

Ben Ocopnick

Volunteer from Canada on the "Chaim Arlosoroff"

This is the Way it Was

I served on the "Ulua" (Chaim Arlosoroff).

The following is my Palyam or Aliya Bet career. I was recruited in Toronto in 1946. I proceeded to New York, staying at the Breslin Hotel until receiving word to proceed to Baltimore to join the Ulua, where I met the rest of the crew. We outfitted the 1000 ton ship and left for Marseilles through the Chesapeake Bay, Cape Hatteras and across the Atlantic. What a bad trip. I was seasick most of the time but still had to work. We spent 5-6 weeks in Marseilles outfitting the ship with bunks 3 high and then left for Denmark and across to Trelleborg in Sweden where 600 single girls and a few men waited. They had been rescued from the concentration camps. What a sight as a train pulled up to our dock and these well dressed women came on board. When they went below and saw the three tiered bunks, they panicked thinking back to their concentration camp days.

We left after an emotional farewell with friends on the dock and the girls on board singing the Swedish National Anthem. We proceeded to Le Havre, France, to take on more fuel and provisions. The British asked the French to blockage our ship so we left in the middle of the night after cutting our lines. After a bad storm in the Bay of Biscay we finally got through Gibraltar to the Mediterranean. We passed a British flotilla carrying the Queen of England to South Africa. They asked for our colors. We raised the Magen David since the BBC broadcasts had been tracking our progress. We went across to Tangier and hid in a cove for two days, and then we proceeded across the Mediterranean to Italy. A few days later we hit Monteponto in the Gulf of Taranto in Italy where we used our long boats and pulled ourselves ashore on a wire anchored to the shore and took on another 700 Ma'apilim. What a night. We lost nobody due to a few miracles.

We then set out for Palestine and a day out of Haifa we were surrounded by 5 or 6 British warships. They proceeded to jump us but we took evasive action and tore the side of one of the British frigates. Eventually they tear-gassed the whole ship and managed to land many marine commandos, the infamous "Calaniot" and they took over the ship but they couldn't stop us from running our ship up on the beach at Bat Galim. We were dragged off our ship onto prison ships. Empire Lifeguard was the one I was on and we were deported to Cyprus where we met the other thousands of Jews interned there. That's a story all by itself.

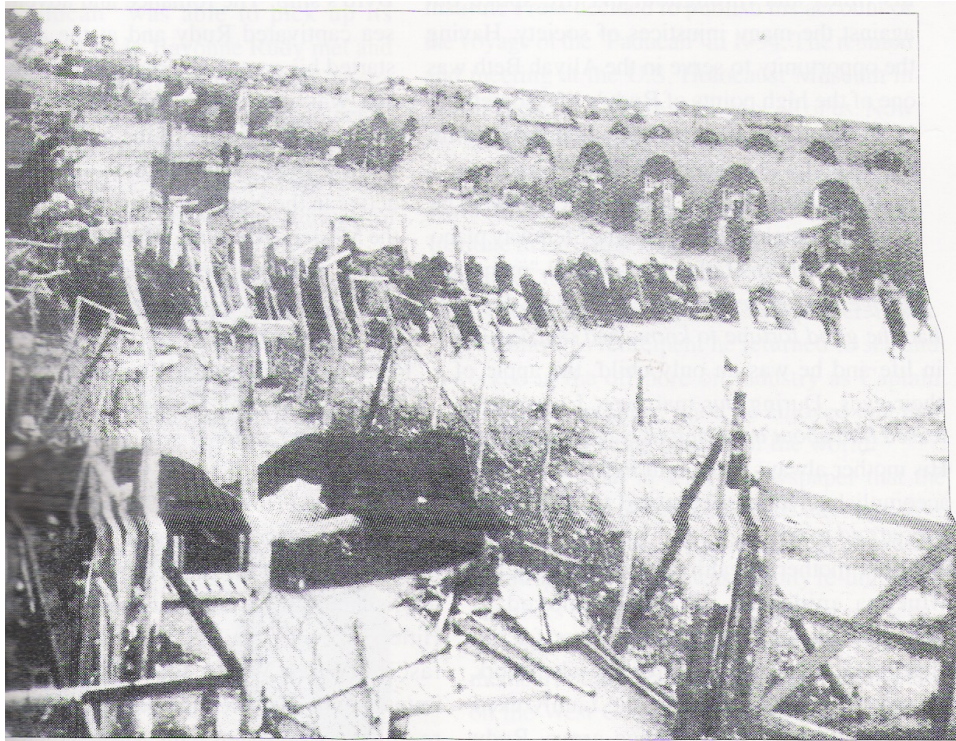
These people, survivors of the death camps only wanted to go to a home for Jews. They gave up chances of going elsewhere. To my dying day I will never forget these fellow Jews. I was so proud to be one of them. I was eventually able to escape to Palestine, spending a few months there and then back to Canada to help recruit the 1st Canadian Volunteers to fight in 1948.

I returned to Palestine in April 1948 with the Canadian Machal and went into the army to fight at Latrun (3 times) and then proceeded to the navy after the first cease fire on the "Wedgwood" which had been turned into a warship. We fought off Egyptian ships trying to attack Tel Aviv port, shot down an Egyptian bomber (a Dakota) and sailed into Tyre Lebanon, and shot up the port. After the next cease fire I went into the air force, training as a flight controller at Akir and then spent the rest of the war until April 1949 in charge of the Beer Sheva air strip.

To summarize

In Cyprus the British were very correct and let us run the camp ourselves. The few soccer games we had with the British usually ended up in a riot. If one had to have enemies, I was glad it was the British with their concept of fair play. Our relations with the Ma'apilim were very warm and some great friendships were formed. We were young and the women were young, and they thought we were great Jewish heroes and treated us accordingly. We met some of them after we came back to fight in 1948 and to this day I still see some of them.

I was born in Montreal, Canada, October 30 1924 which makes me 76 years of age. I was in the Habonim in Toronto before I went into the Canadian armed forces in late 1943. Took air gunner and wireless training and by the time I was ready to go overseas to fight the war had ended with the defeat of Germany and Japan. After that, I was recruited by a Hagana Shaliach to join the Aliya Bet, and that is how the story began.



Detention camps in Cyprus