

Ellis (Buddy) Robbins

Volunteer from the USA on the "Hagana"

**This s the Way it Was**

I was born in Baltimore, Maryland on 17 July 1923, and was brought up in a strongly Zionist-oriented background. My parents were very active in the Zionist movement, my father with Hashomer and Poalei Tzion and my mother was President of the Pioneer Women's group for many years. Her brother, my uncle Joseph Meyerhoff, was very active on behalf of Israel, giving a great deal of time, effort and money, and served for many years as national chairman of Israel Bonds in America. I grew up in the Zionist Youth Groups Gordonia, and later after their merger, with Habonim. While I was growing up, many of the emissaries from the Yishuv in Palestine, including Golda Meir, were hosted in my home.

When the USA got into WW II after Pearl Harbor, I was attending George Washington University in Washington, DC. I left school and enlisted in the U S Navy, where I served from May 1942 to February 1946. I was assigned to the 12th Amphibious Fleet, based at Exeter, England for three years, and saw action on D-Day. While I was stationed in England I met up with Elliot Kaufman, an old friend from Baltimore and the Zionist youth movement, who was in the Army and also stationed in England. When I got back from England to await my discharge from the Navy, Elliot and I got together again. He told me that he had heard of Aliya Bet, and that they were looking for volunteers to man the ships. We talked about it, and decided that that would be a great way to "put our money where our mouth was" after all the years of talking Zionism. So we went to New York to volunteer for Aliya Bet and were sworn into the Hagana.

Two weeks after my discharge from the Navy I was aboard one of the two Canadian corvettes obtained by Aliya Bet, helping to prepare it for the duty ahead. This ship was later renamed "Hagana", and I was with her for both her historic runs to Palestine. The first time she left from France and the second, and more dramatic run, was from Yugoslavia. When we left France we had 1,100 refugees aboard and we had one other passenger, I. F. Stone, a well-known columnist and author. It was on that trip that he wrote his book, "Underground to Palestine" in which I was the crew member he described as "Fireman X". Among the refugees we had a large number of ultra-orthodox members of Agudat Yisrael. I remember some of them approaching us Erev Shabat and saying that since we were working to save all those lives, it was permissible to work, and that they wanted to volunteer to help us.

The many historic firsts that occurred on that first run of the "Hagana" are surely documented elsewhere, but a couple of comments on the dramatic run from Yugoslavia might be in place. We were supposed to take some 1,200 refugees, and hopefully come back for more later. But once in Yugoslavia, we were told that this would be the last Aliya Bet ship allowed there, but we could take as many refugees as we could get aboard. We managed to get 2,600 aboard, with about half below deck and half on deck. It was so crowded that the ones above could not get below, and the ones below could not get topside. It was a very difficult and dangerous trip for all, passengers and crew alike, but we did get all the refugees to Palestine. Some of the crew with whom I shared the experiences and satisfactions of Aliya Bet that I remember well were Hal (Ranger) Monash, who was later killed at the Castel, near Jerusalem; Sam Weiss, a taxi driver from Washington, DC; Yis Bernstein from a Zionist training farm in New Jersey; Moishe Sokolov, from Canada; Milton (Limey) Miller, from England via the USA; Yehuda (Avraham) Halevi, from Hashomer Hatzair and the ship's cook; and Yaakov Frank, son of the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, who had just been discharged from the U S Army.

But the ones who impressed me the most were the Palestinians from the Yishuv who made all the arrangements that made everything happen, and later helped us to escape the British. Among them, the one I remember most clearly was Aryeh Friedman. I met him again a few years after returning to the States when he visited Baltimore aboard our ship, the "Hagana" which had become the flagship of the fledgling Israeli Navy.

After we were caught by the British Navy at sea, and rammed, boarded and towed to Haifa harbor, I met some of those same representatives of the Yishuv closer and more personally than before. They came aboard our ship for relief work with the refugee passengers, and were able to combine that work with getting us off the ship and out of the harbor ahead of the British police. I remember sitting on the terrace of the Hotel Carmelia and reading in the Palestine Post that the British police reported that they had identified the crew of the "Hagana" and were going aboard to arrest them.

After a few days I was able to leave Haifa and went to Jerusalem, where I was introduced to the management of the Palestine Post and immediately went to work there. Only occasionally was I advised to take off a couple of days and go visit a kibbutz when some intensive police activity was anticipated. Soon after arriving in Jerusalem I met a beautiful young Sabra who had just been discharged after four years of service in the British Army. The attraction was mutual and a few months later we were married through the office of the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, all arranged by his son, our good friend Yaakov Frank.

We planned to stay on and live in Palestine, but I wanted my bride to meet my family, and I wanted my parents to get to know her. We planned a trip to the States that was to last no longer than one year. But the best-intentioned plans

don't always work out, and because of family matters we were not able to return as planned. And soon the years stretched out and the State of Israel was declared and we were still in the States. We became active in local Zionist affairs, we recruited volunteers, including doctors and nurses, to help in the Israeli war effort. We helped locate munitions and equipment that could be purchased for Israel. And we helped plan and establish a successful weekly pro-Israel radio program. At the same time we were able to interfere with similar pro-Arab activities in the area.

Ultimately I was able to complete my education, and have been a Certified Public Accountant for many years. Our son, Don Asher, followed in the same direction to become a CPA as well, and is now a partner in an international accounting and consultant firm. Over the years we have made trips back to Israel, but we find everything so different from what we remembered. We've been particularly sorry to see how the Haredim have attained so much influence, and have become so vocal in the politics of Israel. It seems they are fanatics intent on creating a Jewish Vatican, which is certainly not what I had envisioned for the Jewish State.

I feel privileged to have been part of Aliya Bet, and consider it to be a highlight in my life.



Babies on the deck in the ship "HAGANAH"