



## **Eli Avizov, Israeli and International Champion**

It's hard to know how many leases Eli Avizov has had on life, but three of them are easy to count.

The first came at his birth in 1939, in what was then known as the country of Palestine. The second came 26 years later, shortly after Eli, a national champion rower, finished a workout on the Yarkon River in Tel Aviv.

En route home by motorcycle, Eli swerved to avoid a pedestrian who had suddenly walked into the road, causing him to crash into a parked truck.

With a skull fracture, broken arm and numerous other injuries, Eli's chances of survival were put at 50-50. After two weeks in a coma, the odds turned in his favor and he gained consciousness. As result of the severe trauma, he had no recognition of his family, couldn't walk and was unable to speak.

"They had to train me. I had to learn everything again, including all basic functions for living," he said. Six months later, Eli was back on the water and participated in the National Israeli Championship, taking first place and qualifying to participate in the 1965 Maccabiah Games. There, he took first place in the Single.

By then, Eli was a highly accomplished rower who had won his first Israeli National Championship in 1962. He competed in single and double sculls at European and World Championships in Luzerne, Amsterdam and Bled. He had trained three months in Kiel, Germany at the invitation of Coach Karl Wiepke and also received coaching from the legendary Karl Adam of Ratzeburg Rowing Club.

"I was with a bunch of world champions. It opened my eyes to a whole new world," Eli said.

In 1964, Eli qualified for the Israeli Olympic rowing team. But love got in the way and he never made it to Tokyo. Whirlwind plans to marry Yaffa, an Israeli-born woman who lived in the United States, pre-empted the competition.

In 1967, Eli and Yaffa moved to the United States, where they eventually raised two sons and a daughter. Based in New York City, Eli worked for 40 years as a diamond manufacturer, cutting and polishing some of the world's largest and most rare diamonds. Nicknamed "The Man with

the Golden Hand,” he would create the finest, most excellently graded cuts of diamonds for private dealers in America as well as internationally.

An all-around athlete, Eli ran seven marathons and won medals in rifle target shooting. Eli rowed in Long Island at Hewlett Bay Rowing Club as well as at Columbia University’s facilities on Spuyten Duyvil Creek. He competed in regattas in Philadelphia, CT and other locations. Most of these races were raced in his single that he had named “Yaffa,” after his wife.

After moving to New Jersey in 1988, through conversation with a friend, he found Nereid in 1995 which at that point was former boatyard undergoing construction. “I met and spoke with a member named Mike Lyons, who was sanding the floor. There were lots of other guys around working, helping out with the construction and renovation effort,” Eli said. “I knew that I wanted to become a member and I’m so glad I did. What this club has achieved over the last 15 years is amazing. It is beyond belief!”

In 2006, despite maintaining a healthy body weight and excellent conditioning, genetics took over and Eli developed heart complications, leading to the need for a defibrillator to be surgically implanted. In 2009, his condition worsened to congestive heart failure. “The only hope for me was a heart transplant. My name went on a very long list.”

On a rainy August afternoon in 2011, as Eli and Yaffa were about to have lunch in a diner, a cellphone rang. It was someone from Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, calling to say they had a heart.

“I waited years for that moment, and when it came, it hit like a bomb,” he said.

At 3 a.m. the next day, the eight-hour surgery began. Eli awoke 24 hours later with the heart of a 33-year-old woman from Pennsylvania—and his third lease on life.

“It was amazing,” he said. “God gave me my life back. After my accident in Israel, God helped me to get back to myself, and then he did it again.”

Shortly after his surgery, Eli sent a letter to the hospital for the family of the anonymous donor, whose lung, liver and kidney were also transplanted to other lucky recipients that same day.

“I had to thank the woman who was so generous as to save four lives,” Eli said. “I did not have enough words in my mouth to express myself. I went to synagogue, I donated some money, and I asked the rabbi to pray for her soul. Whatever her race or religion, she was one of a kind.”

Recovery was a long process that included months of physical therapy. Unsurprisingly, Eli incorporated ERG pieces into his workouts. More than once, Eli visited Nereid and looked out at the Passaic, longing to row. Doctors were unsure about whether he should.

“Rowing has to do with reach at the catch and the doctors thought I should not open my chest

like that,” he said. “I was very upset but I knew my ambitions, I knew what I wanted to do. Besides being around the family, I wanted to go to the water.”

In June 2012, Eli felt fit enough to row in a double scull with Nereid member John McEldowney. Just before the season ended in November 2012, Eli and Nereid Head Coach Boris Roque Alvarez rowed in the club’s fall “fun races” against boats mixed with masters and juniors. And they won.

“I can’t tell you how many times I looked up to the sky and said, ‘God, thank you.’ Even before I was sick, on an early morning, on a beautiful day, I used to say, ‘God, thank you for the pleasure of being out here, for rowing.’ And now with my new heart, I say thank you even more.”

*Eli’s accomplishments in rowing include:*

- 1961: 6th Maccabiah Games in Israel in 4+.
- 1962: First place, Israel National Championship, 1x
- 1962: World Rowing Championships in Luzerne, Switzerland, 1x and 2x
- 1964: European Championships in Bosbaan, Amsterdam, 1x
- 1965: First place, 7th Maccabiah Games in Israel, 1x
- 1966: World Rowing Championships in Bled, Yugoslavia, 2x
- 1966: International regatta, Villach, Austria, 2x
- 1995: First place, Frostbite Regatta, 2x
- 1997: First place, Frostbite Regatta, 2x
- 2000: Joined Nereid Boat Club.
- 2004: Last regatta, Head of the Schuylkill Regatta, 1x

In 2015, at 76, Eli competed in his first regattas in over 11 years at the Overpeck Sprints (NJ), USRowing Master National Championship and HOSR. In 2016, he competed in the Overpeck Sprint, USRowing Master national championship, Independence Day Regatta, HOCR, and HOSR (also in 2017).

Quite a life time of rowing accomplishment at any age!