

A tale of Heroism in Maccabi Tzair Israel

Dear Chaverim,

In the 6 decades of Israel's independence, any Jew who wants to live here is automatically entitled to do so. Through the work of our National Institutions – the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization – we have grown used to the fact that any Jew, after a short bureaucratic procedure, is enrolled as citizen and joins his or her destiny with that of the Jewish State.

It was not always so. When the Land of Israel was ruled between 1917 and 1948 by the British, first as occupied enemy (Turkish) territory, then as the Palestine Mandate of the League of Nations and after 1945 by the UN, entry of Jews wanting to make aliyah was very severely restricted. The dismal series of White Papers¹ certainly contributed vastly to trapping Jews on the European continent during the 1930's, suffering discrimination and persecution by anti-Semitic governments, and ultimately, for all too many, slavery and mass murder at the hands of the Nazis and their myriad collaborators.

The people in the small Yishuv² and Zionists abroad fought British policies, developing a complex apparatus of "illegal" immigration called "Aliya Bet" or "alternative Aliyah" as it is sometimes known. "Illegal immigrants", the vast majority from Europe, sailed through the Mediterranean in small ships and boats, evade British coastguards and reach the coast of Palestine to be absorbed into the Yishuv. Of those who succeeded, most lived their new lives in Eretz Yisrael in constant evasion of arrest and deportation.

Our Youth Movement, Maccabi Tzair, was part of this national effort to save Jews from persecution and bring them to the Yishuv that was the basis on which modern Israel was built. A very moving story was published in **Maccabi Tzair's 80th Anniversary Album**³ telling of the zeal invested in the Aliyah Bet campaign, and the yet greater courage needed to create and defend a State invaded at birth in 1948 by 5 Arab armies. Maccabi Tzair's first Nationwide Course for Madrichim (Youth Counselors) was held in 1934, a year before the 2nd Maccabiah, succeeding the 1931 Special Course, and specifically to display the growing strength and extensive, flourishing activities of Maccabi Tzair to 'citizens' of the Yishuv newly arrived from Diaspora countries.

The 1934 Course strongly emphasized sportsmanship, physical fitness, scouting skills and security as missions required of Jewish youth then and in the future. It was the first Course held on a nationwide basis. An extraordinary event occurred during it which imbued the Maccabi spirit for the next generations. These are the words of Avner Kahanov from Ness Ziona:

"Our Course took place in the Maccabiah Stadium next to the Tel Aviv seashore. Two of us represented Maccabi Tzair Ness Tziona, me and Adam Yalovsky. On one of the Fridays during our Course everyone got together for a traditional Kabbalat Shabbat. A sudden hush fell over the hall as a written note was

¹ British Government Policy Documents issued from 1922 restricting entry of Jews to Palestine. The last White Paper was the worst, purportedly raising the annual quota but actually limiting entry to 75,000 Jews over a 5-year period from 1939 with none to be allowed in after 1944.

² After the first large Zionist aliyah in 1882 and until the establishment of Israel in 1948, the Jewish population of Eretz Yisrael and the towns and settlements they established were (and are) collectively called the "Yishuv".

³ Many thanks to Maccabi Tzair Israel Director-General Roey Tshuva for sharing this story with me.

handed to Course Commander Yehoshua Alouf (Sports Dept. Director of the 1st Maccabiah, but who was also, as everyone knew, a leader of the Haganah in Jerusalem⁴). And just as sudden, Yehoshua looked serious and concerned. He thought for a moment, looked at us, and said in a quite laconic, matter-of-fact tone:

'An illegal immigration ship carrying 250 of our brothers and sisters has anchored about 1 mile (1.5 kilometers) from where we are. As of right now, helping those people off the boat and bringing them ashore is entrusted to the commanders and trainees of this course. That's our job; Haganah people will take them from the beach to safe havens. You should know that British coastguard boats are patrolling out there, sweeping the coastline and looking for our ship, and at any moment, British detectives and police are likely to seal off this place. So, we're in a race against time, and from this moment, consider yourself enlisted in this operation, totally disciplined and following your commanders' orders. Get ready for a tough fight with the British.

We need 3 volunteers to go with our chaver Walther Frankl⁵. This team will reach the ship undetected, board it, organize the immigrants to disembark into small boats, and navigate them to the shore - real quick. Torchlight flashes from shore will indicate the landing spot. Everyone else will form into groups under your commanders, spread out along the beach, step into the surf, get the people off the boats and carry them dryshod onto the beach, so the boats can do quick turnarounds back to the ship and bring out more immigrants.'

Frankl steps up, Yalovsky and me jump to join him, followed by a flock of others. He picks us Ness Tziona guys and a chap from Tel Aviv. Frankl dives into that choppy and fairly rough sea and we swim after him. From time to time we glimpse torchlight flashes from the ship, appearing and disappearing as it bobs up and down on the water.

It was so tough for us kids to battle against those waves! We weren't used to swimming such a long distance. Before that night, we'd never swum anywhere except in the small irrigation dams near the citrus groves, and I tell you that if I wasn't driven by our ultra-important mission, I certainly couldn't have made it. Anyway, I was sort of pulled towards our goal because the closer we approached, the ship loomed bigger and bigger."

Muscles straining, they clambered up a rope ladder dropped from the ship's side. Within a few minutes, 20 immigrants filled the first lifeboat heading for shore with the teenage Kahanov in charge as the navigator responsible for getting them safely there. 4 Greek sailors manned the oars; no-one dared utter a sound; everyone peered towards the shore on the lookout for torch flashes indicating the landing zones British forces had not yet reached. Only oar splashes and the slapping sound of the sea against the boat's hull disturbed the absolute silence until they met Kahanov's

⁴ Serving later as Chief Inspector of Physical Education, Alouf made an indelible impression on the character of young Israelis, acknowledged when he was awarded the Israel Prize in 1974.

⁵ Represented Austria at the 1928 Olympics, made aliyah after being Victor Ludorum of the 1st Maccabiah, became National 5,000 meters & Marathon Champion. A botanist trained at the Kadoorie School, he pioneered domestic and market gardening and wrote what is still the standard encyclopedia on the subject in Israel.

fellow-trainees standing thigh-high in the roaring surf to carry immigrants onto the beach.

As soon as the last of the immigrants left the boat, it was turned around to fetch more from the ship, but without Kahanov, who was ordered to stay on the beach. Flopped exhausted on the sand, he was somewhat embarrassed to be repeatedly kissed in front of his astonished fellow-trainees by immigrants elated to have reached the Promised Land. That was when the excited teenagers of the 1934 Course Madrichim realized just how history-making was the moment in which they were involved.

Their adventure wasn't over, not by a long way. Haganah forces arrived to spirit the newcomers away to hideouts safe from the British. Then the next boatload of immigrants arrived. One who jumped out too soon was swiftly trapped in the strong undertow and swept back into the sea, in imminent danger of drowning. Kahanov saw him, ran breathless through the surf, dived into the waves with other trainees behind him, swam out, collared the unfortunate and dragged him unconscious but still breathing to the beach, where they immediately tried to revive him, stripping off his clothing to apply heart massage.

It dawned on Kahanov that this fellow, roughly his own age, was of very modest means, inadvertently trapped in the sea by the weight of wearing layer upon layer of all the clothes he had in the world in order to start his new life in Eretz Yisrael. The Maccabi Tzair kids ripped off the heavy seawater-soaked overcoats and sweaters, "Like peeling a thick onion," Kahanov recalled thinking as he continued the heart massage. Finally, the young fellow blinked, opened his eyes and said, "My name's David. Thank you for saving my life!" To which the relieved Kahanov replied, "I'm Avner. Welcome to Eretz Yisrael!"

The trainees heaped dry clothes on him and Haganah people put a coat over his shoulders as they hurried him away to safety. Kahanov and the others turned to await the next lifeboat, then to their horror, saw its interception by a British patrol boat, with another following in its wake; a wail of sirens signaled the approach of British forces to the landing beach. Avner and the others took to their heels, escaping into the night.

The British trapped the last 17 immigrants and 4 Greek sailors in the lifeboat, along with Walther Frankl and Adam Yalovsky who stayed aboard the ship to organize the disembarkation, the ship's captain and all immigrants still on board. The ship was impounded and towed to Jaffa harbor, the prisoners detained in the Jaffa police station lockup to await trial. Avner visited his friend Adam and commander Walther every day; luckily, Maccabi Tzair's "lawbreakers" were sentenced to pay heavy fines and freed from prison.

That's not the end. 14 years later, on Rosh Hashanah 1948, Avner Kahanov - long after he graduated from Maccabi's youth movement - set out with a reconnaissance patrol in the Negev after enduring a night of shelling by Egyptian Army artillery in the Faluja pocket. Observing the Irak Suweidan Police Fortress, he was hit in the leg by a sniper's bullet; wounded and pinned down behind a shallow sand heap in

open country, bullets smacking into the dust all around him, Kahanov signaled to his patrol to stay where they were, return fire, but not attempt to rescue him. He was certain they'd also be hit. One soldier disobeyed his order, zigzagging on the run from rock to rock towards the wounded officer, ignoring the bullets fired at them. When IDF machine gunners silenced the Egyptian fire, Kahanov and his rescuer - nicked in the shoulder by an enemy round - were evacuated to the hospital at the IDF's Bilu camp. Avner was mad at his would-be rescuer. The soldier, however, smiled shyly: "You surely remember a night back in 1934 when you fought the sea to save a young illegal. You almost drowned yourself, dragging that kid to shore, then bringing him back to consciousness. Remember that kid? Well, that's me, David. You risked your life to save me, so this time it was my duty and privilege to try to save you."

Two real, historical episodes of heroism; a testimony to Maccabi values, conviction and responsibility, deep love for the Land of Israel and dedication to our mission of building the Jewish State on the soil of Eretz Yisrael; a chronicle of courageous Maccabi Youth who dreamed of a better future for our People, and who actually made it happen through their pioneering actions.