

Weiss, Gavriel (Gabi)

Born November 10 1925 in Timishuara, Rumania

Made Aliya in 1941

Joined the Palyam in 1945

This is the Way it Was

Timishuara was a city with a mixed population of three nationalities: Romanian, Hungarian and German. The Jews were about 10% of the population and the other three shared the rest. In March 1941 we came to Palestine and in September I began my studies in the Naval School, adjacent to the Technion in Haifa. I was then aged 16 years. I chose to specialize in naval engineering and in addition there were studies in sailing, radio operating and boat building.

Joining Palyam

Several months before the end of the course, several men came from the Palyam, among them Avraham Zakai, and convinced us that we should join the Palyam. There were 17 students in the class, but I was the only one from engineering to volunteer. It seems that from the professional point of view this was a mistake, but I did not regret it. This was an interesting and challenging experience, and above all, it gave me a feeling that I was fulfilling a role in the creation of the State of Israel.

Training and Activity in Palestine

Most of those in my class who volunteered were sent to Ein Hayam, a kibbutz near Atlit. Most of the time we worked at loading bags of salt onto trains. I had the luck to be chosen to help the chief mechanical engineer to repair the motor of a railroad engine. That was the only specific job in my area of training that I performed during the next three and one half years of service.

In the first action of unloading olim in which I participated (in the group that was in the water - the vessel was the "Dalin" that brought 37 olim) I had one of the most dramatic experiences of my life. The vessel came into Caesarea and I will never forget how Berchik sang at the end of the mission.

At one stage I was transferred to a platoon formed at Kibbutz Ma'abarot, and for about a year I worked in the kitchen, or in making compost, or in the orchard. We also had periods of training. If we used weapons, we would train in a trench. Our commander was Poza whom I greatly admired, and whom I heard was later killed in some battle. I was the only city dweller among a bunch of kibbutznikim, but I felt very comfortable with them. One of them was Chaim Senesh, who was originally from Hungary and later went to Kibbutz Maagan where he got the job of wagon driver. I was jealous of how well he could control the horses as the wagon sped along and he held a whip in one hand.

In this platoon, situated in an orchard grove with several tents, and orange crates serving as furniture, there were several characters known to the public at large. One was Dan Ben Amotz, who liked to pinch the girls from under the

table, when they were working on kitchen duty or eating their meals with us. Another of the clowns in our outfit was Shaike Ophir.

Our next stage of training was at Kibbutz Sdot Yam in Caesarea. The course (Course No.5) was conducted by Avraham Zakai, who was then commander of the Palyam. The course ran for several months during which we spent considerable time in row boats or sail boats, but also did some theoretical work in navigation. Sometimes we were drafted to help unload a vessel that came in, or for other operations. Sometimes, upon returning from whatever we had been doing, we would find that our tents had blown down.

When this course was over I was sent to a course for squad leaders near Juara. One third of the participants lived at Ein Hashofet, one third at Ramat Hashofet, and one third at Mishmar Haemek. The commander of the course was Mula Cohen and he overcame the distance between the three settlements by riding to them on horseback. I wasn't a very successful trainee in this course, as it seemed that I wasn't born to be a "fighter".

voyage and trip to the Diaspora

Toward the end of 1946 the Palestinian Court returned the "Enzo Sereni" to its rightful owners (it was registered in Italy as belonging to a private citizen, but in effect, belonged to the Mosad for Aliya Bet). Fourteen Palyamniks were detailed to work on the ship (it's original name was "Rondine") which was anchored in the harbor of Haifa and I was one of them. We did any odd job necessary for the Palyam in the port besides working on the ship. It was also our duty to get the Palyamniks safely out of the port to avoid deportation after arrival with the olim, and being hidden. We also took any weapons that they had brought with them as well as radio equipment, and saw that all of this remained for the Palyam to use again. Our regular job was to prepare our ship for sailing. Pinny Ashuach and I attended to the engine room and all the others did the deck work. Moishe "the sailor" was in charge of us, and the other seamen were Cushi (Eliyahu Shachar), Benny Kravitz, Reuven Ashkenazi (the Turk), and I don't remember the names of the others. The ship's captain was Captain Sheinman and he was loaned to us by the port authority. Several years later I sailed with this captain on an Israeli cargo ship, and by then I was the chief engineer.

After several months of repair work the "Rondina" finally sailed under the Italian flag and without a cargo, to the port of Alexandria. We loaded empty barrels there and after a stay of several days we took off for Genoa. The crew was fired and most of us went to Magenta, the center of the work of the Mosad for Aliya Bet which now also dealt in procurement. The first person I met at Magenta was my good friend Gad Lifshitz; we had studied together at the Naval High School. He was now the Gideon, (radio operator) and had been working there for several months. I should also mention that our British passports had been taken from us in Genoa so that they could be given to Ma'apilim. Fate brought it about that years later I met the fellow who had used my passport, on a bus to Tel Aviv.

Activity in Italy

During my stay in Italy, where my only papers were those of a Polish refugee, I traveled the length and breadth of the country and did every job to which I was assigned. I was storehouse keeper for the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Milan, I was a driver for the AJDC (American Joint Distribution Committee) between Rome and Bari, and I was the contact man with local detectives there when the "Lino" was blown up with a cargo of weapons for Syria. These weapons later reached us in an episode in which I was not involved.

At one stage I was sent to Formia to be in charge of the camp. A group of Ma'apilim were there who were waiting their turn to board a ship. While waiting, they were used as a work group, and helped in the loading of other waiting immigrants onto a ship at the nearby port of Gaeta. There was a large storage room there which the Italians knew about but they helped us by not paying attention to it. This was due to the influence of Ada Sereni and also because of a bribe to the right person at the right time. It was while in this camp that I was told, by phone from Zaki in Rome, of the creation of the State of Israel.

Having been in Italy for more than a year, I started to pressure Zaki, and after him, Ada, that it was time to send me home, and that I could be sent as a mechanic on one of the ships carrying Ma'apilim. Ada, who had received command of Italy after Zaki [*editorial note: Ada received her command from Yehuda Arazi and not from Zaki*], gave me the permission. Several weeks later I boarded the "Af Al Pi Chen" which was in Gaeta and immediately went down to the engine room to help the Italian engineer. However, not a half hour went by and I was called to take a call from Rome. Ada's instructions were very clear: "No Israelis are to return to Israel except for those necessary to accompany the Ma'apilim". So I had to stay in Italy for a few more months. Incidentally, the "Af Al Pi Chen" today stands as a museum piece at the Naval Museum in Haifa.

The voyage home

About a month before the British High Commissioner and his entourage left Haifa, I was sent to Venice to bring back to Israel a small landing craft and a tanker of 200 tons capacity. These had been bought by Zeev Hayam by order of Ben Gurion. This voyage was Kafkaesque and I will recount it briefly: We left Venice but the radio operator had forgotten to take the crystals necessary to run the transmitter. These had been wrapped in the handkerchief of another operator and were brought out to us as we were already some distance from the pier. Our people on shore forced a motor launch at gun point to bring the crystals out to us, but the launch did not catch up to us. That same night a different launch owner was shot and killed (he had no connection with us) and in the aftermath of the investigation our Zeev Hayam was thrown into prison. We returned to the wharf, went to the hotel, retrieved the crystals, and went out to sea again. This time the sea was so rough that the tanker which we were towing, broke away and we received orders to enter the port of Ancona. We were permitted to continue our journey but the Kafka adventure also continued. In Israel we met Samek, who was then the Chief of Operations of the Navy and

he informed us that the Navy did not want the landing craft. We should ask the Mosad for Aliya Bet, whose offices were close by, what to do with the craft. I then went home to see my parents whom I had not seen for 1½ years.

My activity in procurement.

After a short vacation, several Gideonim, several escort leaders and I were sent abroad on the ship "Avionia". All the ships that worked in procurement flew the Italian flag and had Italian crews. We were all conscious that the munitions which we were able to bring to Israel were necessary so that we could defend our country, and plan counter-offensives against our enemies. I made three trips on two different ships: the "Maestrale" and the "Resurrezione". We loaded the "merchandise" in Sibenik, Yugoslavia and in Sicily. After the serious ""stuff" had been loaded, we loaded onions in order to fool agents of the UN. There were several cease-fires during the War of Independence and it was forbidden to allow armaments into the country during this period. The Arab sides had no difficulty in getting weapons from the surrounding Arab countries. We had only ourselves to depend upon. Most of our armament came by sea but some was also delivered by air, directly from Czechoslovakia. One fact I recall very clearly; 48 hours after we unloaded the precious cargo of the "Maestrale", the decisive "Battle of the Negev" began.

I had an interesting meeting with the officer in charge of contact between the UN forces and the port authorities. This was Zeev Hayam, who had been my teacher at the Naval School, and had purchased the landing craft that we brought from Venice. He was very good in concealment activities by our forces in unloading arms and successfully getting them transported out of the port area.

In conclusion: My final activity in the service of the Mosad for Aliya Bet was as commander of the Italian ship, "Modica" which made two trips. The first was from the port of Burgas, Bulgaria, in which we carried 2,300 Olim. The second was from Marseilles, with 1,700 Olim. There were seven of us who accompanied the Olim, plus two doctors and a radio operator. Our representative in Bulgaria was Yerushalmi, and I met him many years later under other circumstances. Towards the end of the second voyage, in February 1949 I was asked to continue but I refused. I thought that it was time that I entered the merchant marine as an engine room officer, so I transferred to Shoham (ZIM) and joined the crew of the "Negba" as an engine room cadet.

My work in the merchant marine

After six months I was transferred to the "Dromit" as fifth engineering officer and continued to work on Israeli merchant ships for twelve years. I finally became chief engineer and from 1963 to 1966 was sent to London for academic studies. When I returned I became an instructor at the Naval School at Acre. From 1973 and until I retired in 1991 I served as dean of the school, and then as CEO of the Authority for Naval Training.