

Yahel, Yochi

Born in Jerusalem

Joined the Palmach in 1945

Joined the course for radio operators in 1946

Worked for the Mosad for Aliya Bet as a Gideonit in 1947

This is the Way it Was

The fact that I was born and grew up in Jerusalem played an important role in my life. The atmosphere of Jerusalem and the threat of being isolated, which later proved to be real, had a bearing on my thoughts and development. I was a leader in the Hashomer Hatzair youth movement and at age 15 was sworn into the "Hagana", which was then called the "Irgun". Today, when one says "Irgun", he usually means the "Etzel" which competed with the "Hagana".

We were still kids when we were sworn in. I went to a unit that trained in communication every Saturday on Mount Scopus. We would get there singly, going by foot through the Sheikh Jerach quarter, which had a bad reputation. All this was until 1945, when I joined the Palmach, "F" Company of the 1st Battalion. That same summer I took part in the first squad leaders' course that the Palmach ran by itself (but was supervised by the "Hagana"). The course was headed by Yitzchak Rabin. (Later. I was an officer of his wife-to-be, Leah, at Ein Harod). Until 1946 I served in various positions of command wherever the 1st Battalion happened to be. I led courses in weapons, field training, demolition, and topography, after I myself had taken courses in these fields.

In 1946, there were discussions within the Palmach as to the most important priority. Was it to bring the Remnant of the Holocaust to Palestine? Or was it to fight against the British occupation of our land, right here in Palestine? I decided that I could do more good by participating in bringing survivors of the Holocaust to Palestine. I went back to the communications field and went to Kibbutz Shefayim for a course in radio communications. This course was secret and we also practiced hiding our equipment from the British. We put guards on the water towers around our area to give warning if they were approaching. This led to a humorous incident. During the course there was an attack of locust; I couldn't remember having ever seen such a thing before. There were millions of them everywhere in a layer 10 centimeters thick. Every step I took would echo with the squash of them.

Probably out of boredom, someone signaled to the watch on the tower nearest our course that "An army of locust is approaching!" (**locust = arbeh**) His Hebrew accent was not perfect and it sounded more like: A big army is approaching!" (big - **many = harbeh**). Immediately, all radio equipment went into hideaways and we all put on aprons and became part of the kitchen crew or child care personnel.

When the course was over but before I was sent overseas, I worked at the radio station of "F" Company at Ein Harod, in "C" Company at Ashdot Yaakov and in

3rd Battalion Headquarters at Ayelet Hashachar. I also worked for a short time in the basement of the tuberculosis hospital in Safad, where a group of Palmachniks was stationed in case of need. There had been rumors that the Arabs of Safad might stir up trouble. I then went over to the Headquarters of the 4th Battalion and from there to the Headquarters of the Palmach. Fighting had already begun in Palestine in several places. In 1947 I was sent overseas.

When I was told that I was leaving within 24 hours, I made my way to Jerusalem by a roundabout route to see how my parents were doing. It took me a long time to find them but I did and then went back. I went abroad without any ID on the "San Michele," which later became the "Mishmar Haemek", and on which I returned to Palestine with Ma'apilim.

This was a small, 500 ton vessel of wood construction, and below the water line had a long beard of algae which slowed its progress in the water to almost a walk. There were 18 others on the vessel with me when we left. No one had an ID and each one was to go to a different location. Those of us who were not veteran seamen, and I among them, worked with a pail next to us, and if I sent the code letters "KMK" in the middle of a message it meant: "Wait a minute, I'm throwing up!" This was known to every Gideoni.

I had only one radio transmitter which we had put together by improvisation in an air-raid shelter. I received instructions regarding when and to whom to send a message. We received specially coded instructions and moved out to sea. After one day, I was left alone with the transmitter and it went on the blink. I could only send, at a specified hour, and did not know whether my messages were received or not.

The professionals on the ship (the captain and chief engineer) did not have faith in the tap-tapping of the little girl and were worried that we had no contact with the outside world. They felt that if we were in trouble we would not be able to get help. We had been told that if there was a foul-up in communication, we should make for Yugoslavia instead of Italy.

At the time, Yugoslavia was friendly to us, as was most of Eastern Europe. We went up the Adriatic but there was a storm that slowed us. It turned out that we had gone through waters that had been heavily mined. These were leftovers from the War that had not as yet been cleared, and it was only sheer luck that we didn't blow up.

As we were waiting for dawn before entering port, the crew got drunk, because they thought that when we got into port they would be taken to Siberia. Yugoslavia was a Communist country. They were very surprised when we entered the harbor of Buccari and were received by an officer of detectives who knew of our coming. He took excellent care of us and ordered two German electronic engineers to fix my transmitter. They tried and tried but could not find the trouble and were unable to repair it. I had been watching them all the time, so when they said they could not fix it and wanted to take it apart, I sent them away and, on my own, found that a small fuse had burned out. I did not have

any wire or lead to make another so I took a matchstick and painted it heavily with a pencil. This was sufficient to act as a fuse and the transmitter worked perfectly all the way to Italy. In Buccari the Yugoslavs laid a railway line right down to the water's edge. This meant that when the survivors of the Holocaust got onto the train they would be taken directly to the ramp of the ship for embarkation.

While in Italy, I was in Rome most of the time and lived at the villa of the Gideonim. This was an elaborate place for us, in those days. It was located in a suburb of Rome called Monte Mario. We found out that the villa had also been Nazi headquarters during the war. The transmitter was located in the toilet, behind the toilet bowl and behind a wall. The room could quickly become either a toilet or a transmitting room.

Our contact was with ships of the Ma'apilim and with procurement vessels while they were en route to Palestine. We also talked directly to a station in Palestine called Shoshana, and had contact with other stations where there were Gideonim, such as Paris, Marseilles, London and Prague. Our station in Rome had the code name "Leonardo". Every message was sent in Morse and in code. The job of the Gideonim was to encode and decode. Sending messages in Morse is like the personal contact of a letter. Every one sends a message in the same manner but differently, and one could identify the sender by the way he signaled.

There are many stories of various activities and what was behind certain events; the tension attached to moving six Messerschmitt planes that had been disassembled into parts and loaded onto one plane in Czechoslovakia. We had "bought" many checkpoints on borders so that it was easier for the Ma'apilim to cross and get to the Mediterranean coast. The system was so good that when Nazis wanted to escape from Europe, they often used our name for their cover. Once, on our way to Austria we traveled in two jeeps. A car rode in front of us and someone in our crowd recognized a Nazi sitting in the car, and he had used our name. We chased him on the road to Innsbruck and his car went over the side of a bridge and into the chasm below. We heard on the following day that the car had fallen into the river but the passengers had miraculously been saved.

During the whole time that I was in Italy I had false papers. I was a refugee named Rosa Stemler, or one named Sonia Katz. I came back to Israel in 1949 on a boat called "Modika". We went to pick up olim from Bulgaria. True, we already had a state but the conditions on this vessel were like those of the vessels of Aliya Bet. We arrived when the temperature was -21 C^0 . The vice-president of Bulgaria was a Jew, and he was a living witness to the statement that a Jew is "more Catholic than the Pope". He was awful in his behavior toward us. The olim had group papers for groups of 300 people each and in all for 3,300 people. At the last minute, when people had sold all they owned and were standing in the biting cold weather, this vice-president voided the permits of one of the groups. We were stuck there trying to get the matter straightened

out, but with no success. Despite that, and perhaps because they were glad to get rid of the olim, a band played on a Bulgarian ship that accompanied us out of the harbor. This aliya vessel had the same wooden boards laid out with the same spacing for each oleh as in earlier vessels for Ma'apilim.

Once again we ran into a terrible storm with fearsome bolts of lightning. We had to put into a Greek bay for three days until the storm was over. On this trip three babies were born and three other people died.

I would like to say a few words about the people of the Palyam, those who accompanied the Ma'apilim, and the Gideonim. All of us, the oldest were 20 or 21 years of age and the younger ones were 19 or 20. We were all the highest, and only authorities in the eyes of the Olim on these voyages that lasted usually between two to three weeks. We were the ones who solved their problems and, believe me, there were many, and very serious ones. We were their consultants regarding their future work and we were their psychologists. We counseled in family matters and we arbitrated disputes. We were their referrals to find relatives anywhere in the world, and many other problems. We took those upon ourselves and tried our best to find answers.

For several years I tried to find out what happened to all those who came on the ship with me, but was unsuccessful. Then, one day Aharon Bachar, a well known journalist, told about his aliya to Israel and I thought that he must have come on my ship. I received a very emotional response from him saying that although he had only been a boy, he remembered me. Unfortunately, he went to the USA to work for his newspaper, and died while there of a heart attack.

Sometime after I returned to Israel I was appointed chief radio operator for Army headquarters, as a civilian, and in 1956 I transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture. I remained there as the operator of a radio station for the fishing industry until my retirement

After retirement, I accepted the position of chairperson in a voluntary organization that occupies almost all of my time. I also attend courses, and delight in spending time with my daughter and her family, including my granddaughters Naama, Maayan and Gal.

Editorial note :

The Aliya Bet ship "Mishmar Haemek" arrived to Eretz Israel with ma'apilim (illegal immigrants) on Apr. 20, 1948. Yochi sailed on this vessel in another voyage in late 1948, not in 1947.