

Shavit, Avraham (Stern)

Nickname: Avrum

Born in Kibbutz Ein Harod 23 September 1924

Joined the Palmach from Cadoorie in 1941

Joined the British Army in 1942

Joined "The Gang" in 1944/45

This is the Way it Was

My parents left Ein Harod in 1928 and were among the founders of the settlement that became Kfar Vitkin in 1930. I lived there even before the settlement was founded, when I was only 6 -7 years old. In 1940 I went to study at the Cadoorie Agricultural High School and was there from 1940 to 1942. Yigal Alon mobilized us into the Palmach from Cadoorie, and all those from the school became "A" Company of the Palmach, with Yigal as our commander.

I went AWOL from the Palmach because in those days we had no money and no training and I would work months on end without training. I thought to myself that if I was just going to work then I could go back to my folks' farm and do that, and that was not why I joined the Palmach. So I joined the British army. I served at Sarafand, and then in Ismailia and from there was sent to Libya and Tunisia. From Tunisia, we came back to Palestine and then I was sent overseas to Italy.

After three weeks in Italy I started to deal with TTG matters and continued in that work for three and a half years, until I returned to Palestine. Bracha Eshel did research on all of my activities in this field. My contact with Aliya Bet started in 1943 after I had skipped the Palmach and gone into the British Army. I was in Company 544 which consisted of electricians and mechanics and we were a part of an engineers' unit. While in Libya we met Jews who were interested in making aliya, so every time a group of us were returning to Palestine to visit, we would get false documents, dress a young Libyan Jew as another soldier, and add him to our group. We sent a good number of young fellows on aliya in this manner.

Most of the time that we were there was spent gathering up weapons from the battlefield after battles had taken place between the British and the Germans/Italians, and we would send these to Palestine. When I arrived in Italy at the end of 1943 I trained youths who were survivors of the Holocaust, and then went into the TTG business. After the "La Spezia Affair," the British decided to send the Israeli soldiers back to Palestine. The Hagana decided to leave 150 soldiers in Europe so that the underground organization would not collapse. 150 olim were given soldiers' identity and made aliya in this manner, and 150 soldiers took the identity of the olim. I was one of the 150 soldiers who remained in Europe as a survivor of the Holocaust. This made me AWOL from the British Army, of course. We were promised by the Mosad for Aliya Bet that after a year or a year and a half we would be given certificates to return to Palestine. This promise was never fulfilled and each of us had to find his own way back home.

I asked Yehuda Arazi if I could board one of the immigrant ships and he said that in that manner I would only get myself to Cyprus. He finally agreed that I board the "Shabtai Luzinski" but only on condition that I help the other Palyamniks prepare the ship for sailing. We sailed to Metaponte and there took on 700 olim. A terrific storm arose and we had to put into the bay of Taranto and wait out the storm. While waiting, we discovered that the ship was leaking water seriously. We could not repair the leak so it was decided to return to Metaponte. The olim left the ship which moved to Portovenere for repairs, and we waited for the next ship to arrive. We waited ten days and then the "Chaim Arlosoroff" arrived from Sweden. All 700 of those who had been on the "Shabtai Luzinski" boarded this ship, and we sailed smoothly towards Palestine for four days. On the fourth day a British plane sighted us and soon a destroyer appeared. By the time we reached Haifa we were surrounded by 6 British destroyers.

The British tried to convince us to sail to Cyprus under our own steam but when they saw that we had no intention of doing so, they started to use force. This fight lasted several hours and in the end we wound up on the rocks at Bat Galim. The British could not pull us off, but did take over the ship. They started to transfer the olim to the deportation ships. We, the Palyamniks Yisrulik Auerbuch, Nissan Levitan and I, decided that we would try to get straight home. We had earlier prepared a hiding place on the ship in case the British took over, so as soon as they started moving the olim, we went to our "slick. We hid from four o'clock in the afternoon until midnight and then crawled out, jumped into the water, and swam to Bat Galim. Yisrulik had a friend there who took us in, and we were able to have a hot bath and a meal, and stayed there until morning.

In the morning we contacted Davidka at Solel Boneh in Haifa. He was in charge of Aliya Bet in Palestine, and came with new identity papers for us. I had arrived home! I returned, and stayed to work on my parents' farmstead for several months. I met with friends with whom I had been in the Palmach. They told me that ships were being repaired and made ready to create the Israeli Navy and asked me to join them. In my visits to the Palmach headquarters at the "Red House" I sometimes met men whom I did not know. Upon asking who they were it was intimated that they were "Hush Hush". On further investigation I learned that they were the sabotage unit of the Palyam. I joined immediately.

In the summer of 1948 we received several special "explosive boats" from Italy and with them came the expert, Fiorenzo Capriotti. After having sunk the "Farouk" and a minesweeper off the coast of Gaza on the 22nd October 1948, we looked for a suitable place to set up a permanent base for our sabotage unit, and picked a spot near Atlit. This is where the 13th Squadron (the naval commandos) started and I served in that unit, including reserve duty, for forty years, from 1948 to 1988.

In 1954-55 Ben Gurion asked the sons of moshavniks to come to the aid of the Negev moshavim in economic and security matters. I worked within this framework to help those moshavim in all agricultural matters and toward the end of 1955 Ben Ami Malchiman from Kfar Yechezkel replaced me in my job. He was killed when traveling to one of the moshavim and I named my oldest son after him. During the years 1956–1957 I busied myself with the development of my own farm which had been sadly neglected.

Before the Six Day War I was mobilized into the naval sabotage unit but since this unit was not activated in that war, I transferred to the paratroopers and participated in the taking of the Golan Heights. I also participated with the paratroopers in the Yom Kippur War and that was my last military activity.

In 1969 a young man came from Russia named Yasha Kazakhov (Yaakov Kadmi). He spoke to us at Kfar Vitkin about what was happening in Russia and that the Jews there had no voice. From that day on I was in contact with Yaakov and active in aliya from Russia. In 1992 we went to Russia to facilitate aliya of Jews to Israel. Moshe Chalfon and Nachum Shafir were also members of this mission.

We explained to Jews that we met there, that our parents also came from Russia or Ukraine and if they had not done so, our fate would have been exactly the same as theirs. In 1994 I traveled to Russia again and came to Bobruisk where my grandfather was born. I found the house in which he had lived. I am still interested in the aliya of Russian Jews and maintain contact with Nativ, the contact organization for Aliya from Russia.