

Shorek, Siomka (Sioma)

Born 1923 in Lutsk, Poland

Came to Palestine with General Anders Army in 1943

Joined the Palmach in 1943

Joined the Palyam in 1946

This is the Way it Was

I never really had an urge to be a seaman, but grew up on the banks of a wide river in eastern Poland and never saw the sea. My heroes as a youth were generals and intrepid adventurers. When I was a child and looked at the Keren Kayemet collection boxes, I dreamt that I too would be a redeemer of the Land of Israel like Yehoshua Hankin, about whom I had read. The great discoverers were probably my greatest heroes. When I was mobilized into the Polish Army at the beginning of WW II, I asked to be assigned to the armored corps. Fighting on land seemed more appropriate for me.

I came to Israel with the Anders Army in 1943, and looked for ways to take part in the fighting against the Germans. It therefore seemed quite natural for me to join the Palmach. There was a company of the Tel Aviv Palmach at the kibbutz where I was living. I was very happy there. I learned Hebrew, made many friends, and the framework of the Palmach became a home for me. I attained self-confidence and became a bona-fide Israeli. My company sent me to a course for squad leaders and I returned to my company when the course ended. I gained experience as a platoon leader. During the fight against the British I participated in the attack on the railway bridges and on the Jenin police headquarters. After "Black Saturday" I was sent to an officers' course at Juara.

My life was going along on a course which was totally to my satisfaction. I had matured and was active and participated in the events of the time. The officers' course was just another step in the right direction. There was one thing, however, that I didn't mention until now, which clouded my otherwise bright horizon, and that was the situation of the rest of my family. My mother and I had been banished to Kazakhstan. My father was sent to a coal mine in some other corner of that country, and it was some time before he was able to join us. We heard that the rest of our family, my sisters and many cousins, aunts and uncles were all exterminated by the Germans. I joined the Anders Army (The Free Poland Army) and came with it to Palestine.

My mother became seriously ill at the news of the tragedy to the rest of the family and soon passed away. My father was left by himself. This news was a shock to me and my first reaction was to drop the Palmach, drop everything, and return to my father in Kazakhstan. Others convinced me that it would be foolish to return and that I would be most useful exactly where I was. After the war my father was repatriated back to Poland, to Varoslav, where he lived quietly and dreamt of the opportunity to join me in Palestine.

My conscience bothered me a great deal, as I had already been in service for three years, was to go to an officers' course which would obligate me to more time in service, and meanwhile my father was left by himself. I felt very bad and did not know what I could do to change matters.

My meeting with Yigal:

It was now time for the course to begin and the day prior to its start, we participants met in Juara to arrange technicalities. As was customary, the commander of the Palmach appeared, in order to acquaint himself a bit with the men and their personal problems. Yigal Alon and I had a discussion about my dilemma. I told him that I was of a mind to drop the course, although I was definitely interested in it, and go find my father and bring him to Palestine. Yigal agreed with me that perhaps the course was not suitable for me at this time, but suggested what he thought was a better solution: He told me of what was being done in Aliya Bet, which was growing by leaps and bounds and was becoming more complicated in the fight against the British blockade. All the hard work fell on the shoulders of the nautical unit of the Palmach, all of whose members had undergone training but were short on manpower. This unit needed men who were reliable, who could lead and take responsibility for commanding ships and navigating them, and caring for the passenger-immigrants, who were survivors of the Holocaust.

The Palmach was now looking for additional manpower for the naval unit and a course was to begin shortly to train men in preparation for the work to be done. These men would be sent to the Diaspora to bring the Jews of Europe to Palestine. He suggested that I join the Aliya Bet and when I got to Europe I would find a way to get to my father. Yigal did not have to work hard to convince me. His reasoning was so simple and sensible, and was the right time and right thing to be done. It was decided that I could leave the course and return to Maoz Chaim and wait for the start of the naval unit course. Yigal wrote down in his notebook the information concerning my father.

Several days later I gathered my belongings and headed for Sdot Yam and the naval course which was to last about two months. We had a great deal of practical and theoretical training, met with people who were active in Aliya Bet, and with ship commanders who told us of their experiences. Most of the participants in the course came from the Palmach, and had been in positions of leadership. We were scheduled to go to Europe and bring ships of immigrants, survivors of the Holocaust, to Palestine. When the course ended in November 1946, I was taken to a big store in Tel Aviv and outfitted well. I resembled more a cultivated city dweller and not some country rube who would stick out like a sore thumb in the streets of the cities of Europe.

While waiting to go abroad, we – Nachum from Kibbutz Hulata, Chaim V. from Kibbutz Tel Yosef and I, were ordered to remain at the Carmeliya Hotel in Haifa. We wasted a few days there and then were told to report to the Solel Boneh offices in the lower city. Our good clothes were taken from us, we were dressed in work clothes, and boarded a Greek ship as stevedores. Once on board, we

were hidden in a small hold in the bow of the ship and the entrance was sealed.. The police noted a discrepancy between the workers who had gotten onto the ship and the number that left, but after a careful search, and not having found us, the ship was allowed to sail. Once at sea, we were released from our cell and freed. Only then did we receive our instructions, telling us that we were to make our way to Marseilles and we would be taken care of there.

In Marseilles the authorities had set up a cordoned-off area where passengers descended and their papers were checked. We had no papers and were a bit nervous about what to do, but as I looked over at the crowd of people who were on the outside, receiving the newcomers, I noticed one fellow who was smiling at me and even spoke to us. It turned out to be Ehud Avriel and he was with someone else. They came on board and told us that they had two legal entry passes to the port area and the country, and we would be able to use them. I was told to follow behind them and to just keep walking. They jumped over the cordoned-off area and we did the same, and they walked right out of the port with us on their heels. It was all over. We were in France.

We went to a café where friends were supposed to be waiting for us, but no one was there. Haggai was worried and thought that perhaps our friends had been arrested. It turned out that that was exactly what had happened. We then picked ourselves up and went to St Jerome, which was sort of the logistics and administrative center for the ships that sailed from southern France. The Palmachniks also gathered there between assignments and waited for new orders. When we arrived there I met several whom I knew, and several who were new to me. While conversing with them about recent events it came out that Yigal had been there the previous night, on a trip to familiarize himself with the work and the men involved in Aliya Bet. He gave them a short summary of the political situation in Palestine and of the fight against the British.

I was sorry that I missed meeting him. I wanted to remind him of our private talk and to see if there was a possibility of his doing something to speed up whatever had to be done to bring my father to Palestine. A few days later we all scattered to our duties in various cities and countries. I was sent to Lyon where I was put in charge of a large estate at the edge of the city. There was a large two-storied building there, set in the midst of a large forest. Its owners had rented it out, probably for economic reasons, and Aliya Bet had taken it because it was out of the way and hidden from the eyes of British intelligence. Survivors of the Holocaust were gathered in this villa as they were in other similar ones, so that they could await the preparation and the sailing of the Aliya Bet ships. A group of 150 young Polish Zionist youth came to "my" camp. It was my job to prepare them mentally and physically for their aliya to Palestine. The ships that were to carry them would be very crowded and they had to be organized into groups, with leaders, and would have to fight British soldiers and navy if need be.

The following spring my 150 were among those that sailed to Palestine on the ship "Theodor Herzl". I went back to Marseilles and to Zvulun camp which was

located on the outskirts of the city in a building four stories high. The building was not far from the sea and in addition to being a holding camp for the waiting immigrants, it also had some special underground functions; it maintained radio contact with our ships at sea and our headquarters in Palestine, and ran courses for Gideonim (radio operators). I was put into the Aliya Daled unit, which supplied immigrants with false identities or false documents. Aliya Daled never received publicity because none who came through that channel were ever caught, and nothing was ever written or spoken about the subject. While I was in that unit, between 15 and 30 immigrants with false papers, were put aboard every ship that sailed (legally) to Palestine.

One night I took part in what was, for me, a unique operation. Jewish remnants of the Holocaust were to be transferred to Aliya Bet ships, and were due to come into the Marseilles railroad station en route. Instead of dismounting from the train at the station where British intelligence men always waited, the train made a stop some distance before the station. The immigrants then got off the train and transferred to buses which took them to our camps. We were waiting in an out of the way spot with 12 trucks and a train came along, disconnected several cars of immigrants and I and other Palmachniks hurried them along into the trucks.

It was my habit, and this was now two years after the war's end, to question immigrants from Poland about friends and relatives of mine in the hope of getting some news about them. This time I also went from car to car and asked in Yiddish if there was anyone from my home town. The answer was generally negative, but someone told me that in the last car there was someone from my town. I went to the last car and there I found my father!

I dropped everything and took my father to Zvulun camp. It was very emotional for both of us. It had been a separation of five long years during which time all the rest of my family had been murdered by the Nazis and my mother had died. We talked and talked all night long and we tried to tell each other all that had happened to us during those years. I asked my father how it was that he happened to be on this train. He told me that he met a young girl a week ago who asked him if he wanted to go to Eretz Israel and he unhesitatingly said yes. She told him to be, with one suitcase, at an appointed spot at an appointed time. He was there and met the others in the group and they were all put on a train to Czechoslovakia which took them as far as Prague. They waited in Prague for two days and then continued to France. My father was surprised that the girl he spoke to did not ask all the Jews in the town if they want to come to Palestine, but only him.

Years later I met Yigal Alon in Acre and he recognized me immediately. He asked me if my father reached Israel and what he was doing. It seems that in his travels in Europe he had asked the representative of the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Prague to find out about my father in Varoslav and to facilitate his aliya. That is how my father happened to be on that train. (The girl who spoke to him was Ruth Lev, from Jerusalem).

Since then I have been an avid admirer of Yigal Alon and would be ready to follow him through fire and water. With all that he had on his mind and all of his heavy responsibilities, he nevertheless did not forget to help someone whom he didn't really know very well.

My father did not want to linger in France just to be with me. He wanted to make aliya to Palestine and get on with his life. He had friends and acquaintances who knew of his capabilities, and he wanted to get started. That is what he did, but when I returned to Israel I convinced him to come to the kibbutz that I had joined and he did so. I would come home from work and he would have a hot cup of tea waiting for me. My father liked to read aloud and he would read to me and to other members of the kibbutz who knew Yiddish, stories of Shalom Aleichem, Mendele Mocher Sfarim and Y. L. Peretz. These were years that brought me very close to my father, and I learned to appreciate him, and to love him dearly.

What happened afterwards:

1957-1960: The Kibbutz Seminary – I studied math, physics and chemistry, and taught high school children.

1967-1971: I studied education and geography at the Hebrew University.

1971- 1973: I received a BS in Geography from the Hebrew University.

My Army Record:

1948-1951: I participated in the War of Independence and was wounded twice. When it was over I was a company commander with the rank of Captain.

I participated in the Sinai Campaign as second-in-command of a battalion. I was now a Major.

I participated in the Six Day War as second-in-command of an infantry battalion.

I participated in the Yom Kippur War as commander of a tank battalion with the rank of Lt. Colonel.

My Civilian Career:

1950-1955, 1957-1960: Math, physics and chemistry teacher in Kibbutz Cabri High School.

1965-1967: Principal, Beer Tuvia Regional School

1967-1971: Director, Department for Talented Children, Boyer School Jerusalem.

1975-1977, 1979-1980: High School Principal, Jerusalem

1980-1989: Community Center Director, Jerusalem.

1990-1995: Director, School for Tourism, Jerusalem, course for guides.

1995: Lecturer at the JDC College, Leningrad

1997-2000: Director, Course for Guides, Beit Shmuel, Jerusalem