

Maimon, Aviva

Born in Sosnovitch, Poland, on 13 December 1924

Joined in action of the "Bricha" in 1945

Made Aliya on the Aliya Bet ship "Wedgwood" in 1946

This is the Way it Was

My name at that time was Fedda Lieberman and I studied in the Hebrew Gymnasium and belonged to the Hatzofeh Youth Movement. During WW II, I joined the Noar Hatzioni Youth Movement which had activities despite being banned by the Nazis. In the Spring of 1942, we heard news of the murder of Jews in death camps and the youth movements organized self-defense units. I was a member of such a unit that went underground. In 1943 I was sent to Germany.

After the war, I returned to Sosnovitch together with my friend Lea Diamant. We hoped that we might meet survivors, friends or family, but received news that most of our dear ones were no longer among the living. The youth organized into groups to train as Chalutzim (pioneers) to go to Palestine. We met other groups like ours and started on our way. With the help of the "Bricha" organization we reached a border town between Austria and Italy. Soldiers of the Jewish Brigade took us across the border in covered trucks to Treviso, a collection point in the Italian Alps.

Jewish refugees from all over Europe swarmed along the smuggling trails in order to reach the "Promised Land". Most of them were young and remnants of youth movements, who by some miracle had somehow managed to survive. Training camps were erected in locations in Italy at the initiative and organization of the Mosad for Aliya Bet, Jewish units in the British Army and men of the Jewish Brigade. Together with Lea, we arrived at a training camp in the vicinity of Maestra where there were members of the Noar Tzioni, Bnei Akiva, Hashomer Hatzair and other movements. This was the first place in a very long time where we started to live a normal life, and hoped to go directly to Palestine from here.

It was here that we met soldiers of the 179th Company, who helped us a great deal. Many of the Olim were in need of health care and a Doctor Miasnik, who was himself an Oleh, set up a little hospital. I worked in the hospital as a nurse (in Sosnovitch I had had training as a practical nurse). Many of the Olim were ill as they had been in concentration camps and their bodies were in poor condition. Our lives moved along at an even pace for several months until one day we were notified to prepare for Aliya. We were to take a minimum of clothing, etc. with us. We traveled at night by train and arrived at Magenta and went to a camp known as "A". In the morning we noticed that many more people were there who had come from other places in Italy. Actually, we were in a very large camp which seemed to be a staging area for Aliya to Palestine. We even practiced boarding a ship.

We were divided into groups and had health checks. Among those who were there to receive and care for us was Meir Davidson, whom everyone called Meirke, and Ben Artzi. They invited Lea and me into a room where Mula ben Chaim was already seated. They asked us questions about our past, requested that we keep everything secret, and suggested that we go to work for Aliya Bet. It was a bit hard to decide because our group had consolidated itself, we wanted to go and build a kibbutz, and here we were on the verge of Aliya to Palestine. Nevertheless we were thrilled by their suggestion. We understood the importance of being able to take part in the actual work of Aliya and felt an obligation and privilege. The camp was emptied of its inhabitants and a group of 12 young people was all that remained. It was now our duty to feed ourselves and take care of the camp.

It was winter, there was snow, and it was very cold. We stood guard duty at night and must have looked very funny. Lea and I would go on duty in big heavy army coats. In one hand we had a kitchen knife and in the other a kerosene lantern. We would walk about the entire camp, which was at some distance from any hamlet. We lived in a room together with three other girls; Sima, Chedva and Itka. They were survivors like us. At first, we were disappointed in that all we had to do was guard the camp, but that did not last long. We next, had to prepare the first party for Aliya Bet workers in celebration of having sent the first 1,000 Ma'apilim who had gone on the vessel "Enzo Sereni". It turned out that we were really not very good cooks. Shaul and Meirke who came to direct us, explained the importance of the occasion and encouraged us. In the end we managed to do fairly well. Among those who came were men from the Mosad for Aliya Bet, men of the Palyam, various emissaries and even some important Italians. The "Old Man", Yehuda Arazi was there and I recall his words: "This is the first thousand but there will be many thousands more".

Moshe Rabinovitch who had already drunk a glass or two, repeated his words, "thousands and thousands more, I promise". Among those who accompanied the vessels were Yisrael Auerbach (Uzi), Menachem Cohen (Churchill), Eliezer, Peter and others. Uzi was appointed in charge of the camp, and after the party we started preparations for Aliya. We had store rooms for food and clothing, and for all sorts of things that were brought to the camp by "The Gang". This was a group of men active in Aliya Bet, who served in various units of the British Army. They would "get" material of all kinds from British warehouses and bring them to us for storage. I was put in charge of food storage, which had been in the hands of Dovka, who was to go on the next vessel to Palestine.

The food had to be sorted and made into a menu. We figure out how much would be necessary for one day's supply, and then multiplied that for a voyage of 7 – 10 days. I consulted anyone more expert than me on the subject, and how to pack and store everything so that it would be easiest for those on the vessel. Of course I was given helpers. Lea and Chedva were in charge of the clothing stores. The boys in our group had plenty to do in unloading stuff that arrived at the camp, which included fuel; later, weapons were also brought and

stored. In line with the Palyam tradition, there was the party of the 13th of each month which took on the character of a “Kumzitz”, a friendly ‘get-together’. Tall stories were told and we sang songs and drank some wine. We would drink Turkish coffee and these affairs would bring all the participants closer together. Among the drivers there was one young fellow to whom we took a liking, Tzvika Tuchman. He would always try to bring a smile to our faces; he sang and told stories and played the harmonica.

We started to prepare for the “Wingate” and at that time there was a group of people from Gordonia in the camp. They did not know all the special things we did. At night we would clean weapons in a special bunker, and wrap them for shipment. (According to Meirke, these arrived in time to be useful in the War of Independence). This work gave us great satisfaction and we felt that it would bring the day of our Aliya closer. It was a happy time, a time of fulfillment. It was like a second before the realization of a dream.

Lea was with us only a short time at “A” camp. She went to Milan to take care of an apartment which was reserved for all kinds of important meetings. Reuven, Siomka and others came there at times. She was also in charge of the housekeeping. She was a very special person, with blond hair and blue eyes. She had a gentle demeanor, was intelligent, and gave a person the feeling that she could be trusted. It was difficult to be separated and we had become like sisters during the two years we spent together. We promised to visit each other as frequently as possible. She really did come very often to visit and Berchik took very good care of her. Lea did an extremely good job (we made Aliya together in June, 1946). She died at age 28 after a difficult illness.

Before preparations for the “Dov Hoz” and “Eliyahu Golomb”, we decided after a conversation with the “Old Man” to simulate a day on the vessel, and eat that day only what we prepared for the Ma’apilim. This was a very good experiment but, not everyone was able to eat on a vessel, and the important thing was to drink. Our “A” camp was somewhat distant from Magenta. A small road led to the town and at the entrance to the town stood a small villa with a large courtyard. The courtyard was surrounded by buildings and one of them had two stories. This is where those who accompanied the vessels lived. Opposite the tall building was a little one, and was where weapons were hidden.

When the weapons had been cleaned and packed, the door of the hideaway was sealed with cement. Big vases were placed in front to hide the entrance. There was another building on the side, with more of our people living there. There was a stream on the other side of the wall and a bridge that crossed the stream on which there were railroad tracks. Palyamniks coming to this town would stay on the train until it came to this point and then jump off the train and get to the villa on foot.

One night, trucks came and took those scheduled for Aliya, who had been in the villa. They were some of the La Spezia men and we heard that the vessel had been caught. There was a rumor that Italian police had halted the convoy before

they could board the ship. Another transport was on the way. This had to be halted and the people put up somewhere. Terdeta was the closest and most suitable spot. We had a villa in an isolated area there. The refugees arrived there, worn out and disappointed. They had lost belief in their leaders. This villa was terribly neglected and we were called to help. Arrangements had to be made for them to sleep, wash, and eat.

Meirke volunteered to clean the latrines. All of us got to work, but we first put on white armbands so that the refugees would recognize us if they needed anything. They took us to be worse than Nazis; they were so disgusted. The deserted villa somehow must have reminded them of concentration camps they had been in. We brought whatever was needed from our camp and managed to get everything fixed up fairly well. Chaim was appointed commander of the villa. We slept outdoors that night; I was only there two nights but the place left a strong impression upon me.

In "A" Camp we had everything we needed to outfit a vessel. We had canvas and we had a lot of rope with which hammocks could be made. There were also barrels of fuel buried in fields to look like ordinary fields of cabbage. . Once, the owner of the villa came to see if we were taking proper care of it. When the people at La Spezia received certificates and were allowed to sail, we made a 13th of the month party and felt much better. Atara returned to camp "A" and gave up her certificate to continue working with us.

Many Palyamniks and Mossad for Aliya Bet people came our way and we were always busy. The drivers worked very hard and very long hours. We tried to be of help wherever we could. We prepared sandwiches for them and hot tea and fixed up their beds. Sima, (in Kibbutz Gal On today) made a laundry out of a big old barrel in which we laundered sheets and the personal effects of the men accompanying the ships. They were very thankful and we felt good. All the time that we, the staff, were at Camp "A", we did not receive wages and we did not receive vacations. We very much wanted to visit Milan and were allowed this pleasure just once, and were even given some pocket money.

The Palyamniks usually arrived at night and their arrival was kept as secret as possible. One of these was Bezalel Drori, and he remained in the camp longer than most of the others. He took our group in hand and taught us Hebrew and Hebrew songs. We started preparing for another vessel and knew that this time we were also to make Aliya on it. We made a final 'going away' party where many tall stories were spun, and Uzi put on an especially fine performance. Some of the younger men there gave me the nickname: "Savta" (grandmother) as I was usually serious although I was only 21, the same age they were.

I will not describe our Aliya; others have written about it. We were the first ones aboard the ship as we had to tie the sleeping hammocks. We were about 1,300 Ma'apilim and there were not enough bunks for everyone. Poldek, one of Abba Kovner's men and my life-partner, was also there. As there was not enough

room we slept on the deck, but on the last night Berchik made a nice gesture and offered us his cabin.

My period of work in Camp "A" was one of the most beautiful periods of my life after a period of deep sadness from the loss of my dearest ones in the Holocaust. This was a period of action, of doing what had to be done for a very good cause – bringing the survivors of the Holocaust to Palestine, and at the same time, meeting and working with the young Israelis who were "the cream of the crop". This served to ease my pain.

When we reached Palestine Poldek and I joined Abba Kovner and his group at Ein Hachosh. In the fall of 1946 I was sent by Tzvi Yechieli, the head of the Mosad at that time to a course for radio operators at Shefayim. This was to prepare me to work for the Hagana. I participated in unloading Olim from vessels under the command of Arie, and in May 1948 I enlisted in Tzahal and served as a radio operator in Navy Headquarters. During the "Pirate Operation" I was in contact with our men. I switched with Shosh from Kibbutz Yagur and served on the "Eilat" under Yoske Almog after the battle off the shore of Tel Aviv.

In the winter of 1948 I was sent as part of a team of the navy to bring two landing craft from France. I served under Yisrael Auerbach and his second-in-command Yisrael Rotem. After my discharge when the war was over, I worked as a nurse in the Molada Hospital in Haifa. Two sons were born to us. We all went to Poland when Poldek worked for the Embassy there; I worked as a clerk in the Embassy.

When we returned to Israel I went to a course for librarians and worked as the librarian of the Abba Hushi House in Haifa, until I retired.