

**Ophir, Yeshayahu** (Shaiké) RIP

Born in Jerusalem in 1927

Joined the Palmach in 1943

Joined the Palyam in 1944

*[Editorial note: we corrected above year info that is wrong in the Hebrew version]*

Died August 1987

Written by: Nimrod Eshel

### **This is the Way it Was**

A long time before Shaiké became a celebrity, that is, an important person on the stages of our country and of the whole world, we, the seamen of the Naval Company of the Palmach, had the privilege of knowing him well and knowing his mythological characters. That was even before all the Palmach knew him as Shaiké of the “Chizbatron”.

His heroic characters that became household names in Israeli culture, (like the Policeman Azulai or his Dr. Ticho) were so well known to us, that it was as if they belonged to us. We were eyewitnesses to their growing skin and bones and the forming of their character, step by step, and stage by stage. During the long winter nights when we were locked behind the walls of our secret activity and cut off from sources of culture and entertainment, we would gather in the boat storage at Caesarea, sit scattered about on the boats and equipment, and were his captive audience. “Give him one more person and you will have a full-blown performance”, said the wise men of the group.

The Palyam period was a short one, and one that is not so well known in his interesting biography. He soon became a leading performer in an army troupe, and then a famous actor and the leading comic that Israel produced. Therefore we will not talk about the Shaiké that everyone knows; we will tell a little bit about his time with us. His creative imagination was like a bubbling fountain the whole year round. However, on those long nights when a vessel was supposed to come in, there was one delay after another. This was when Shaiké would become inspired and others would join in and soon the mood would change and morale would soar upwards. One night, I saw for the first time, how a man can thread a needle and then sew up his own eyelids. Anyone who saw that and cannot recall it, must have been asleep at the time. I can recall that scene vividly, more than what happened afterwards on Shefayim beach when destroyers appeared and we were caught by the British and brought first to Jaffa and afterwards to Latrun.

In the course of the years there was a consolidation of fellows who became our suppliers of culture and esprit-de-corps, and this group put its seal on all of the Palmach. There was Dan ben Amotz, Eskimo, Yosh Halevi, Moishe Lipson and other big names of the theater, but Shaiké was no doubt the “jewel in the crown”. He was a natural pantomimist and yet wrote such hilarious skits, and could tell stories or sing or dance or create characters so funny they made you cry. When

Dan ben Amotz met Shaike in the Naval Company, wonderful things happened. This left a mark on the field of comic theater for many years, even after they passed away. When all of Israel realized what a great actor, writer, and character creator Shaike was, we in the Palyam felt that we had been especially lucky to have seen the birth and early development of his character. The trackers, with whom he worked a great deal, praised him highly as a team player, and said that he often had them rolling on the ground in hysterical laughter. He and his friends would prepare skits for us that were superb, just as he did, much later with professionals. When the War of Independence began Shaike was in the first troupe of the Chizbatron and its chief performer.

When Shaike left to perform on stages all over the world, some fellows were dubious if we were ever to see him again. Although he was successful, he always returned to Tel Aviv. One day I met him on a street in Tel Aviv and was surprised to see him. "I long so for Israel and for my buddies that I must come back again and again," he declared. On another occasion I was walking with Dan ben Amotz and we saw Shaike coming toward us. He assumed the look of an idiot, took a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket and approached us. He started shoving the paper in our faces and babbling profusely in a supposed foreign language that could not be understood. Soon we were both laughing hysterically at his antics.

On another occasion he gave me a one-man performance on the corner of a street as we stood face to face. He gave me a dozen different versions of a simple scene: A seaman applies to a clerk in the office of the seamen's labor office. Once it is a Romanian seaman talking to a Polish clerk, and the next time it is a Moroccan seaman and a German clerk; and then again it is a Yemenite seaman and an Anglo-Saxon clerk. Finally there is an Israeli seaman and a veteran clerk from the Histadrut Labor Federation. The theme that ran through them all was that each person was talking to a wall and one side had no inkling of what the other person was saying. I just about died laughing there in the street, but what I could never figure out was, "How did Shaike know what went on in the seamen's hiring office or how a seasoned clerk of the Histadrut acted?"

One of the noted abilities of Shaike was to mimic the accents of various nationalities. What was especially unique was hearing him talk English with an Arabic accent, or as an Israeli talking Yiddish, as a Pole talking Arabic or as a Yemenite, Romanian, etc..

In the monologue of the French official of the UN, he says (according to the translator, Uri Zohar, who didn't know a word of English), "Accordingly" and this is translated by the interpreter as, "He plays the accordion".

When not performing on the stage, Shaike was a simple and straightforward person, I would almost say – naïve. We loved him for that also, and not just because of his humor.