

**Shur, Alexander (Alex)**

Nickname: "Livni" in the Hagana and "Dov" in Aliya Bet

Born in Zichron Yaakov in 1926

Joined the Palyam in 1945

**This is the Way it Was**

I was born in Zichron Yaakov in 1926. My parents were Shifra and Yaakov, and I had a sister, Aviva, who was two years older than I. In 1931, when I was 5 years of age, my family moved to Haifa and shortly thereafter, to Kiryat Chaim, which was then being built. My parents built a house there and I studied at the workers' children school there until the eighth grade.

I was attracted to water sports from a very early age. I joined the sea section of Hapoel Haifa and later continued studies at the naval school, which was adjacent to the Technion in Haifa. In Hapoel I was an instructor in rowing and sailing and concluded my studies in 1945 with very good marks. I intended to continue studies at the Technion where I received admittance directly from the naval school, but because of joining the Palyam I did not attend.

**The Palyam**

While at the naval school I joined the Hagana in Kiryat Chaim. and attended a course for squad leaders. As soon as our studies were completed, we were approached to join the Palyam. There were 18 men in my graduating class; 6 were for deck, 6 for engine room, and 6 for communications. Serving in the Palyam was voluntary and no one was paid for what he did. Most of us young men joined up, and I among them. At first we were sent to Kibbutz Neve Yam, near Atlit, where several left our group and joined the merchant navy. I and the remaining young men continued our training. Several weeks later I was sent to work on a small vessel, the "Amos," which flew the Palestinian flag and sailed between Haifa, Beirut, Famagusta and Port Said. On occasion it also sailed to Alexandria. The boat belonged to the "Atid" company in Haifa.

I served on the ship as a deckhand and met other Palyamnicks aboard, including Menachem Cohen and Benyamin (Bob) Nativ, Ossie Ravid and Yonatan from Kibbutz Ein Gev. After six months on the "Atid" I was ordered to Caesarea and be an instructor for course no. 5 for small boat commanders. This course lasted three months and when it was over I was to go overseas to accompany ships of Aliya Bet from Europe to Palestine. In preparation, I attended a six-week course conducted at Givat Zaid. The head of this course was Mulla Cohen of Kibbutz Alonim. We studied physical education, hand to hand fighting, the use of light weapons, and how to deal with people in crowded situations. Following the course, I was sent to Tel Aviv, outfitted with good clothes, and told to be ready to leave for Europe via Egypt. In preparation for the trip to Egypt, I was given the uniform of a British soldier and the appropriate documents.

A few days before going to Egypt, I practiced strutting along the streets of Tel Aviv in my uniform so that I could get used to the feel of it. I tried to stay out of

the way of officers and MP's so that I would not be caught in any give-away action, such as a poorly executed salute. I received notice to report on a certain evening at a certain spot with all my equipment. When I got there a truck came along and gathered a group of us and we traveled in that truck all night, ending up at Penara, which was on the Bitter Lake on the Suez Canal, not far from Ismailiya. This was the base of the 645<sup>th</sup> Truck Company. Gad Lifshitz, the Gideoni was the only other Palyamnik with me, and others in this outfit had no idea who or what we were.

Several efforts were made to ship us as stowaways on ships that passed through the Canal, but these were unsuccessful. After a week we were taken to Alexandria and put up in a villa which was empty, except for the bedbugs. Finally we were able to sail to Italy on a small vessel, the "Doron," that flew a Palestinian flag. We received instructions to go to the town of Mastera near Venice, which contained a camp for survivors of the Holocaust.

We found the camp without difficulty and were welcomed with open arms. The next morning we boarded a train for Milano and went to see Yehuda Arazi at the office of the Mosad for Aliya Bet on Via Unione 5. He directed us to Magenta and from there we continued as soldiers in a military vehicle to Marseilles. From Marseilles we were sent to a villa at St Jerome. I spent several weeks there as a director of one of the refugee camps and also helped to prepare ships for sailing. My next orders were to report to Antwerp, Belgium, to accompany a ship of refugees from there to Palestine.

### **The immigrant ship, "Ha'chayal Ha'ivri"**

I arrived in Antwerp just as the ship was getting ready to sail, and on board I met Tzvi Taitel from Kibbutz Yagur, who was the commander of the ship, and Gershon, the Gideoni. The ship, "Ha'chayal Ha'ivri", was scheduled to leave the following morning. Before sailing we met the one responsible for Aliya Bet from Belgium, Willie. Willie gave us the following instructions:

1. This was a steamship that ran on coal. There was not enough coal in the coal bin to get the ship to Palestine so more coal was stored in a hold below deck. There were plenty of extra shovels and buckets on board and we were to carry the extra coal to a place near the boilers during the voyage.
2. The ship's crew refuses to sail to Palestine because it fears arrest upon arrival. Willie promised them that when we would be close to the coast of Palestine they would be transferred to another vessel which would return them to Europe. This was nonsense but we were to handle that as best we could when the time came.
3. Willie gave us a suitcase full of gold coins with which to pay the crew when the voyage was over, as he had promised.

There were 507 olim on board, most of them rather young. They boarded the ship at night so that we could leave port at daybreak. A pilot took us away from the harbor and when we were in open water, he went back to port and we continued by ourselves. The captain and crew were mostly Greek. We Palyamniks were divided as follows: Tzvi was in charge of the olim and Gershon and I were his assistants. Several of the olim were also conscripted to help us. This was particularly necessary at mealtimes. Since the crew was short handed and there was no third officer to stand watch, it was decided that I should act as third mate and be responsible for one watch. In that way I could also check that we were on course.

The voyage must have taken close to two weeks and we arrived in June 1946. We had good weather all the way, even while traversing the Bay of Biscay which is infamous for its weather. When we had passed through Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean, some of the stronger looking olim were picked to help move the extra coal from where it had been stored, to the bins close to the boilers. Our only worry now was how to handle the problem of transferring the olim to another ship, as Willie had promised the crew. We decided that since there was no chance of our meeting another ship to arrange a transfer, we would have to sail as close to Palestine as possible and then force the crew to continue.

We informed the captain that we had word from Palestine that small boats would be waiting for us off the coast opposite Rosh Hanikra. We should approach from the North and arrive there during the night. To our great luck, the British did not discover us. We organized a group of the olim, armed them with sticks, and told them to force all of the crew not on duty to stay in their quarters. I took over the bridge and to our good fortune the engine room gang kept working and kept the ship on course. I asked permission to go ashore at Kiryat Chaim but was refused, so headed into the port of Haifa. Once inside the port I left the bridge and I and the other Palyamniks hid among the olim. A police launch came alongside. Policemen came aboard and tried to find us among the olim but soon gave up.

A harbor crew brought the ship to a place near other aliya bet ships kept in a corner of the port. At this time, olim were sent to Atlit and not as yet to Cyprus. I noticed that there were olim from other ships swimming in the water near their ships, so I also shinnied down a rope and swam to an empty ship not far away and waited for a passing Jewish crew of port workers. I spoke to the foreman of one such group and identified myself. He found work clothes for me and gave me a box of tools and I eventually left the port together with them without arousing suspicion. I presented myself almost immediately to the Mosad for Aliya desk in Haifa and gave a full report of the voyage. Just so that all facts be presented and recorded, I add that the crew and the captain received their full wages in gold coin, as promised.

A week or two later I received a call to again report to the Aliya Bet desk in Haifa and was told to prepare to leave once more for France. That same day I

was dressed in khaki shorts and short-sleeved shirt, and had nothing with me but a toilet kit. I was told to board the small ship "Cadio" that same day, together with my good friend the Gideoni, Azriel Einav. It had been arranged with the purser of the ship (for a tidy sum) that we would leave as stowaways and be delivered to Marseilles. No places had been arranged for sleeping so we wandered around the deck day and night and slept wherever we found a quiet corner. The ship put into a number of ports in Greece and Italy before finally arriving at Marseilles and there we disembarked.

I knew how to get to Hechalutz, and from there we were put in touch with the Mosad for Aliya Bet. We were told to report to the camp at St Jerome but soon afterwards I was sent to run a camp near Lyons. I was there until the camp dwellers were all sent to Marseille to board a ship, and then also returned to Marseilles. I worked in preparing ships for sailing and at times also helped out at the camps of the olim. Azriel and I were told that we would soon be leaving on a small boat called "Barak". The ship had a Turkish crew but the owner of the ship was a short Greek who we called "the Midget". As I recall, we were told to leave without passengers because further east, somewhere in the Mediterranean, we were to meet the "Chaim Arlosoroff" and help take her and her passengers to Palestine.

We left the harbor and turned east, parallel to the coast of France when suddenly a fire broke out in the engine room and the engine died. The engine room crew was not able to get it going again so we put up a sail and traveled with the wind toward Corsica where we put into a little harbor called Calvi, on the north coast of the island. We were there for about a week, when "the Midget" came along, saw what had happened, and sent a tug to tow us into Genoa. Near Genoa a storm arose, the rough sea broke our towline, and we drifted into the little harbor of Porto Santo Stefano. A few days later another tug showed up and towed us into Livorno. We seemed to have been forgotten and remained in Livorno for several weeks. It was decided that I go to Milan and check out our situation.

I met Yehuda Arazi in Milan and the first thing he did was to place me as second-in-command of the ship, "Hatikva". This ship was to sail in a few days and it's commander was Yisrael Rotem. Yisrael's other assistant was Meir Falick and the Gideoni was Nachum. I later learned that Azriel was put on the "Exodus 1947" as Gideoni. "Hatikva" was a very sturdy ship; formerly having served as a coast guard cutter. Its crew consisted mostly of young Jews who had brought the ship from the USA. When we approached the shore of Palestine we were discovered by the British, and several destroyers accompanied us the rest of the way. We made preparations to resist their boarding the ship. The destroyers rained tear gas bombs upon us and fired machine guns and under cover of this action, marines managed to board the ship. The fight lasted several hours but in the end the ship was theirs. We were towed into Haifa, loaded onto deportation ships and sent to Cyprus. Prior to entering Haifa port, Meir Falick, the Gideoni Nachum and I found a place to hide within the ship and we stayed there until morning. The next day when workmen

came to clean the vessel, we came out, joined the rest of the workers, and left the ship with them. Once again we presented ourselves to the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Haifa and made our report.

This time I took a small vacation and went home to help my parents, who were building an addition onto our house. That was when I met Yehudit (Lily) Levchinsky, my future wife. I appealed to Yoske Rifkind who was then commander of the naval company for leave, so that I could study at the Technion. He convinced me to continue serving because this was a time when things were happening, and when things had to be done.

In November 1947 I left Palestine once again, but this time with my own passport, and I traveled by plane to Prague together with a group of buddies. From Prague we continued by train to Paris and from Paris to Marseilles. In Marseilles we were parted from our passports, which went into service for Aliya Daled (the sending of olim to Palestine with the aid of false papers and/or false identities).

Once again I was in Marseilles, this time in the camp at Mizra, and once again I was helping to prepare ships for sailing. My girlfriend Yehudit came to Marseilles, and worked in the local Hagana office. Israel had now become an independent state but there were still several ships that had left the USA before independence and had reached France. One of these ships was "The Calanit" (Mala), and its crew consisted mostly of young American Jews. We sailed on this ship to Haifa (without being accompanied by British destroyers) and were welcomed with open arms. The day after we landed I joined the navy and the first ship I went to work on, was the "K-18" which had formerly been "The Josiah Wedgwood".

Shortly after, I married Yehudit but continued to serve in the navy in many positions and for many years. While in service I was able to study evenings at the Technion and received a degree in law. Sometime thereafter, I became judge advocate of the navy. I retired from the navy in 1969, and went into private law practice.

### **Conclusion**

Several days after returning to Israel on the "Calanit" I went to Haifa port to have a look at the "Ha'chayal Ha'ivri". It was lying sunk in the waters of the harbor. Even when we sailed on it, it was not in good condition and it was only a matter of luck that it didn't come apart when we had the olim on board.