

Zakai, Avraham (of blessed memory)
 The First Commander of "Yod" Company – Palyam
 Born January, 1923 in Jerusalem. Died August, 1989
 Participated in the first course for small boat commanders in the Palyam
 First Headquarters Officer of the Naval Service, the forerunner of the Navy
 Responsible for preparing the Aliya Bet ships in Europe.
 As told by Miriam Zakai

This is the Way it Was

Avraham was born in Jerusalem to Rachel Aaronson and David Zakai (Zochovitski). From 1950 to 1954 he studied Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering and received an MSc degree from M.I.T. in Boston. From 1954 to 1959 he was Chief of the Department of Equipment and Engineering of the Israeli Navy and in that year he was honorably discharged from Tzahal with the rank of Colonel (Captain). He then served as a lecturer at the Haifa Technion and was technical director of a number of firms, such as the "Military Industries", "Rafael," and others, and was the representative of the Zim Lines in Japan.

In his public life he served as a member of the Haifa City Council, was chairman of the Inter-city Firefighting Council, and a member of many technical societies. Avraham was a man who, although very active in many fields, was a very modest person. He had a very great love for Israel and as a child absorbed many important human values from his father. These were important to him throughout his life. He regarded any public position that he held as a mission for the good of those he served. He always held the welfare of his fellow man to be of utmost importance.

From early youth he felt a strong connection to the sea. Together with his brother, Yaakov, he spent hours building sailboats and naturally gravitated to the marine section of Hapoel and larger sailing vessels. As he once said: "We heard stories from Shmuel Tankus and Dov Magen that affected us strongly and instilled in us a love of the sea and a feeling of mission..." The first time that he put his seamanship skills to use was when the ship "Tiger Hill" came in close to shore, and he helped move the immigrants from the ship to the shore. This is when he first came into contact with the Mosad for Aliya Bet.

Avraham took part in many seamanship courses, first as a student and later as an instructor. A short time later he became the first commander of what was then called the Naval company or "I" Company of the Palyam. The men of the Palyam knew how to think creatively, in Avraham's opinion, and also knew how to criticize constructively. It was not an easy job to lead them.

Even prior to leaving for Italy to work in the Mosad for Aliya Bet, Avraham had met remnants of the Holocaust. He wondered if he would be able to establish contact with them, coming as he did from a background so different from theirs. Although he was the commander of his company, he demanded the right to go to Europe to accompany ships just as the men in his outfit were doing and after

a period of waiting, that permission was granted. He and Bezalel Drori were smuggled out of the country in the chain locker of the "Atid". Lova Eliav met them upon their arrival and took them to Magenta.

The camp at Magenta was a center for young people who were survivors of the Holocaust, and also became a center for equipment used to outfit the Aliya Bet ships. Avraham was given the responsibility for outfitting ships and preparing them to receive olim. Avraham was not satisfied with the manner in which ships were prepared. When a ship had to be worked on, the young people would work hard and long hours and get the ship off, and then do nothing. Avraham thought that if he wished to change things, he would first have to contact those individuals who had influence over the others in the group, and he had to serve as a personal example.

The first thing he did was to wake up early in the morning, exercise, and see who would join him. Quite soon there was a group of young people who joined him and others kept coming. That was a good start. Soon after, the whole atmosphere of the camp underwent a change. There were two incidents that shed more light on the problem of working with the youthful survivors. A ship was to depart earlier than planned, and to do so, an additional 150 knapsacks and hammocks had to be sewn and additional food supplies and first aid equipment loaded onto the ship. The young people, however, refused to work on the Sabbath. I appealed to the workers committee to allow them to work but the committee refused.

I had learned from my mother how to sew, when my brother and I used to make our own sailboats. I decided to go to work by myself, and no sooner did I do so, than other young people followed and soon a good number of people were sewing. We finished what had to be done in good time. On another occasion the group wanted to go to the nearby village and was on the truck and ready to leave when I received notice that police were in the village and it would be better not to go. I ran to the gate and told them they best stay in camp. They did not want to obey me so I decided that I had no choice but to command them to stay. When I issued the command, one of them said: "Capo!" I felt as though he had stuck a knife into me, but did not react. In the course of time, I developed good relations with them and started to teach them Hebrew and the Bible.

In December of 1946 Yehuda Arazi asked Avraham to go to La Spezia and prepare the ship "Albertina" for sailing. He stayed at La Spezia longer than intended, also worked on the "Exodus", the "Pan Crescent" and a number of smaller vessels. There was a beautiful bay near La Spezia called Porto Venera which seemed like a good spot for Aliya Bet ships to load passengers and leave. A British major who was an intelligence agent, hired a villa overlooking the bay and our drydock. When Yehuda was warned of the major, he replied that the major would probably look everywhere for them, but not under his nose.

The Exodus was a large river boat that had been procured in the USA. When it arrived at La Spezia Avraham went to meet the captain. This turned out to be

Ike Aaronovitch, a friend of his from youth movement days. Ike had an all-Jewish crew and Avraham heard them wondering in astonishment: "What a peculiar nation this is; it has no country and no government but it has money to buy ships." It was rumored that there was food and cigarettes in the stores of the ship that had come from the States and the villagers came in droves to buy them. The authorities regarded this as smuggling and this put the ship and its owners in a very bad position. It was necessary for Ada Sereni to use all her influence in order to clear up the situation.

The British did find us however, so we had to leave La Spezia before the ship was prepared for the olim. We left for France, and the job finished there. An Italian destroyer followed us when we left port but after some maneuvering we managed to lose it. When we got to France, the French government was not too cooperative either. The captain decided to leave the port as soon as work on the ship was finished, and he left without the aid of a pilot or a tugboat. On the 18th of July 1947 the "Exodus" left port with a cargo of 4500 survivors of the Holocaust and a few Palyamnikim. Ike was the captain and Yossi Harel was commander, and Azrilik Einav was the Gideoni, the radio operator.

Having spent months in Europe preparing ships for sailing I was ready to sail on the "Exodus" but there were still the "Pan York" and the "Pan Crescent" to prepare so my wish to sail was further delayed. The "Pan Crescent" was such a large ship that we had to find a drydock big enough to handle it. We found one in Venice. The Pan Crescent had been a merchant ship that carried fruit, had been owned by a private American company and flew the Panamanian flag. The owner was listed as Paul. Paul came to Italy for the start of work on the ship and it was on this occasion that Avraham met Paul Shulman.

Paul Shulman was a graduate of Annapolis, the academy of the US Navy. He came from the background of a staunchly Zionist family, and during WW II had served as an officer on an American destroyer. He helped Avraham plan and organize the fixing over of the ship and that was the start of his service for the State of Israel. In order to safeguard the secrecy of the work on the ship we needed a cover story and this was given by Paul. He told the drydock authorities that the ship was to be refitted to carry sheep from Australia and we would need many tanks of water for the sheep and many small pens. There would also have to be additional ventilation to make certain that sheep in the holds would get sufficient air. The additional showers installed were for those working with the sheep during the voyage. Maybe the drydock people believed the story, and maybe they did not but they probably wanted the work so swallowed the story and got busy.

One day, while working on the ship there was a loud explosion and Avraham ran out on deck to see what had happened. The whole bow of the ship had been blown up and sank in the port. This sabotage was the work of British intelligence and the timing had been meant to catch the ship when it was at sea. Luckily, the ship was in port and the bow could be repaired so the danger and loss was not as serious might have been. It was later learned that the famous,

or infamous Commander Crabb was in back of this explosion and was the one who had perpetrated it. In December of 1947 the ship made its way to Palestine but Avraham was not on it this time either.

It was with increasing difficulty that Avraham continued his work to prepare ships for sailing, instead of accompanying the immigrants to Palestine, which had been his chief aim. This time he was called upon to prepare the ship "Despite All". When the UN decided to permit the formation of the State of Israel on November 29th 1947, Avraham traveled to Rome where he met Zalman Shazar, the future President. They discussed the ability of survivors of the death camps to adjust to normal life and to live in a normal society. There was also the problem of the Sabres adjusting to living with those who had undergone suffering in Europe.

Following the UN decision, fighting erupted in Palestine, comrades fell, and Avraham felt that it was incumbent upon him to return home and fulfill his national duty there. This finally came about in February of 1948, and was when his activity in the Palyam came to an end. Avraham more than once expressed the belief that when discussing the Aliya Bet, there was a natural tendency to mention the various agencies involved, but we should remember that in this historical drama, it was the olim (immigrants) who were the heroes. They had been ready to suffer and fight for their beliefs. They knew that Europe was no place for them and were ready to do all they could to reach Israel.

The encounter between Avraham and the survivors of the Holocaust had a profound effect on him and he was proud that he had had the opportunity to help them and to help in the creation of modern Jewish history.