

Shani, Chaim (Sergei)

Born 1920 in Poland

Came to Palestine in 1935

Participated in the first naval course of the Hagana in 1939

Joined the Palmach in 1941

Joined the Palyam in 1945

This is the Way it Was

I lived in Tel Aviv and belonged to the Noar Haoved movement. I was a leader of a group of younger children in Hapoel. We practiced in field training and weaponry. In 1939 I participated in the first naval course in the Exhibition Halls in Tel Aviv. Shmuel Tankus and Gatriel Yaffe were our instructors. While attending the course I participated in helping take immigrants off the ship "Dora", in August 1939, when it landed at Shefayim. Berchik also took part in that operation. When the course was over I served as an instructor on the Yarkon for the nautical unit of Hapoel. After that I was an instructor in physical education for secondary school children in Yaarot HaCarmel and at Kibbutz Ashdot Yaakov.

In 1940 I was in a commune of leaders of the Noar Oved in Haifa. Among the children we led, were those whose parents were seamen or stevedores who had come to Palestine from Salonika, Greece. In order to maintain ourselves economically we worked in the quarries of the Nesher cement factory, near Haifa. We arranged a camp for the children at Ein Gev, and traveling on the famous "Emek Express" from Haifa to Tzemach was an experience in itself.

In 1941 I participated in a seminar for leaders of the Noar Oved in Massada. This lasted 10 days and was led by Shmarya Gutman of Naan. Shimon Peres was also a participant in this seminar. (In 1999 another assembly took place in Massada and those still living, who had participated in the first course, came to take part. This event was organized by Ben Ami Rivlin of Kibbutz Gesher.) During 1941 I volunteered for the Palmach and was attached to F Company at Kfar Gileadi under the command of Yitzchak Rabin.

There is an interesting episode that is recounted in "The Book of the Palmach" that was described by Moshe Zohar (Finkel): "It was nearing the end of the summer and the water had stopped flowing in the Tanur Falls, near Metulla. The course for physical education instructors was also coming to an end. We were looking for something daring to do and it was decided to scale down the face of the waterfall by rope, about 30 meters in height. After a tiring climb, we tied a rope around a boulder at the top of the falls and small Sergei was to be the first one to go down. Before setting out he exclaimed: a la Trumpeldor, 'It is good to fall for our country.' He kissed his buddies goodbye and went over the face of the fall and down the sheer wall. Every one held his breath and watched with awe and trepidation as he made his descent. When he reached bottom, he looked around him and asked, 'Why are each and every one of you so pale?'

After he had broken the ice and survived intact, all the others followed him.” (Book 1, page 359). Several months later we were off to Kibbutz Dafna.

At the beginning of 1942 I was transferred to Kibbutz Ayelet Hashachar for a squad leaders course. The course continued for 10 months and toward the end several additional people joined us, including Yerucham Cohen, who later became commander of the ‘Arab’ unit. One of our course instructors was Yechiam Weitz. While in the squad leaders course we smuggled weapons from Mishmar HaYarden to Amiad. We used horses of the police at Ayelet Hashachar, for this purpose. We would ride from Ayelet Hashachar to Mishmar Hayarden, load sacks of machine guns, rifles and grenades and bring them to Amiad. The next morning we would go to Rosh Pina and enjoy ourselves at Gittel’s café. When the course was over we hiked from Kfar Gileadi to Dafne, to Ramat Hagolan, and back down to Ein Gev. We crossed the Kinneret in rowboats and then continued our hike to Caesarea. Shimon Avidan led the hike.

I then participated in a course for scouts, in Shfeya, and then to Mishmar Haemek to join a scouting platoon. The platoon mapped out all Arab villages in the Shomron and in Lower Galilee. For a time I instructed the Gadna officers in the Sharon Valley in field and weapons training. This training started with a six kilometer run each morning. I also trained the ‘Arab’ platoon, stationed at Yagur. At the same time, we accompanied hikers of the Noar Ha’Oved to the Dead Sea, Ein Gedi, Sdom and Massada. I also served as an instructor in the first course for naval officers of the Palyam, at Sheikh Abreikh. Lessons in sabotage took place at the Graves of the Nobles at Bet Sha’arim. Among the pupils were Shmuel Tankus and Moka Limon who later, were each to become a commander of the Israeli Navy.

While in the Palmach I took part in the following actions:

- Blowing up the Sidni Ali Police Station on the shore near Nof Yam-Herzlia.
- Blowing up railroad tracks on the night of November 2nd 1945.
- Blowing up Police armored cars at Kfar Vitkin.

Before the action at Sidni Ali I scouted the area day and night to see what the British did to guard to area. A Palmachnik, who spoke Arabic well and looked like an Arab, accompanied me to the fence of the British compound and changed into Arab dress. I took his other clothing back to camp. We arranged to meet at that spot two days later. The next day the mukhtar of Sidni Ali told the mukhtar of Shefayim that an Arab merchant from Shchem had come to the village and made anti-Jewish propaganda. On the second day I returned to the appointed spot, met the ‘Jewish-Arab’ Palmachnik, Gamliel, and took him back to camp with me.

During the months of June to August of 1945 I participated in a course for platoon leaders at Juara. When this ended I was assigned to a British unit of the shore patrol and was stationed at Shefayim. In addition to the work I did for the British, and the pay they gave me, I also worked for the Hagana in the area

between Bat Yam and Haifa. When the shore patrol was disbanded I was appointed commander of Caesarea. We would practice shooting on a range that the British used. They started at 8 a.m. and used it during the day. We started at 4 a.m. and used it until 7. During training, a girl committed suicide. She shot herself with one of our rifles. I didn't want to lose the rifle which was from one of our 'slicks'. As a weapon had to be produced in order issue a death certificate, I gave the British my own personal revolver as the weapon. To our amazement, the British officer to whom I presented the weapon, cleaned the fingerprints from the grip without even bothering to check them, took out a knife and carved his name on the butt of the gun.

In December 1945 the "Chana Senesh" landed on the shore at Nahariya. After we had taken the immigrants off the vessel, it listed dangerously to one side. The immigrants in the water distanced themselves from the boat as quickly as possible. We also had to dispose of weapons that Palmachniks had brought to secure the area, before the British arrived on the scene. We were given a large room in Kibbutz Gaaton in which to store the weapons. Detonators had to be removed from the grenades and stored separately. Suddenly I noticed that someone had removed the safety from a grenade and I hurriedly took the detonator out of the grenade and shoved away the people closest to it. There were dozens of grenades in that room and a bunch of Molotov cocktails and thousands of bullets. Luckily, only the detonator exploded and no one was hurt.

In 1947 after I was put into the reserves of the Palmach, I joined a group that formed Moshav Mishmeret, located between Ramat Hakovesh, Moshav Herut, and opposite the Arab village of Miski. We worked in the orchards and lived in tents. Of the twenty members, some of us were single and others married. I was one of the latter. I was approached to teach the use of firearms to the people of Herzlia, in view of impending war. I put my foot down and said that I had lived out of a knapsack for 7 years and that was enough. "If you want me to train them, bring them to me", and that is what happened. Every Sunday morning two squads of young men would come to me and I would give them field training and teach them how to use Sten guns, rifles and grenades.

Once, scouts did not notice that a squad of British mounted police had approached to within 200 meters of us. During the Mandatory Period punishment for carrying illegal weapons was very severe and meant many years in prison or death. I continued to shoot and throw grenades and they decided to withdraw rather than enter into armed combat with us. On November 30, 1947, the day after the UN declaration to establish a state of Israel, Yaakov Chefetz came to Mishmeret and told me "Yigal Alon is calling you.". I was then married and the father of a little girl. I took my wife and child to Tel Aviv to my parents' house, and opened a training camp in the government compound in Tel Aviv.

After the declaration of Statehood on the 15th May, 1948, I joined the cadre that set up the 7th Brigade at Tel Hashomer. We had three days to organize and train. We had no suitable weapons but were nevertheless sent to the attack at

Latrun. The results were disastrous, and about 150 men were killed and many others wounded and without water. It was only on the following day that we were able to get two armored half-tracks with thirty liters of water each to pick up the dead, wounded, and scattered weapons. While being pounded by machine guns and mortars of the Arab Legion we managed to pick up wounded and dead in two trips, and brought them to Hulda. We took control of two villages in the area, Beit Jiz and Beit Susin, but were under fire from the Legion until the first Cease Fire on the 11th of June 1948.

On the 10th of July when fighting was renewed, we widened the corridor to Jerusalem which had already been created by the opening of the 'Burma Road.'" It was made by two Palmachniks who descended from Jerusalem by way of Bet Machsir. During the second Cease Fire, we went back to Ein Shemer to reorganize and I was transferred to the instructors department of the IDF. In 1950 I was released from the IDF, returned to Mishmeret and started to build my farm. In 1952 I went to a course for battalion commanders and was assigned as second-in-command of a battalion. In 1955 I was released from the reserves. Today I still live in Moshav Mishmeret, have three children, six grandchildren and two great grandchildren.