

Rotem, Yisrael RIP

Born in Danzig in 1926 and came to Palestine as a baby

Joined the Palmach in 1941, Joined the Palyam in 1943

Died in 1994

Commander of, or accompanied the vessels:

“Natan B”, “23 Who Were Lost at Sea”, “Hatikvah”

Second-in-command of the Palyam from 1947 to 1948, when the Israeli Navy was created

Material gathered by his friend, Oved Sadeh and by his son, Tzachi Rotem

This is the Way it Was

Yisrael was the youngest son of Yitzchak and Fania Rosenbaum, and had two sisters. The family made Aliya to Palestine because they were staunch Zionists. Yisruik was then about three months old. In 1932, when he was only 7 years old, his father died after a prolonged illness. This put the family into a very difficult economic situation. He finished elementary school with excellent grades but could not continue his studies in the nautical school, as his family was unable to afford it. On the recommendation of Moshe Smilansky, an author and friend of the family, he was accepted into the Kadoorie Agricultural High School and graduated in the 6th class together with others who were the ‘salt of the earth’. He joined “A” Company of the Palmach and enrolled in work of Aliya Bet, which was the pinnacle of his career. His bond with the sea became the strongest and most dominant in his life.

Oved Sadeh tells about Yisrael:

In order to explain to the reader who Yisrael was and what he did, I went to a video that was done on the shore of Sdot Yam and at La Spezia in Italy. In this video, Menashe Raz tried to describe what led a young Israeli to make his way to Europe, to the refugee camps, and to bring those refugees to Israel:

Q) Would mass Aliya have been possible without the Palyam? Menashe asked provocatively.

A) Without the Palyam? replied Yisruik, Other men like the Palyam would have had to be found. I am extremely doubtful that foreign seamen would have been ready to do this kind of work.

Q) Why do you think foreign seamen would not have done this sort of a job?

A) Those who accompanied the Ma’apilim on the vessels had several functions:

1- To keep an eye on the foreign crew and make certain they brought the vessel to the designated port. When I was on the “Tel Chai” I had to check the navigational charts and used my authority to make certain we would get to Palestine.

2- The second job was to make certain that the refugees were properly taken care of, received food and water regularly, and that their sanitary conditions were satisfactory. I don’t believe that a vessel with many people on board could have gone to sea if others were not trained to look after them and be responsible for them during the voyage.

Q) Are you saying that all this was a complicated operation?

A) This was very complicated, but it worked. We started in 1945 with the "Dalin" that carried 35 *[editorial note: the actual number was 37; the mistake is in the Hebrew version]* refugees and ended up with the two "Pans" in 1947, each of which carried 4,500 *[editorial note: should be 7500; the mistake is in the Hebrew version]* refugees. This was a complicated logistical problem that necessitated military organization.

Afterwards, Yisrulik told Menashe about the argument between the first members of the nautical company and Yitzchak Sadeh, commander of the Palmach, about the need for an independent unit with specific training needs; about the first commanders of the first courses, like Zalman Perach and the first instructors, like Berchik and Shmuel Tankus. These men believed that illegal immigration had to take place on a large scale and that men were needed to man the vessels, accompany the refugees, and help them when they reached the shore of the country. This had to be a special unit. Yitzchak Sadeh was of the opinion that all Palmachniks should receive basic sea training so that the Palmach could work on land as well as sea. The approach of the first Naval Company men was accepted and the first courses for small boat commanders and naval officers began. The graduates of these courses were those who went forth and did the job, bringing the ships and the Ma'apilim.

Menashe, the interviewer continued his questioning: You, a young Israeli, and still a youth, arrived in Europe and met the survivors of the Holocaust, the Ma'apilim, in their camps and on the ships. Didn't your proud Sabra bearing and haughtiness cause resentment among these people whom you wanted to lead across the sea? I related to the survivors with the utmost respect. Words cannot describe my feelings toward them. They were a treasured prize that we were carrying and I kept that in mind constantly. I recalled that we had an order to allow each one of them to carry one parcel with them onto the vessel. I could not always remain severe concerning the request of a Ma'apil to add some personal article to his belongings, which was all that remained of loved ones who had been so ruthlessly taken from him. We came from another world but I, we, took into account that they had gone through the seven stages of Hell, and regarded them with respect and awe.

At the end of the interview Yisrael stood before the beautiful bay of Portovenere and explained to Menashe how the sleeping arrangements for Ma'apilim were made, while a British detective stood watching from a distance. Everything he said was in terms of "We sailed, we did"; not "I sailed, I did".

When Aliya Bet ended with the creation of the State, Yisrulik continued in the Navy for some time, before finally going into private business. He was very active in building an Israeli shipping industry, an idea hatched in the tents of the Palyam. At the end of 1956 the first ship of the 'sea kibbutz' was blessed with the name, "Palmach". The idea was to have a fleet of ships manned and operated by kibbutznikim. A small group of men, including Yisrulik Rotem, Yisrulik Auerbach, Ike Ahronovitch of course, and others from other kibbutzim, congregated in Kibbutz Ma'agan Michael. This was a daring undertaking and it

continued for about 30 years. Yisrulik invested about ten years of his life and a tremendous amount of energy in this project. In 1956 he went to Italy with his family as a representative of the Kibbutz Meuchad Shipping Company. In 1963 he returned to Israel and was appointed Director of the port of Eilat. From 1970 he was in private business, always in the company of his close friend Yisrael (the 2nd) Auerbach. He died of leukemia in 1994 at the age of 69.

Oved Sadeh eulogized him at his funeral:

50 years ago we started to trek the paths of the country, through its fields and over its waves. We were called by events of the times, and were called by our own consciences. We went out to battle and we faced serious crises. Yisrulik was there with us, in our midst and in the lead. Tall and erect, of noble bearing; he was handsome in appearance and his nature was gentle.

From childhood and youth, through school years and the years in the Palmach, he like all men picked and chose his friends and companions. They became intertwined in their lives until they formed a strong unbreakable circle. The circle was worn as a good-luck charm, around the neck and close to the heart. It was with him when he went onto the bridge in a time of storm, in nights of carousel and joy, and on the eve of deepest sorrow. Perhaps we are your charm, Yisrulik. You, Yisrulik, are the dearest jewel in our charm. We will cherish you to the end of our road.