

Perach, Zalman (of blessed memory)  
 Born 1919 in Oman, Russia - came to Palestine in 1924  
 Joined the Palmach in 1941 and the Palyam in 1942  
 Died at Bet Hashita on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1989  
 Collected and written by Dita Perach

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

I was 5 years old when my family emigrated from Oman, Russia to Palestine and settled in Haifa. My father collected wood that drifted in from the sea and built us a hut in the Valley of Olives, in the middle of an Arab neighborhood. "They were hard times". When I was 15, I rebelled against my parents who had worked very hard so that we would be able to study, and left home and went with friends from the Machanot Olim youth movement to Ben Shemen. From there we went to Kibbutz Ein Harod for training and preparation for building a kibbutz based on the sea. Later, this group of young people formed Kibbutz Sdot Yam, but prior to that, settled in Kiryat Haim with the aim of working in the port of Haifa. The first job was that of stevedores.

After about a year, when the promise of building a sea-faring kibbutz had not yet been realized, I joined Kibbutz Bet Hashita which had just settled on the land. With the outbreak of WW II, and the presence of the German army in Syria and the advance of the Germans in North Africa, a very real threat was posed to our existence in Palestine, I decided to join the Jewish Brigade and fight the Germans. One day I was approached by Yigal Alon and he suggested that I join a special force which would be under the jurisdiction of the Jewish Agency, and would fight with and against the British; with them against the Germans but against them in protecting the Jewish settlements. This suited my aims perfectly and I agreed.

#### **1941 – My first day in the Palmach**

A short time later I received orders to report to Café Nordau in Haifa, and there I was met by Yigal Alon and Yitzchak Sadeh. I was given instructions by them, and two cabs and a list of 14 names (among them, Moshe Rabinovitch). I was to pick up these people and bring all of them to Kibbutz Kfar Gileadi. Our mission would be sabotage and spying on the enemy in Syria in preparation for a British attack. In this mission I cut telephone lines between Kuneitra and Marj Ayun.

#### **“A” Company of the Palmach**

The company has its first meeting in the woods near Kibbutz Ginossar and was under the command of Yigal Alon. It went out on its first trek. We then went back to Kfar Gileadi for work and training.

### **Facing the German Enemy**

We were sent to the Negev to stop Rommel and the German Army. However, until their arrival we were busy at work in the kibbutzim nearby and in training, but we didn't have weapons. Chaim Chefer wrote: "how a little company was sent to the Negev with sticks instead of guns". The truth is that we did not even have sticks! But we did train and exercise, and wait for Rommel and some time later a pickup truck did bring us sticks.

### **The fight to establish a "Sea Company"**

After we completed the first courses in seamanship, each Palmachnik returned to his own unit. There were those in the Palmach, and Yitzchak Sadeh was their leading representative, who believed that it was useful for every Palmach unit to have several people trained in naval skills, who could help in solving problems to do with water obstacles, rivers, etc. One of his favorite expressions was: "A Palmachnik should be like a duck: he should know a little about swimming, and a little about flying, but must very well know how to walk." Others believed that there must be a naval unit ready for action on the sea at all times, and I believed that as well. I spoke to Yigal Alon about this a number of times and he became convinced, but said that it could take him up to a year to convince Yitzchak. In the end he did convince him and the naval unit of the Palmach was formed with me as its first commander. Just as with the rest of the Palmach, we spent part of our time in training and the rest in working. The work in our case was stevedoring in Haifa port where we had to be as good as the Salonikan and Arab workers.

### **Aliya Bet**

In 1945 I was one of the first to be sent abroad, to Europe. This was just about the time I was to get married. Three days before the wedding I received orders to go to Egypt so, instead of a wedding, I went to Egypt. We were dressed to look like British soldiers and had false papers, but the disguise did not work and we were returned to Palestine. That gave us a few days to carry out the wedding, which took place in Kibbutz Degania on the eve of Succoth. There were many guests from Bet Hashita and from the Palmach.

Dita Perach adds: Moshe Rabinovitch liked to remind me that on the day of the wedding I ran into him in Haifa, and I asked him if Zalman intended to make it to the wedding that evening. The Palyamniks, Moshe, Samek, the Sruliks, and Menachem Churchill came by way of the Emek Railway and arrived at Tzemach. They had brought a set of dishes with them as a present, but on the way to Tzemach the dishes were broken. My honeymoon lasted four days and then I took a boat out to the "Santa Maria de Luca". The captain of this vessel was an experienced smuggler and it didn't matter to him whom he carried to Lebanon or elsewhere.

### **The immigrant ship "Enzo Sereni"**

I reached the ship four days prior to sailing, some time in December. The ship was to leave from Vado, a small fishing pier near Savona. This was a ship of 700

tons, one of the biggest ships we had ever had. We were to carry 750 immigrants. Several original ideas were tried out on the ship. One was that its silhouette should be changed to that of a banana transport. The immigrants' bunks were to be made of canvas and they were told not to bring any baggage with them because the passageways between the bunks were too narrow (40 cm). The bunks in the holds were 8 bunks high. At the last moment I was informed that a convoy of immigrants was on its way and could not go back as it was being chased by the Italian police. The immigrants were to be taken aboard immediately and we were to leave port ASAP. In addition, the 750 had now become 900.

Before one leaves port with a ship, one checks the gyroscope. There was a gyroscope expert in the port of Savona and he found that ours was no good. We were refused permission to leave port. We also had to keep in mind that all along the coast of Italy there were minefields which still hadn't been cleared at the end of WW II. We notified Yehuda Arazi and what was his answer? "Give the expert half a million (lira)." That meant, bribe him to okay the gyroscope and get under way! At the last moment we were able to buy a new gyroscope, loaded the passengers, and were gone. Our luck was that the ship was built of wood and not of metal so that it didn't attract mines. Otherwise, I am positive that we would have all been blown up.

We had to load the immigrants into the holds so quickly that we could not do so according to the groups and units that had been prepared in advance. It was therefore difficult to do the most ordinary duties in an orderly fashion. This was probably the most crowded, of all the crowded ships, that the Hagana/ Palmach/ Palyam had sailed, and the situation below deck was really terrible. There were not enough hammocks for everyone, and the lower hammocks caved in from the weight of those above. Water could not be distributed to everyone, and there was real danger to the lives of the immigrants. People were seasick and threw up. They could not get to the toilet facilities which, in any case, were overloaded. My assistants, Gad Lasker and Tzvi Katznelson, were down with the immigrants and did all they could to help them. We were so few that I felt almost helpless in the face of this enormous mess.

It was at that moment that someone told me that there was someone on board who could really help me in the present situation. He was a tall, silent, former partisan who had spent the entire war in the forests, fighting the Germans. His name was Petya. Petya had a group of partisans with him. Petya and his cohorts took charge of affairs below deck, and in a short time and in a very quiet, low-keyed manner, he and his men made order out of chaos.

We had 10 barrels of water on the ship but after the first day someone told me that one of the barrels was leaking. Someone had found a nail, made a hole in the barrel, and stolen water. I told Petya to find me the one who had stolen the water and ruined the whole barrel, but one of Petya's men, a huge strong fellow,

said to me: "I will do anything you ask me, lift a house or turn the ship about or whatever, but I will not lay a finger on a Jew even if he stole water." That caused me to think again, that even if the thief were found, what could I do to him?

About 20 years later I was invited to Kibbutz Gesher to talk about illegal Aliya. I suggested that instead of telling anecdotes I would describe how a ship was constructed or altered so that it would be able to carry many olim (immigrants), and I chose to describe the "Enzo Sereni". Suddenly one fellow raised his hand and said, "If there is such a thing as a time limit on past misdeeds, then I would like a word with you during the intermission." I assured him that there was such a limit and we met during the intermission. A pretty woman and three children stood at his side as he spoke. He said: "You see this woman? I am alive today because of my love for her. I went to the camps with her, watched over her, and was always at her side. We went through hell together and she never returned the love that I gave her. But when we were on that ship, she was on the verge of dehydration and I could not let her die, so I brought her a bottle of water. Now we are a family and these are our children, and if you want to punish me, go right ahead."

When we reached the shore of Greece it turned out that we had arrived at the port of Zenta instead of Spineza, a mere mistake of about 60 miles. This showed the state that our gyroscope was really in. The food supply was supposed to last eight days for 750 people. This was now the tenth day for 900 passengers. We received an order to move out to sea and wait for a few days. Our food and water supplies were running very low.

As we did not have faith in our gyroscope we tried to identify the Lebanese coast at night. This led to our discovery by British planes while we were still in international waters, and a British naval vessel set out to accompany us. We received orders to remain calm and not offer resistance. The British captured the ship and towed us into the port of Haifa. Most of the officers and crew mingled with the immigrants and were not identified. I acted as helmsman and the captain himself remained on the bridge. The captain and the British entered into negotiations in my silent presence. The captain acted very haughtily towards the English and actively supported the rights of the immigrants to emigrate. When the immigrants were taken to Atlit I went along with them. Once there, I hid in a truck carrying empty Tnuva boxes and made my escape.

### **A fictitious name**

When an immigrant ship arrived, the procedure was to list the names of all the passengers, where they originated from, and the last place they had been in Europe. I was also given a fabricated name and a home town somewhere in Poland. Three letters arrived for me addressed to that name; one came from Kibbutz Kiryat Anavim, one from an industrialist in Tel Aviv, and another one. All three had the identical content. The first said: "I am so glad to know that my brother is alive and I hope we shall meet very soon... etc." The industrialist

wrote: "If you are really my cousin, then I am very happy! Even if you are not my cousin I welcome you into my family. Come and see me when you are free and my house will be open to you,..."

Since joining in 1941, and until now, I had never had a decent vacation. My wife was living with her folks in Degania instead of my kibbutz, Beit Hashita. Now I received orders to attend a six month course for naval officers, and this would also allow me to be with my wife when she gave birth.

Ditta continues: On the night of the Seder, our son Yitzchak was born. We went to Schweitzer Hospital in Tiberias and returned with the baby. When we arrived in Degania we found Yigal, the second-in-command of the Palmach, waiting for us and he was holding a heavy parcel. This was a gift, a very good dictionary. In presenting this to me, Yigal said; "If there is need, you can throw this book at someone and it will kill him." In later years I presented this dictionary to the Palmach archives in memory of Yigal.

"Black Saturday" came and went, and the course for naval officer was abandoned. Samek and I were caught in Degania and once more taken to Atlit. Once again, we were smuggled out of the camp with other members of the Palmach. All the men of Bet Hashita were in the camp at Rafiah, and no one was left to do the work that had to be done. I took Ditta with me to Bet Hashita and promised to stay there for at least half a year.

### **Sabotaging the Deportation Ships:**

I was working at the kibbutz one day, applying mortar to bricks, when a stranger approached me and asked: "Tell me, would you sabotage a ship that was about to founder, like the "Patria?" I told him that I would do everything possible so that it would not sink. "But, I continued: if you were to ask me if I would sink one of those deportation ships, then the answer is YES."

Several days later my good friend Nachum Sarig, then commander of the Palyam, came to visit me and we talked. He told me that a vessel, the "Katriel Jaffe" was soon to arrive and the Palyam wanted to have explosives placed aboard the deportation ship while the immigrants were being transferred to it, but there is no sapper available at the moment. He asked me if I would like to do that job. I said, "What are we waiting for?" We left and Ditta remained with the baby. Ditta continues: "Zalman left and I remained in unfamiliar surroundings. The trauma of the Patria was still fresh in our minds and I was wondering if I would see him again. A parting note arrived from him."

"Dear Ditta, What can I say to you now? Be strong, you know that this is a difficult job but has to be done. I hope to be back very soon and we will be together again. Meanwhile you have to bear the burden of my leaving, so be brave and I will be thinking of you all the time. With love and many kisses, and kiss the baby for me three times a day. Zalman."

I took the letter and went into our room alone, and cried. A friend and neighbor heard me crying and came in asking what had happened? She thought that someone in the kibbutz had been rude to me. I told her nothing. After the explosion Zalman was sent to Cyprus and returned three months later. He was then sent on another mission to Europe.

Zalman recalled: "In order to get onto the ship with the explosives I first went to Dostrovsky, the Head of the Agency in Haifa who was a very good friend of ours. I asked him how I could get the explosives hidden in the food supplies that were to be taken onto the ship for the immigrants, and were already loaded on the boats that delivered these supplies. Dostrovsky complained that we were spoiling the good relationship that he had with the British.

I boarded the "Katriel Jaffe" as a stevedore and I and Aya Pinkerfeld (Meyer) the Gidonit, divided the gelignite among young girls who hid it under their clothes. At first the British tried to convince the immigrants to go willingly from their ship to the deportation ship. We broke the ladder immediately so that no one would even think of going up it willingly. The British then sprayed water on the immigrants but this had no effect on anyone. Even tear gas canisters produced no effect. Meanwhile, the water in the ship was already knee high. We were all standing in the water when they threw canisters of a substance that caused a burning sensation and the whole incident went on for several hours. People started moving and shoving while sticks and other debris were thrown on them by the British above. When smoke grenades were also added the resistance just about came to an end and everyone tried to leave the ship at the same time and climb onto the deportation ship. Wet and miserable, the immigrants made their way onto the deportation ship. The immigrants were searched and manhandled by the British who hit them with sticks and took their watches and other articles.

By the time I had gathered my wits and was ready to act, I found that there were 6 girls who had some gelatine on them and in all I had about a kilo of explosive. Now I had to find a dry box of matches. Aya and I and the six girls went into a storage hold. The instructions that Nachum Sarig had given were that the material should be divided into lots of not more than 2.5 – 3 kilo and be placed so that only part of the ship would sink.

The British wanted all the passengers to be above deck. The lower hold was closed and barred with wooden boards. The girls started to prepare the explosives with Aya and I went looking for a way to get down below deck. I was able to move some of the boards and make a small passage way, and the girls sat down and started singing. There was a problem of getting from the entrance to the bottom of the hold, as all the ladders had been broken. We took rope off the beds and tied them together to make a rope ladder. This ladder was about a meter and a half short so that when I went down and jumped the remaining distance, the torch that I had held in my mouth fell, and the light was

extinguished. If I would have to go up and down again with the explosives, I was liable not to be able to get out the next time because it was difficult to catch and find the end of the rope, and to climb out. That is what I did do in the end and there was an explosion but the damage from less than one kilo was not very great.

### **Cyprus**

We arrived in Cyprus with the deportation ship. Eliezer Klain (Tal), the commander of the "Katriel Jaffe", and I thought that there would be a Jewish community in Famagusta and that we would be able to escape and hide in their headquarters. The British officers and soldiers in Cyprus did not seem to be of the same caliber as the British paratroopers in Israel.

Two days later Dr Shiba appeared. He had a high rank in the British Army. We shook hands and I introduced myself. He was very surprised when he heard that I was Zalman Perach. "What?", he exclaimed, "I heard that you were wounded by the British and I have been looking for you at all the hospitals." That same evening I escaped from the camp by walking out with a group of Cypriot workers. Dr Shiba met me in town and introduced me to Gabi Bardi, the son of an Israeli family that owned copper mines in Cyprus. Gabi hid me in an abandoned village where I lived by myself for a month. Every few days someone would bring me food and water. I stayed there until arrangements had been made for a boat to take me back to Palestine.

*[excerpts from an interview with Zalman in 1982]:*

### **"Aliya Bet was a War Waged for Hope"**

Question: How do you, an ordinary person, whatever your motivation, take it upon yourself to lead hundreds of people through minefields, and through numerous other dangers? And how does the one who orders you to do so find it in himself to give the order?

Zalman: Four months ago there was a convention in honor of the 35<sup>th</sup> year since the arrival in Palestine of the immigrants of the "Katriel Jaffe". Ada Sereni and I were invited to this convention. I had gone onto the ship with explosives and I had gone onto the deportation ship with them and to Cyprus with them. While we were telling stories and anecdotes of that period one of the immigrants, a survivor of the Holocaust, stood up and challenged me. "How could you people take a boatload of immigrants who had gone through hell and put them on a ship that you were going to blow up when they reached the Land of Israel?" I will give you a brief gist of my reply to her, which is also an answer to your question. "Once you reached the shores of Israel you became an integral part of our struggle for Aliya and Statehood. There were mines in the sea but that was not reason enough for us to do nothing. But the question remains, how does someone who was trained on a little sailboat take it upon himself to captain a ship carrying 1,000 people, like the Enzo Sereni? Later, when I was a high-ranking officer in the Israeli navy I set up the security standards for the merchant

marine. Had someone done what we did, he would have received a lifetime prison sentence. The difference was that if Aliya were to stop the State would have died. **Aliya was the hope for the life of the State of Israel!!** We had to go ahead and do what we did. Will we be caught or will we not be caught, does the engine run or does it not run, are we safe or are we in danger, is there enough food or is there a lack of food. Did any of our ships have enough lifeboats for the passengers? Danger was a very minor factor in all our calculations.

### **Similar to Bird Migration**

Question: You were a twenty year old and you had a hope and a dream and a war; but what about the immigrants, remnants of the Holocaust some of whom were not so young and who had already overcome so many dangers in their efforts to survive. They had their own private dreams and hopes that were as important to them as was the creation of the state. What did they have to say?

Zalman: Most of the survivors of the Holocaust had very little to say. They were in an unusual situation at the end of the war and their reaction was like that of a bird migration. They all gathered together and they all moved in the same direction. They had no choice; they crossed borders and they found food on the way, and they were drawn toward their goal in a mysterious, instinctive manner. Nothing stopped them, We were there just to give a little extra organization, and a little push, here and there. No one who had not gone through the "University of Life" in the camps would have been able to overcome the obstacles that they faced. If I had gone through the same route with 900 Israelis, I would not have made it. The survivors had the "knack of survival", the resistance and resilience which they acquired in their life in the camps or in the forests. They had undergone a process of selection which set them apart from ordinary people.