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Nickname "Silvy"
Born 1918, came to Palestine in 1946
Volunteer seaman on the "Hagana"

This is the Way it Was

My reasons for participating in Aliya Bet activity: I wanted to make Aliya to Palestine and if I were able to do something positive at the same time, so much the better. During WW II, I served in the air force of the US Army in England, France, Luxemburg and Germany. During this period I came into contact more than once with the remnants of the Holocaust and with those from Palestine who were active in the "Bricha" and "Aliya Bet".

My activity in Aliya Bet began when I was discharged from the US Army at the beginning of 1946. Yona Yanai of Kibbutz Ein Hashofet was then an emissary to the Hashomer Hatzair youth movement in the USA and he drew a picture of the many who were trying to get to Palestine and of their path being blocked. This was not altogether news to me, and I also knew of the ships that had been bought in the States, but how many would they be able to carry? Yona asked if I would be willing to sail with the a to Europe and await my own passage, from there to Palestine. In France, the Palyam people would find a place for me on one of the ships as soon as possible. I agreed. I also had a talk with Zeev Shind, who was head of the Mosad in the States. He promised that I would also be able to remain on the ship as one of the crew when we got to France.

He told me whom to contact in France, and that happened to be Yisrael Hertz of Kibbutz Ein Shemer who was then an emissary to the youth movement in France. If I remember correctly, Yehuda Tubin and Moshe Gross were also at the meeting, and all agreed that I remain on the ship. I informed Yona of the meeting. As a result, 5 men from my kibbutz (Gimel) and from Kibbutz Daled left on that ship "Hagana" for France, and I was one of them. On the 2nd July 1946 we left the small port of La Ciotat without any mishaps and with the full support of the French. The ship filled up with the immigrants quickly and in a very orderly fashion, and what made matters easier, was the fact that there were many young people among the passengers and many were from youth movements. There were also partisans from Abba Kovner's group, including his wife, Vitka.

We organized about a dozen of these partisans to help us with taking care of the rest of the immigrants and also as additional help to the crew. The cooperation between the European and the American men was an interesting and rewarding experience for both. The Europeans had experienced years of hardship and despair, and of bravery and hope; they had been cut off from the outside world. Now they found partners to their hopes and their dreams, and partners in the effort to reach our Promised Land. Several other Americans in the crew had also

been soldiers in Europe during the war, and for others this was their first encounter with the remnants of the Holocaust and they were shocked.

From the very beginning the crew moved out of what had been its quarters and from then on, slept on the bridge. Our hold was turned into a hospital ward. For every watch there was one hammock in which three men slept in rotation. There were also a few extra hammocks and the bridge became the "social center" for the crew and our partisan helpers. We would sit there evenings and sing together and it was also an opportunity for the partisans to tell us something of what they had gone through during the war years.

On a Friday evening when we were at sea, the commander of the ship gathered us together and told us of the secret plan that the Hagana authorities had evolved for our ship. It was too good a ship to lose after only one voyage. We were to transfer our passengers to a little old "tub" when we were close to the shores of Palestine, and we would then go back to Europe to take on more immigrants while the "tub" brought the others into Haifa harbor.

The following morning all of the passengers were gathered and told of the plan for transferring them all to another ship. It is important to emphasize that there was no panic or other traumatic behavior, and the plan was received with the full support and the trust of the immigrants. There may have been several reasons for such calm behavior, but probably the most important reason was that the passengers had full confidence in the handful of young men who had brought them that far.

Bezalel Drori describes the dangers and the difficulties he faced in his report of the voyage: "We had two motor launches which could be used in an emergency if we had to make for land. They were lowered into the water. At the same time, the little Turkish vessel "Akbel" approached us. This was the vessel that we would transfer the passengers to. Bezalel Drori and several partisans went over to the "Akbel" and convinced the Turkish captain that it was worth his while to fulfill his part of the bargain that had been made with him. We then started the transfer of the passengers. At the same time, some carpentry work was done on the Akbel so that it would be able to take on so many people. It soon became clear that the vessel was not equipped with everything that the captain had said it was, and that the ship was in very bad condition. All the immigrants were transferred to the Akbel which was now renamed "Hagana ship Biria".

The weather turned bad and the waves were so high that there was danger of the ship capsizing. When the waves washed over the deck and there was danger of immigrants being lost at sea, Bezalel sent out an SOS. A British warship, the "Virago" answered our call. She asked what the ship needed, and we answered her that we needed to be towed to Haifa. The ship turned and sailed off but returned in the middle of the night and then turned away again. When we entered the territorial waters of Palestine the British confiscated the ship.

Meanwhile, the "Hagana" had returned to Europe. The first stop was Milos, Greece where we took on fuel and food. We were surprised to find two Israelis waiting for us there; one was Benyamin Yerushalmi, active in the Mosad for Aliya Bet and who spoke Greek, and a doctor. We continued on to Yugoslavia where it very soon became clear that we intended to take twice the number of immigrants we had taken on the first trip.

On the 30th July 1946 we received word that the immigrants would arrive that night, and then we would leave. In the evening a long train appeared and stopped close to the ship. When night fell, the immigrants started to board and this continued for hours. At first sight, the human material seemed of a different caliber than on the first trip – they were definitely an older group of people. There were also children and even some infants. A group of Hungarian Shomrim came on board with a flag and took their places among the passengers. When the holds were full to capacity, the immigrants filled every nook and cranny of the deck of the ship. In all, we took 2,700 immigrants on board.

Yehoshua Bahrav added this: "I would like to say a few words about the young Jewish Americans of the crew. I called them all together and told them that we will have to take every immigrant in the harbor. We can't leave anyone behind. In order to take all of them, we will have to give them our bunks and we will take over the bridge. You will have to sleep on the deck of the bridge for the rest of the voyage. None of the crew raised the slightest objection, and I doubt if we could have done the same with hired sailors."

Once all the immigrants had boarded the ship we sailed from port and made our way between the beautiful islands of the Adriatic. When we reached the open sea we forgot about the beautiful scenery and our troubles began. Our air-conditioning was built for only a handful of people and in a very short time those that were in the hold, the vast majority of the people, began to suffer from lack of air. Also, most of the immigrants suffered from sea-sickness and the smell and the vomit contributed to the terrible conditions that existed in the holds. The toilet facilities were also soon overburdened and stuffed up, and there was little the crew could do to alleviate the matter despite all efforts.

All the above were nothing compared to the 'big' trouble we had that forced us to send out an SOS. For no apparent reason the engine conked out and the ship tilted. With the engine dead there was no electricity and the air-conditioning stopped working. The passengers in the holds were in a difficult situation and we could not explain it, nor could we allow them on deck as the ship would certainly have capsized. The angle of tilt was 27 degrees,, and that was extremely dangerous. The passengers did not panic, which says much for their maturity and their faith in the crew and the officers.

David Baum, ship's engineer, a veteran seaman and former member of Kibbutz Sasa, had the following to say about this: "We had trouble with the fuel and because of the crowd of people everywhere we could not get to the fuel tanks to see what the fuel situation was. We probably drew too much fuel from one tank and reached the water at the bottom of the tank. The water is what probably killed the engine. We went down to the engine room and started pumping from another tank. We also took wood from a large number of bunks and burned it for fuel to get the engine running again. That, together with the pumping from a full tank, got the engine running and the ship moving. The temperature in the engine room had gone up to 48 degrees c., but the crew, together with the partisans who helped them, worked in shifts for a short time and then rotated, until the situation was back to normal.

While this emergency situation was being handled, Yehoshua Bahrav, the commander, was sending messages to the High Command of the Mosad in Haifa and describing to them what was happening. We did not have a state then, nor did we have a navy, so no help could be sent to our ship. A British warship did answer the SOS and flashed a strong searchlight onto the ship. It was easy to see what ship we were and what its situation was, but they asked by megaphone who we were and what the purpose of our voyage was. We answered that this was a ship carrying Jewish passengers that was traveling to the Land of Israel and needed help. The same question was asked a second and a third time and each time the same answer was given. Suddenly, the searchlight cut out and we were left in the dark and the warship disappeared. The engine was repaired by the crew and the ship moved off again under its own steam.

In all the excitement and in the midst of all our troubles, two healthy babies were born and their names signified the struggle that we had all gone through and which was still not over; Nachshon (the first to enter the waters of the Red Sea at the command of Moshe) and Gonen (Defender). Some time later these babies were a source of inspiration for a poem by Natan Alterman: "A Conversation Between Nachshon and Gonen"

The British viewed the Corvettes as a threat to their navy. The Chief Admiral of the Mediterranean fleet wrote to the Naval Headquarters, "One must bear in mind that the appearance of faster ships of the type of these corvettes makes the work of our destroyers much more difficult. These ships can only be caught in the territorial waters of Palestine and are liable to cause damage to our ships: or a ship loaded with so many passengers is liable to capsize with all on board." In another letter to Naval Headquarters the commander of the destroyer that answered the SOS call when we were in danger of capsizing wrote that "...there was nothing of importance about the situation of the ship, at the time of the call".

When the ship approached the territorial waters of Palestine it was commanded to stop. The ship continued towards Haifa under full steam. The destroyer's captain wrote: "The cannon shot across the bow was disregarded with disdain

and it may be necessary to fire a volley from a Lewis machine gun into the bridge.”

When the cannon shots produced no effect, one of the destroyers rammed the corvette and broke the propeller. When the marines tried to board the ship they were met by a volley of whatever anyone could find to throw at them. It very soon became clear, however, that if we continued to resist, a number of the passengers would definitely be injured, and we were given orders to cease. The crew and the Palyamnikim changed into clothes that made them indistinguishable from all the other passengers, and mingled with them.

In a short space of time the Mosad people in Haifa saw to it that all the members of the crew were cleared from the port and sent to wherever they were supposed to go. For most, this was to kibbutzim that the crew members belonged to. When this voyage was over, David Baum was one of the first members of his kibbutz, the fifth American kibbutz, to arrive in Palestine. Because of his expertise and experience with naval diesel engines he continued to work for the Mosad on other ships in Europe and in the USA. With the creation of the State of Israel he was asked to join the new Israeli Navy where he continued to work on the same corvettes he had originally serviced in Aliya Bet, the "Hagana" and the "Wedgwood", which were among the first ships to see service in the Israeli Navy.

The captain of the "Hagana" was Aryeh Friedman, the commander was Yehoshua Bahrav, and Bezalel Drori was his assistant. The crew was of Jewish volunteers from the USA, among them Bernie Marks, first mate, and Avraham Lichovski was Gideoni. Some of the experienced seamen who had worked on the ship returned to the USA when their job was over. A number of the crew were from the Habonim movement and they joined Kibbutz Kfar Blum; others, from Hashomer Hatzair, were in the group that settled at Kibbutz Hatzor, the third American kibbutz, and one went to Kibbutz Ein Dor, the fourth American kibbutz. The photos I took of the voyage are now found in the archives of the Hagana