at the shore, but later I went to Italy and formed a link between Jewish soldiers in British army transport units, many of whom were drivers, and the Palmach. This group, "The Gang", worked with

Yehuda Arazi and Ada Sereni. Relations between "The Gang" and the men of the Palyam were not good and I was sent in order to better relations with Yehuda Arazi.

Arazi was brave and tough and knew how to do things, only in his own way. He did not want to depend on men of the Palyam who had been educated differently. Ada Sereni ignored us and believed only in the Italian admirals. They were a different kind of people with different backgrounds and this led to poor relations and lack of mutual respect.

After the La Spezia incident, some of the characters in the play were changed and a somewhat better atmosphere was created. I was given command of the "Wedgwood" which had just arrived in Italy, at a time when the Mosad had arrived at a decision that it was wrong to continue working with small ships. Thereafter, emissaries were sent to the States where they sought to purchase bigger and better ships. The first of these to arrive were warships of the Corvette type that had been active in the Canadian navy. One was delivered to the Mosad in France and another came to Italy. The crew consisted of a number of experienced seamen and Jewish volunteers from the USA and Canada.

When the Corvettes were purchased, it was thought that they would or could be used to resist the British destroyers. The plan for the "Wedgwood" was to get close to the shore opposite the "Red House" (in Tel Aviv). We added a hold on the deck to take on more passengers, and left Italy with 1,257 immigrants on board. The Italians thought at first that the trucks loaded with people who wanted to flee the country were Fascists who intended sailing to Spain. They delayed the convoy and the ship at the shore. At this point I convinced the police to let aboard all the people waiting on the shore, instead of their having to stand all day in the sun. The police agreed and once all were on board we cut the ropes and fled. The police threatened to fire but they were caught by surprise, and by the time they recovered we were some distance from shore. When we came close to the coast of Palestine, the Mosad changed its mind and ordered us to surrender the ship, as the immigrants were to be interned at Atlit.

The British went to great lengths to hinder and stop Aliya, and were even ready to damage ships. This was so in the case of the "Atzmaut" (Pan Crescent) in Italy. The British contacted a saboteur and when the ship was in the port of Venice for cleaning and repairs, it was damaged and a large hole blown in the bow. It took a great effort on our part to stem the flow of water and save the ship, but we managed. The British had enough influence on the Italian government to cause us many difficulties. The Italians would not sell us fuel in large quantities but only enough to get us to Constanza, Romania.

While approaching our destination a storm arose, and there was danger that we would not have sufficient fuel to reach port. Yet, it was here that we were supposed to take on our passengers.

When we finally did reach port both ships, "Atzmaut"("Pan Crescent") and "Kibbutz Galuyot("Pan York")" had to tie up at an unsuitable point in the harbor and this caused them damage. Most of the crew became sick and the ventilation equipment and the cold storage stopped working. We had great difficulty in getting fuel. We also had difficulty installing the wooden shelves that were to be the immigrants' beds, and in getting the ventilating equipment to work as well as the audio-amplifiers.

Preparing the ships for so many passengers (more than 7,500 on each ship) was a very big job. We installed 125 toilets on each ship and prepared more than 7,500 bunks on each ship, measuring 40 cm x 180 cm. Each ship had a hospital with 45 beds with an operating theater and a labor room. No one had ever taught me how to build stairs for moving people up and down or how to conduct fresh air through the holds with the aid of pumps, or how to arrange for the distribution of food and water for so many people in so small an area.

At the end of 1947 we left port with 15,337 immigrants on board. We left from the port of Burgas in Bulgaria. The immigrants had arrived from Romania by train and had come straight to the port. We passed through the Dardanelles and entered the Mediterranean.

An agreement was reached with the British at sea, and the immigrants disembarked from the two ships in Cyprus, and filled the camps. After a week of hard work, Palmach men stationed there finished digging a tunnel from a camp to the shore and we made our getaway. At the shore, waiting fishing boats brought us to Caesarea.

Inside the camp, young people were trained in preparation for the imminent War of Independence. When they finished their training, many young men were brought from the camps to Palestine by Amos ben Tzvi, who ran a regular route with his fishing boat between Cyprus and Caesarea and I assisted him in this operation.

In 1948, I and my good friend Grisha Sheinkman from Kfar Giladi, worked in Haifa to make ships from the captive fleet seaworthy again, so that they could be used by the Israeli Navy that had just come into existence. "The Jewish State", "Wedgwood", "Hagana" and "Hatikva" were rehabilitated. When I was discharged from the navy I returned to work for Mosad for Aliya and helped build the companies Shoham and Zim ,and the acquisition of military equipment.

In 1950 I returned to my kibbutz and my family. Six years later the Sinai Campaign was under way and I was back in the navy where I did my share in the war effort. Immediately after the war I again became active in Aliya, this time from North Africa, and Morocco in particular. I helped organize Aliya from North Africa for four years. In 1960 I handed my job over to Moshe Rabinovitch, and returned home. My days of active service were over.