

**Rotem, Zeev**

Born 1926 in Jerusalem

Joined the Palmach in 1943

Joined the course for those accompanying immigrant ships in 1946

**This is the Way it Was**

As a graduate of the Hebrew Gymnasium, I joined the Palmach in May 1943 and was placed in "D" Company, as I had requested. At first I was in the headquarters company at Givat Haim and then was a squad leader at Sdeh Nachum. I was accepted as a biology student at the Hebrew University in 1945 so transferred to "H" Company, which was the Palmach reserve in Jerusalem. While there I took part in several operations; the Night of the Railroads, Wingate Night ( when Bracha Fuld was killed), and the Night of the Bridges. That night we blew up the Allenby Bridge over the Jordan River. When the situation in Palestine deteriorated further, I discontinued my studies and took part in a special operation with Yigal Allon and Aharon Spector. In the wake of that operation, British detectives searched for those who had taken part. It was thought best that I and Shmulik Haram leave the country. Both of us joined the Naval Company and took the course at Caesarea for those accompanying the immigrant ships.

In January 1947 I left Palestine with Moshe Rabinovitch and Chaim Kaufman (both of blessed memory) on a passenger ship that sailed to Naples. As soon as we landed we were arrested by the Italian Police and sent to prison. This was most likely due to the intervention of the F.S.S. – the Field Security Service of the British army, which was active in trying to prevent Aliya Bet (illegal immigration). We disappeared from sight and did not reach Rome.

Yehuda Arazi (of blessed memory) was waiting for us in Rome. After two weeks in prison we were transferred by a prisoners' train to a prison in Reggio Calabria. Our hands were manacled but we were able to free them and thought of fleeing but did not succeed in doing so. In Reggio Calabria we were separated for interrogation. One of the prison guards noticed that I had a British mandatory passport; it was brown and not blue as for British citizens. He decided that I was English. I was therefore beaten thoroughly and when I asked him why, he answered that that was his retaliation for the bombing of his house by the British Air Force during the last war. I did not tell him what my real reason was for coming to Italy, but if I had, I might have received better treatment from him.

The three of us were once more thrown into a cell and a few days later they wanted to add a fourth prisoner. We objected and said we were too crowded and there wasn't even a bed for the fellow. They put him in anyway and to our surprise it was Eli Zohar. He had been captured at Reggio Calabria after the LCT that he was on had broken down, which led to his capture. This was our first contact with the outside world so we had a good deal of information to exchange. Two hours later our door opened and a guard came to take Eli. We, who had

objected to receiving an addition in our cell, now tried to talk the guard into letting him stay. Our request was also not granted. Several days later we were sent to a prison at Milazzo, Sicily. Conditions in this camp were terrible. We were 12 men in one filthy cell that was home to fleas, roaches, etc. We slept on filthy mats on a damp, cold floor. We spent one week there and were then moved by boat to the island of Lipari, a small volcanic island in the group of Aeolian Islands. At the time, this island served as a deportation station. We were put into an Italian concentration camp which was meant to hold illegal immigrants of all nationalities marked for deportation. There were also former Nazis there.

We were decontaminated with DDT and then had a hot shower. We were then invited to speak to the interpreter who divided the prisoners according to their nationality. This fellow was a survivor of the Holocaust who could speak eight languages. For some unknown reason we were housed in the main hall, which had iron beds and was next to a group of Hungarians. We learned to sing their songs. The interpreter, Meir, became our contact with the outside world and with his help, we were able to contact Rome and let them know where we were. Ada Sereni's efforts to have us released were successful and two weeks later we left the camp and made for Palermo. From there we traveled to Rome and arrived after a delay of two months. We finally met Yehuda Arazi and he lectured us on the political situation and the position of the British in Italy, and then gave us our assignments.

I became involved in the work at Metaponto, where we loaded Olim on the "Shabtai Luzinski", which succeeded in penetrating the British blockade when it arrived at Palestine. I then took command of a camp near Bari and the Olim were taken from that camp to another one near Monopoli. We taught the young adults there "kapap"(fighting with sticks), something of Israeli geography, and Hebrew. We set up an elementary school for the younger children and I taught classes of children between the ages of 6 and 12. I saw that these children were curious and eager to learn, as they had missed so much during their years of wandering. When the camp was emptied I returned to Rome. During the short time that I was there, Yigal Allon and Yisrael Galili came to visit the Palyamniks in the city. Yehuda asked us to take them to the Opera, where Puccini's "La Boheme" was being performed. I sat between Galili and Allon and during the third act on a cold and wintry morning, Mimi appears and asks the help of the artist Marcel. The music was soft and sweet and I felt the head of Yigal as he sank into a deep sleep on my right shoulder. Yisrael had already done so on my left shoulder. At that moment I felt the weight of the whole Hagana movement resting on my shoulders.

Having spent considerable time in the south, I was now sent to northern Italy, to Magenta, near Milan. Food was prepared there and packed in boxes for use on the ships carrying Olim. One day I received an order to go to La Spezia and from there to Porto Venere where I was to board the American ship "President Warfield". This ship, later known as "The Exodus," was anchored near a shipyard

there. The crew of the ship consisted of American Jews who had been in the US Navy, Army, or Merchant Marine. Some were Zionists and there was even a non-Jewish minister, John Grauel, among them. The captain of the ship was Ike Aharonovitch. The meeting with this crew was particularly interesting after having spent my time previously with survivors of the Holocaust. I heard about the motivations of these crew members in volunteering to work on the ship, and getting involved with illegal immigration to a country that was not yet independent. Here was the Remnant of the Holocaust knocking on the gates of a besieged country, demanding the right to enter.

In the shipyard, all the material necessary for the loading of 4,500 Olim was put aboard. The big ship drew the attention of the British, as did the purpose of the voyage. They demanded that the Italians prevent the ship's leaving port. Two coastal patrol boats sat waiting at its bow. Avraham Zakai and Mario Kanda supervised the loading of material necessary to build the sleeping pallets, the kitchen equipment, toilets, etc. After six weeks of delay, the coastal vessels raised anchor and the "Exodus" left for Port de Bouc, France. Avraham Zakai and a group of Italian workers sailed with her and continued construction of the sleeping pallets.

While at Port de Bouc, I was able to procure a card from the government of Honduras signifying that I was a bona-fide seaman. The photo in it resembled me quite closely. I traveled to Paris by train for a 48 hour visit to look for members of my family that I had not seen since 1937. Of the fourteen that I had last seen, only two were left. I found them and we had a very emotional encounter. They had no idea that I was in France, so they were completely surprised. Of the other twelve, the younger ones had been killed in the French Maquis and the older ones had died in the extermination camps.

In preparation for the sailing of the "Exodus", I took care of Olim housed in camps in the vicinity of Marseilles. On the eve of the sailing, three days before Bastille Day, we traveled in a long convoy to the port of Sete. The Olim were loaded onto the ship, the ship left port, and was at sea before dawn. I was told to return to Italy and to take the four Italians with me, who had remained to finish work that had to be done. I rented a little fishing boat in Cannes and under guise of a doing a bit of sailing in the region, we went out into the open sea. The fisherman's girlfriend sunned herself in a bikini on the deck and the Italian men never ceased to take their eyes off her. By midnight we were close to Bordighera, on the Italian coast. There, our ways parted; they left for La Spezia, and I went to Milan.

While I was at Milan and Magenta I was also able to enjoy the concerts which were given on Sunday afternoons (I Pomeligi Musicali). Then once again I was off: this time to Venice and to Palestrina, which is on the canal that connects to Chioggia. Here in a shipyard Aryeh Kaplan (Kippi) and I oversaw the preparation of a ship which was to carry Olim. This was a wooden vessel that had been built in 1921 and went by the name of "Rafaelucia". The work at this shipyard took

about 5 weeks to complete and while in the vicinity of Venice, I was once again able to enjoy church music, concerts and the opera, La Fenice.

We loaded 794 Olim in the shipyard, of which 150 were young children and babies. The Olim came aboard during the night and we scurried out of the shipyard and into the Adriatic at dawn. Fourteen Palyamniks remained on the ship in order to load the Olim and then helped get them organized. We later lowered them from our ship into a small boat, when we were in the vicinity of Ancona. No sooner did they hit land, than they were captured by the police and charged with being illegal immigrants. Ada Sereni managed to have them released soon after.

The Captain of the ship, Eugenio Lenci, had eight Italian sailors under him. I was the commander of the ship, whose name was changed to "Kadima" while we were en route. I had two Palyamniks to accompany me; one was to care for the Olim and the other was the Gideoni. On our way to Palestine, in November 1947, we ran into a storm near Crete and most of the Olim came down with seasickness and vomiting. One of the women had labor pains as she was in her ninth month of pregnancy. We transferred her to my cabin and a doctor sat nearby on the floor of the cabin, with a pail next to him so that he could also throw up. I did as he directed, and assisted the woman in giving birth. A fine little girl was born whom I named "Aliya". The ship was caught as we approached the shore of Palestine and the passengers were deported to Cyprus. We three Palyamniks hid in the bow of the ship and were taken off the vessel by the crew that came to clean it. I never saw Aliya again. She should now be 53 years old but I don't know if her parents accepted her name or gave her a different one.

After the UN passed the resolution in November creating the State, and the riots began, I spent two months accompanying convoys from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In February 1948 I was again sent to Italy to continue working for the Mosad for Aliyah Bet. My base was in Naples and my job was to prepare the ships "Yechiam", "Tirat Tzvi", "Mishmar Haemek", "LaNitzachon", and "Medinat Yisrael", to carry olim.

I spent most of my time in the area of Naples, Formia and Gaeta. When the State came into existence, I was also occupied with outfitting procurement vessels such as the "Albatross", the "Arsia", "Avionia" and "Kefalos". I finally returned to Israel on the "Scio", together with Dan ben Amotz and Kuba Betzer. This ship brought seven dismantled Messerschmidts that had been bought from Czechoslovakia, and were shipped from the port of Bakar on the coast of Yugoslavia. That was the last of my jobs in the Diaspora and when I completed my service in the IDF, I returned to the Hebrew University to finish my studies in biology with a stipend from the army for 18 months of study.

**Curriculum Vitae after 1949.**

I completed my studies at the Hebrew University, received a degree in Natural Sciences and later went on for a doctorate. In 1951 I was sent to Copenhagen and to the Pasteur Institute in Paris by the World Health Organization (W.H.O.), in order to receive training in preparing a vaccine for tuberculosis (B.C.G.). This was a prevalent disease at the beginning of the 50's, after the large wave of immigration. After the mass vaccinations carried out by the Department of Health, I went over to the Institute for Biological Research where I specialized in diseases spread via breathing.

In 1961 I went to London, to the National Institute of Medical Research (N.I.M.R.) where I worked with Dr Isaacs, the discoverer of Interferon – a factor in hindering the growth of viruses. In 1964 I was appointed scientific advisor to the Israeli Embassy in London and Scandinavia, and continued with my laboratory work at the same time. When I returned to Israel in 1968 I set up scientific industries within the framework of the Israel Research and Development Company (IRDC). In 1971, as director of industrial applications in the Institute for Nuclear Research at the Shorek facility, I continued with the development of industrial scientific industries. In 1973 I transferred to the Bi-national Fund for Science, (Israeli-American) and was appointed Director of the Fund which supported research in the fields of medicine, natural sciences, energy economics and sociology, together with other Israeli and American scientists.

I retired in 1995 and now busy myself with an old hobby - artistic photography, and I read and listen to classical music. From time to time I take a trip on a ship doing oceanographic research and go on trips to places where I have already been or have not yet seen. I live with my wife Ruth on Ma'apilim Street, Herzliya, which borders on the Mediterranean. When my time comes, I hope my body will be returned to the sea, and if that is not possible then I shall donate it for the use of science.

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**Editorial Remark**

In most Palyam literature it is written that the commander of "KADIMA" was Zeev Paz. It seems that both Zeev's obtained appointments in Italy from different authorities, but nevertheless, both of them ran the vessel with full cooperation.