

The Arms & GACHAL Ship 'Altalena'

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Before the outbreak of WW II and while it was going on, from August 1934 until December 1944, three groups were active in clandestine Aliya ("Aliya Bet") from Europe: (1) The Ha'chalutz movement and the Mossad Le'Aliya Bet (30 voyages); (2) The Revisionist movement (23 voyages until October 1940); (3) Private individuals (26 voyages). Towards the end of the war the Mossad renewed its activity, which concentrated on saving survivors of the Holocaust in Europe and even expanded its work to North Africa. The Revisionist movement and the private individuals did not renew their activities in this field, arguably for lack of funds (in the past, most of the immigrants had to pay for their trip to Palestine, but the Holocaust survivors had no money).

All the 66 Aliya Bet voyages after the end of WW II were carried out by the Mossad Le'Aliya Bet except for one voyage that was organized by the American branch of the Revisionist movement. This branch operated under the leadership of Hillel Kook who used the pseudonym Peter Bergson (see the story of the "Ben Hecht" under Aliya Bet/Aliya Bet Stories).

In a conversation that took place between Menachem Begin, the Etzel (the Irgun) commander and Yitzchak Ben-Ami, one of its top commanders and a member of the Bergson Group (the name used to refer to all the members of Kook's immediate circle), which took place in January of 1947, the attitude of Etzel towards Aliya was made clear: that was to be left to the Hagana - Mossad Le'Aliya Bet. Aliya during the period of 1946-8 did not have the same importance of saving lives as it had during 1934 -1940. Any vessels that the Etzel was to procure during this period were to be used for bringing armed personnel to Palestine. Several months later the same Ben-Ami told Avraham Stavski (another top man in the Etzel hierarchy who was later killed aboard the Altalena), that the Etzel was considering bringing ships to Palestine that would carry armed men and weapons. This was in contrast to the stand of David

Ben Gurion, who was the head of the Jewish Agency at the time and responsible for defense. When he appointed Shaul Avigur in March 1948 to be responsible for procurement in Europe, he instructed him not to carry weapons and survivors on one vessel. These instructions remained in force even after the British left the country, as he did not want the UN to catch such mixed cargo.



In accord with Begin's instructions, "The Hebrew Committee for National Freedom" – a cover organization of the Bergson Group – procured a vessel in June 1947, an American LST #138, a WW II surplus that cost \$75,000. It underwent repairs and a crew of 23 - including 4 non-Jews - was assembled. **Monroe Fein**, who had previously served in the American navy, became the Captain. (Nine additional men, Etzel fighters, were scheduled to board the vessel when it would reach Italy.)

*The Captain **Monroe Fein** & the Ship*

In October of 1947 the Altalena was ready to sail, although she had not as yet received clear sailing orders from the Paris Headquarters. Etzel in Europe had not yet collected the weapons and men wanted for the journey. It was suggested that the vessel would make some commercial trips in order to cover its costs and upkeep. Panama papers were procured and during the winter of 1947-48 several runs were made to Cuba, Italy, France and Casablanca. Several hot arguments were being waged between the various leaders of the Etzel and at one point it was suggested that the vessel be handed to the Hagana for transporting 6,000 Holocaust survivors, in order to unload them in Tel Aviv in February of 1948, when the British were

supposed to pull out of the area. This did not receive the support of the majority and in the end - the vessel was put under the command of the European section of the Etzel with Eliyahu Lankan as its commander.

In March 1948 Lankin and his staff in the Diaspora started to organize a brigade of 5,000 men. Yirme Halperin was in charge of this operation. The preparations were slower than developments in Palestine at that time, and it was obvious that the Etzel would not be able to accomplish all it had intended to in the given time span. Begin's calls for arms and money were becoming alarmingly desperate. There was talk of selling the Altalena for \$300,000, but a unanimous decision was taken not to sell the vessel and Stavski was ordered to find a few more "banana runs" for the ship, so that they would not be losing too much money on her keep. On the 25th of that month, Shmuel Ariel (an active member of the "Hebrew Committee for National Freedom" working in France) presented a tentative agreement that had been reached between the French government and the Etzel. It seemed possible that men and weapons would be allowed to leave France. All the men and women who were to sail were to be gathered near the (southern) port, as well as all the weapons that could be collected there. The Altalena would set sail when it would be known that the British blockade had ended or that we would be able to break through the blockade. The Altalena had become a symbol and it was to bring a band of fighters to Palestine with a great deal of weapons for our comrades there. However, the fate of the Altalena was determined by others.

The procurement branch of the Hagana took an interest in what was happening within the Etzel in France. On April 1st 1948 Oscar (code name for a procurement person in Paris) reported to Shaul Avigur - who had transferred his office to Geneva - that he had heard that the Etzel had put its hands on a great deal of weapons and he would get more details about that from Pela (a woman working for the Mosad for Aliya Bet in Belgium). In Palestine, meetings of the executive committee of the World Zionist Organization were taking place from April 6-9 1948. It seemed that although the Jewish Agency and the executive committee had approved the agreement reached between the various armed forces of the Jews, Ben Gurion had not really come to terms with that. Mapam and Mapai deemed this agreement a very bad one and were determined to put an end to it. Israel Galilee and Levi Eshkol were

appointed to manage future negotiations with the Etzel and these two were also vehemently opposed to this agreement. It seemed that they had a very strong influence on the ultimate fate of the Altalena.

On the 8th of February 1948 Hillel Kook reported to his companions in the “Hebrew Committee for National Freedom” in New York that despite all efforts all over Europe, the amount of weapons that had been procured prior to the sailing of the Altalena was negligible. He suggested that the vessel should sail with young people of army age only and arrive in Tel Aviv before the 15th May. He was doubtful that the French authorities would grant permission to take along weapons. The day of departure was approaching but the Etzel people in Europe had not yet succeeded in getting the necessary military equipment that they had hoped to procure for their fighters, nor had they amassed the number of soldiers that they had intended to mobilize. (Years later, Shlomo Er’el, the Commander of the Navy during the 60’s, said that Begin had appointed him to command the Altalena when it was to arrive in Israel with a compliment of soldiers and become an Etzel naval vessel.)

Following the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel, the “Hebrew Committee for National Freedom” announced on 16th May 1948 that an organization striving for the independence of Israel was no longer necessary and the Altalena was to be the last and crowning achievement of their group. That same evening (according to the report of a top Etzel commander), Begin convened what was to be a friendly gathering of the Etzel and the Hagana. Meridor, Landau and Katz were the Etzel representatives and Eshkol, Galili and David HaCohen was those from the Hagana. The Hagana people were given a rundown of the latest developments concerning the Altalena. It was mentioned then that there was a lack of funds to procure armaments and they were told that in addition to the 1000 men that the Etzel was bringing it was possible to load another 1000 – 2000 men of the Hagana, plus whatever arms the Hagana could muster. The Etzel thought that the Hagana should pay a sum for the use of the ship and with that sum they would be able to procure additional arms.

Ben Gurion wrote his own version of what had occurred in his diary, and it differs from the above. He wrote that the Hagana leaders were called late at night to a

meeting with the Etzel, and there it was suggested that the Hagana purchase their vessel for a quarter of a million dollars, with which the Etzel would be able to purchase more arms. It is not quite clear whether the Etzel intended that the Hagana should purchase or lease the Altalena. The Hagana people in Europe were instructed to investigate the use of the Altalena and visited Marseille in order to check out the vessel. Captain Fein showed them around and then Stavski, who - soon after - broke off the contact with them. It was then decided that the Hagana would withdraw from further contact but that the ship would report to the Department of Defense as things develop. Nothing happened for some time and the Altalena remained stuck in Marseille. The French officials then made overtures to increase the supply of arms but were unwilling to sign any documents. Only after the Arab armies had invaded Israel did the French government agree to give the Etzel a certain amount of arms in several shipments. Once the Altalena had delivered the first amount of weapons she could return to France and load another shipment.

On the 1st of June Begin and Galili met with their seconds in order to finalize an agreement in which members of the Etzel would be absorbed into Tzahal (IDF). Several battalions of the Etzel were to be formed and all the weapons were to become the property of Tzahal. Etzel was to stop acting independently, including the Jerusalem contingent. On June 5th more of the top leaders of Etzel came to Israel from Europe. They were greeted warmly by the Israeli Etzel and Begin's first question was: "When is the Altalena coming and what does she carry?" Ben Eliezer could not give him an exact answer and could only suggest that they prepare a port where it would be able to unload. Begin then laid before them the agreement that had been reached with Tzahal and wanted to inform the Department of Defense immediately but Ben Eliezer was more cautious and suggested they wait until they were certain as to what cargo she was carrying.

Ariel phoned Lankin and told him that weapons from the French Army were starting to be assembled in Marseille and the work was progressing well. All being well the vessel would have been able to sail by 7th or 8th of June 1948. In Israel, two important Etzel commanders toured the beaches from Haifa to Tel Aviv, in search of a suitable place for the Altalena to come ashore. The map of their survey was to be brought to Europe by one of them. There were conflicting intelligence reports at this time. On

the one hand it was said that the cease fire was imminent, while another report said that the crash of the Israeli defense forces was imminent. The situation was very precarious and the weapons that the Altalena was to bring were liable to be of critical importance. The Etzel leaders in the Diaspora decided to wait a bit longer and take with them a larger amount of weapons along with the 1,000 fighters they had assembled

Paris, 11th June: Another wire was sent to Israel by the Hagana representatives in France, in which they reported that the Etzel was loading their vessel at Port de Bouc. A list of the passengers on board was given to the Israeli consul in Paris by an Etzel officer there, so that the passengers would have visas when they arrived in Israel. The Chief of Intelligence of the Hagana had prepared a plan to prevent the sailing of the Altalena but this plan was never implemented. The French officials, on their part, were becoming increasingly nervous by the delay in the sailing of the vessel and wanted the pilot to steer the vessel out to sea that very evening. At 20:00 hours of the 11th June the Altalena left port and the wireless operator tried unsuccessfully to contact Israel. At midnight the BBC announced that a cease-fire in Israel had been declared and that a vessel of the Etzel had sailed from Port de Bouc with weapons and hundreds of men on board.

Tel Aviv, 12th June: The BBC announcement was received in Israel and Begin became very worried. He did not want to be held responsible for abrogating the cease-fire and he decided to delay the arrival of the vessel. A message was radioed repeatedly to the vessel that it should delay its arrival. His message to Paris was that the Altalena could not "come home now", why did she leave? The Etzel officials in Paris who received Begin's message wanted the vessel to sail temporarily to Yugoslavia but another official thought that it was a bad idea to send the ship to a Communist country. This was liable to upset the French. Hillel Kook decided to fly by plane to Israel and if worse came to worse he would convince Begin that the ship would return to France.

The vessel itself could not establish radio contact with Paris, or with Israel. Lankin - the Commander and Fein - the Captain - were worried. They prepared to land in front of Frishman Street in Tel Aviv. They felt that the whole operation was in danger and

mounted machine gun nests in several stations on the vessel. The men on the vessel were not trained as combat fighters but their morale was high. There were 820 men and 120 women who came from 15 different countries. It was decided to spend the rest of the time practicing anti-aircraft drill. It was difficult to do other kinds of training within the confined area of the vessel. Meanwhile, life goes on and a wedding took place on board the ship. The Captain in his white dress uniform conducted the service and Zeev and Monique were officially married at sea.

The New York Times reported on June 13th that two vessels had vanished from French ports carrying about 1,000 Olim to Israel. The LST Altalena was one of these, carrying 800 passengers and a good deal of weapons and the other was the sailing vessel "Marie Anique" carrying 150 men, women and children. This last vessel had sailed from La Ciota, not far from Marseille. The NY Times reporter could find no reason for the latter to leave at night other than it may have been carrying men of military age who were liable to serve in the Israeli army; this would be contrary to the terms of the cease-fire. "Marie Anique" was the Hagana vessel "HaPortzim" that broke the British blockade in Dec' 1947 and had returned a second time after the Declaration of Independence, carrying more Olim and flying a French flag.

On the night of the 13th of June, after feverish and unsuccessful efforts to establish contact, a woman's voice was suddenly heard on the radio saying, "Keep away, keep away, and wait for orders!" Once again there was silence. After some deliberation the decision was taken to make full steam ahead and it was hoped that when the vessel was nearer shore, radio contact would be reestablished. On shore, Begin told the Minister of the Interior that the ship had sailed without his permission and he had given her orders to keep away from port. June 14th was a quiet day and the Etzel took stock of what the French had given them as a present; there were 5000 Enfield rifles, 6 armored half-tracks, 300 Bren machine guns, 150 Spandau machine guns and several thousand aerial bombs. There was more arms that the Etzel had also purchased; hundreds of rifles, bazookas and machine guns, ammunition and explosives and a present for the "Lechi" (an extreme right-wing underground group that had split from Etzel) of 50 crates of assorted arms, as a symbol of good will. All the above was sufficient to arm six battalions. On 15th June it became clear to the

Etzel in Tel Aviv that the Altalena had not received word to stay away and that she was coming in to Israel somewhere.

Begin felt that he had to let the Ministry of Defense know of the vessel's arrival. On the 16th June Begin called Galili, Eshkol and David HaCohen to an urgent meeting with himself, Ben Eliezer, Meridor, Landau and Feiglin. The important item on the agenda was: In view of the cease-fire did the government want the vessel to come in? Or should they direct it back to France or somewhere else? Begin did not know that the Hagana was waiting for a vessel of its own – "Inaco" - that was carrying dynamite and half-tracks to Tel Aviv. He also did not know that the Hagana had all the information about the load and the passengers that the Altalena was carrying. Eshkol reprimanded Begin for carrying arms and men on the same voyage and Galili asked Begin if Etzel would sell the arms to Tzahal. Begin answered that the weapons were the holy property of the Jewish people; Galili said that he would report that to B-G.

That night Ben Gurion summed up this meeting in his diary; he wrote that the vessel, 4,500 tons, was bringing 800-900 men, 5000 rifles, 250 Bren machine guns and 5 million rounds of ammunition, 50 bazookas and 10 Bren carriers. The Director of Tel Aviv port thought that all of this could be unloaded in one night. B-G thought that it would be inadvisable to unload in Tel Aviv and it will be better to do it in a unknown beach. Galili phoned Begin the following morning and told him that the vessel had permission to come in.

On June 17th there was still no contact with the Altalena but Galili thought that the Etzel was lying when he was told that. He ordered a plane to be sent out to sea to scout for the vessel. David HaCohen and Pinchas Vaze, the Director of Procurement of Hagana / Tzahal, suggested that the Altalena be unloaded opposite Kfar Vitkin when it arrived. Begin did not object and thought that men of Tzahal should be present at the unloading.

Then came the matter on which they did **not agree**. Etzel thought that all the weapons should be stored and that both the Hagana and the Etzel should guard them. This was rejected by the representatives of the Ministry of Defense and

another meeting was called. On 18 June, when the Altalena was about one day from port and still without contact, another meeting was held between Begin and David HaCohen and Vazze. Begin suggested that 20% of the weapons would go to the Etzel forces in Jerusalem and 30% to the Etzel battalions in Tzahal. Galili agreed to the 20% for the Jerusalem Etzel but demanded that all the rest go to Tzahal unconditionally. There was bickering back and forth and no agreement was reached when at 3:00 in the morning of the 20th June the Altalena ran up onto the shore of the beach opposite Kfar Vitkin.

There were few launches at the site when the vessel came ashore and it would have taken hours for the men to be unloaded and even longer to unload the weapons. Begin called the vessel and ordered it to go back to sea and to come in that evening. The government was convened during the day in order to decide about the vessel. Ben Gurion did not write anything regarding this meeting in his diary but it seemed that he and Moshe Sharet had decided to put the matter in the hands of the Operations Commander of Tzahal and to authorize him to use force if necessary, to force the Etzel to turn over all of the weapons to Tzahal. The Altalena stalled offshore until night fell and then once again ran onto the beach. Begin himself came out by launch to meet the vessel. Unloading of the men started immediately and once they were ashore they were loaded onto buses that set off.

Shortly after midnight, all the men were unloaded and only one company was left to help unload the weapons. Secret instructions were given to the commander of regiment in the area of the debarkation, to keep a sharp eye on the Etzel units, and to certify that they would not rebel against Tzahal and support Etzel. Dan Even, commander of the Alexandroni brigade had orders to force Etzel to give up all arms and weapons to Tzahal, and planes were readied at Sdeh Dov in Tel Aviv to bomb the vessel if necessary. The following morning the whole area around Kfar Vitkin had been surrounded by Tzahal and the Etzel force on the ship had been isolated. At this juncture an argument ensued between Begin and Feiglin, who was in command of the Etzel forces on the shore. He was bringing his men back onto the vessel and when Begin asked him why, he replied that it was his intention to take his men out to sea and wait until the end of the cease-fire and then land them at Gaza or El Arish and fight independently. Begin told him that the UN was not the problem and that the

matter could be worked out with Tzahal. He relieved Feiglin of his command, which was then given to Meridor.

The Etzel commander had reported to his supporters in New York several days earlier that Tzahal was totally unprepared for a war and had no arms. This was very far from the actual state of Tzahal at the time. By 15th May 1948 three procurement ships had arrived with arms for Tzahal and by the time the Altalena came, over a month later, six more ships had been already unloaded. The ninth one, "Maestralla", arrived to Tel Aviv on 27 June with 10,000 rifles and 3,300 machine guns plus ammunition (Yehuda Ben Tzur had been aboard this vessel himself).

The shore of Kfar Vitkin that evening: The Altalena made ready to pull out to sea and closed its holds. She was surrounded on the land side and slowly pulled out to sea. Shots were fired at it and the whistling bullets could be heard clearly. A launch pulled away from the pier to meet Altalena in the open water. It was decided by Begin that the vessel would move on to Tel Aviv. On the 22nd June she was heading south under full speed and outdistancing the corvettes that were following her. She landed in front of Frishman Street near the wreck of the "Tiger Hill", an old former Aliya Bet vessel. Begin and Lankin, who were aboard the vessel called by megaphone to the forces on the beach saying that they were bringing arms for themselves and for Tzahal and that they should come and take it. Lankin and Begin decided to come ashore with a squad of men and weapons and try to contact officers of Tzahal. The launch made one trip.

Next, a fight between Tzahal and Etzel forces developed on June 22, 1948 on the Tel Aviv beach, which led to the destruction of Altalena, some of the arms still on her, and to more than dozen casualties. The details of this conflict, as well as the bitter political conflict that ensued ("The Altalena Affair"), are not presented here, as the purpose of this article is only to describe Altalena's contribution to the efforts to bring arms and immigrants to Israel during her fight for independence.