

The Darien Story

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The website accompanying 'The Darien Dilemma' -
a film by Erez & Nahum Laufer

The Kladovo – Shavetz affair

After the German army conquered Poland on September 1939, the Nazis wanted to send all the Jews that remained in the Germany and Austria to Lublin area in Poland. This idea for the solution of the "Jewish Problem" didn't come about, yet it caused much anxiety to the local Jewish leaders.

On November 1939 Ehud Avriel, head of the "Halutz" and a Mossad envoy in Vienna, got permission from Eichmann to take out 822 Jews from Vienna to Bratislava in Slovakia. They were joined by 130 refugees from Germany and 50 from Gdansk. They boarded a German Ship, "Uranus".

For that the ship could be allowed to sail, Ehud Avriel went to Bratislava and bribed the police chief, because at that time in Slovakia was a pro-Nazi regime. The "Uranus" sailed towards Yugoslavia, past Budapest (Hungary) and had to return to Bratislava. The Yugoslavian authorities refused to let the ship pass throw with a Nazi flag. (This explanation is strange, as the Danube is an International waterway and Yugoslavia could not refuse to give passage. Most probably the German ship company didn't want to risk the ship.)

Avriel that had already reached Trieste in Italy on his way to immigrate legally to Eretz - Israel wanted to return to Vienna and to try to solve the problem. In the meantime Mossad activists with the help of Max Spitzer, President of the Jewish congregations of Yugoslavia, hired three Yugoslavian river boats. That waited for the refugees on the border. The Uranus sailed again and at the Yugoslavian border the refugees transferred to the three boats, "Tzar Dusha" "Tzar Nickolai" "Tzarina Marina".

The 3 river boats sailed down the Danube and reached Kladovo near the Rumanian border where they had to stop. The Yugoslavian boat company refused to continue unless there is a ship waiting for them on the Black Sea, because if not the boats wouldn't be able to return before the Danube freezes.



Stuck in Kladovo

Kladovo was a small Gipsy village with a winter boat anchorage. The refugees remained on the boats as the river froze not allowed to leave them. After some time they were allowed ashore for a few hours a day, to walk 25 meters under guard. They spent the whole winter on the boats exposed to the snow and winds, without hot food or proper sanitation in horrible crowded quarters, waiting for the Mossad to find them a ship. Dr. Max Spitzer took care of them, bringing them food, letters etc' every two

weeks. In March 1940 Moshe Agami from the Mossad visited them on his way from Geneva to Israel.

In May 1940 the Yugoslavian boat company wanted the boats back. The refugees went ashore, huts were built for them, others lived with Gypsy families in the village and about 350 were lodged in a coal barge where sleeping bunks were installed. While the ships were in Kladovo 200 Yugoslavian youths joined the group, but as they saw nothing was happening they left, except for David family (Parents and 2 boys) that joined the boats on their way to Kladovo. In Kladovo and later in Shavetz 200 refugees from Germany and Poland joined the transport hoping to reach Eretz -Israel with them.

The summer months passed in relative comfort. They did sport, played, learnt and had sing-song evenings. Couples fell in love and there were 15 marriages. Tirza describes "*The Danube flowed, and everything was green*"; there she fell in love with her husband to be General Dan Lener.

In September Spitzer got permission to move the whole transport to Shavetz, a small town near Belgrade (the Capital). Some of the group lived in private houses, the Halutz (pioneers) group lived in a burnt flour mill, the boys in the first floor and the girls in the second, with a communal kitchen on the ground floor. In Shavetz was a small local Jewish community, around 70 persons with a synagogue, which became a school for 20 young kids.

During November a few times the refugees got notice to pack. One time Spitzer ordered a train and supplies were loaded on the train, but in the end Spitzer cancelled the order and the supplies were taken off. The Despair returned as the second winter came.

In March 1941 200 certificates for youngsters were received. They could leave in groups of 50 each time. 3 such groups left (including the 2 Yugoslavian boys from David family) and a few adult escorts, among them Ehud Nahir and Dan Lener. The fourth group didn't manage to leave before the German invasion to Yugoslavia, on 6th April 1941.

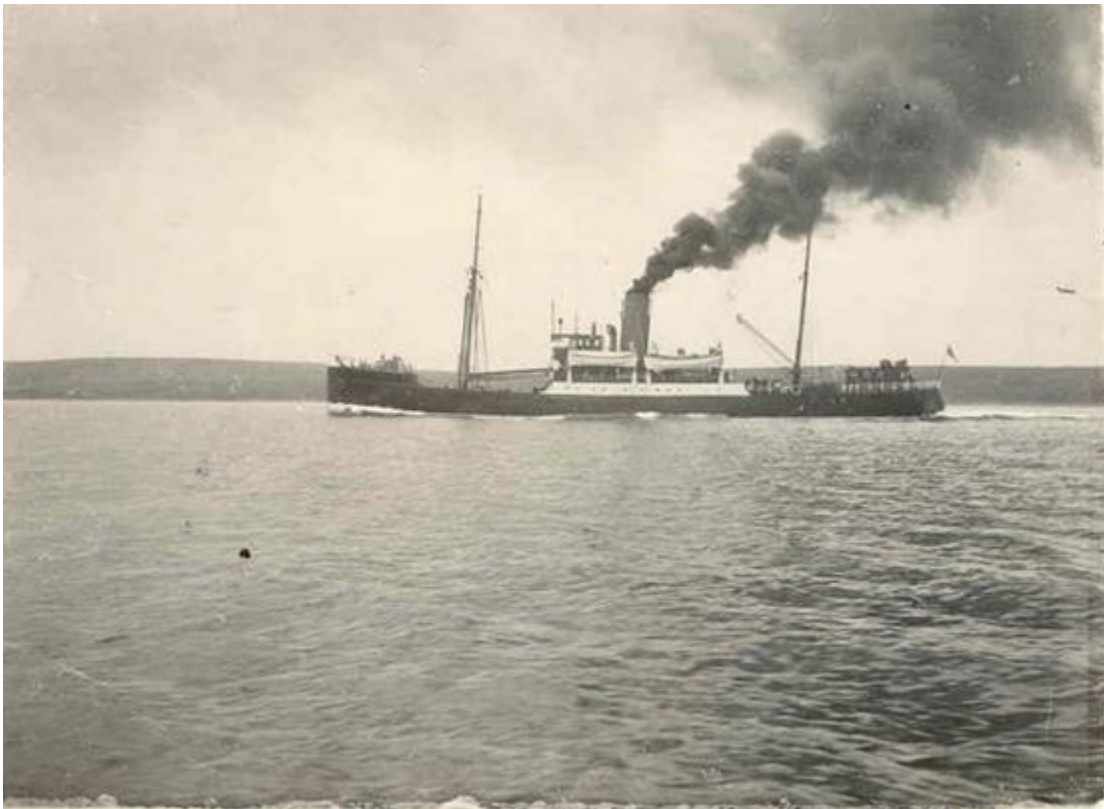


A youth group in Shavetz

After the German occupation all the people were imprisoned in a nearby concentration camp. In October 1941 all the men were taken to a field and shot dead. The women and a few children that remained behind were taken to a camp near Belgrade and from there on April-May 1941 put into "gas" trucks that went through the streets of Belgrade. Their bodies were thrown in some unknown field. As far as we know there were no survivors from the people that remained in Shavetz, except one couple that left just before the Germans came to Croatia and survived by chance in Italy. The remains of the men were moved to the Jewish Cemetery in Belgrade to a mass grave (The Memorial stone in the beginning of the film).

The Darien ship

After visiting Kladovo Agami came to Athens, there he met Shmarya Zameret and together, at end of May 1940, they bought from an old captain Slovakis a sea-ship that was registered in Panama as "Sofia S" (former Pole Star). Zameret changed her name to Darien in honor of the gulf in Panama and he became the registered owner of the ship. As there was another ship with the same name he added II to the Darien. The \$40,000 dollars to buy the ship were received from the Joint in USA. At once after buying the ship Zameret prepared her for taking passengers, bunks in the storage and latrines at bow and stern.



The Darien

The plan was that the Darien would sail to a Yugoslavian port on the Adriatic Sea and pick up the refugees from Kladovo that would come by train. In the meantime the refugees at Kladovo were allowed to leave the river boats.

This plan wasn't carried out. On the 10th of June Italy entered the war on Hitler's side, and sailing on the Adriatic Sea became impossible. Also the Zionist leaders in Tel-Aviv decided to stop the Aliya Beth (illegal immigration) and help the British in all out effort to stop the Nazis. The Zionist leadership believed that their support to the war efforts during the war will be taken into account after the war, and the British will support the interests of the Yishuv and the Zionist Movement.

At this point David Hacoen, the liaison officer between the Hagana and the British intelligence, conceived the idea to sell the Darien to them to be used for sabotage purposes in the Balkans in cooperation with Hagana people.

David Hacoen, Yehuda Arazi (from Hagana Intelligence unit) with Zeav Shind and Moshe Agami (Mossad people) traveled to Cairo and sold the Darien to the SOE (British intelligence unit) for 15,000 Sterling. It was agreed that Zameret will remain the registered owner, as being an American citizen would help in camouflaging her operations.

In the meantime the Darien remained for 2 months in Athens and then in August was sent to Alexandria. After another month, in September, it was sent to Istanbul. Though the Darien was sold to the British it remained in the control of the Mossad and the "international" crew that was supplied by Pendlis (the Fat-Man).

In September Golomb and Katzanelson sent Yehuda Brganiski, "Yulek". He was supposed to make sure that the Darien will be send to Rumania and get the refugees from Shavetz to Palestine (Eretz - Israel). Brganiski in his testimony says that he didn't know that the ship was sold to the British (Shind testified that he knew).

In Istanbul Brganiski met Ruth Kliger that came from Romania.

Brganiski had budget problems, money that was promised didn't arrive. At the beginning of November the Darien arrived in Constanza in Romania and took legal immigrants to Istanbul. With the money he got from the Jewish agency for this trip he managed to send the Darien to Constanza again, to wait for the refugees from Shavetz.

From the 7th November till the 30th the Darien waited in Constanza, but there was danger that the Fat-man's crew will take over the ship, so it was decided that a small group of immigrants (160), including Pioneers from Rumania and Poland together with some well off Jews that paid a big sum for the trip, will go aboard the Darien. The trip should have taken 2 weeks at most. Dr Max Seidman was appointed head of the Passengers committee, and he was told that Aba Berdichev, the Pioneer leader, will be the commander of the trip. The plan was that the Darien will sail to Sulina, a port on the Danube outflow and wait there for the refugees that will arrive by barges from Shavetz. So the ship waited the whole length of December, tied to the quay in Sulina and the passengers were not allowed to leave the ship.

The passengers grumbled about their lingering in Sulina, though they knew in advance that it was one of the ship's missions. In 30th December it became clear that the refugees from Shavetz won't come because the Danube froze, so the Darien sailed back to Constanza.

On the night of 31st December the Darien hit a reef (some believe that the captain did it on purpose so that the "Fat-man" would get the insurance Money). The women and children were taken by lifeboat ashore, the rest of the passengers took every measure to float the ship, and they threw overboard food, coal and gear. After 2 days a tugboat came and pulled the Darien to Constanza and was put into a dry-dock. The damage wasn't big but the repair took a long time and only on the 17th February 1941 it was allowed to sail again. During all this period the 160 passengers were not allowed ashore except once under police escort when they were taken to a hot-bath.

In the meantime Shmarya Zameret arrived in Istanbul on his way back home to Eretz - Israel. Brganiski persuaded him to remain, his services were needed, he was an American Citizen and he was still the registered owner of the Darien. A short time later, at the beginning of December, came Zeav Shind with orders to hand over the Darien free of passengers to Arazi that is arriving in Istanbul. Together with Arazi came Joseph Barpal, because Shind didn't succeed in convincing Brganiski and Ruth that the orders were from the Leaders in Tel-Aviv.

To improve the bad mood that came over the Mossad envoys in Istanbul, Barpal invited the group to a Russian restaurant on New-years eve. The group found themselves sitting in between 3 other groups, Germans, Italians and English, each singing there own songs. In the restaurant Ruth exchanges a few words with Whitehall, the British consul, and Brganiski suspected that Ruth is also in the "Cooperation" with the British.

Next night the group met In Ruth's room in Park Hotel, and a hot debate ensued, in the end they voted (3 against 2) to hand over the Darien to Arazi. Yet none of them had the will or heart to inform Alexander "Azia" Shapira in Rumania, who was taking care of the repairs of the Darian, that he has to take off the passengers from the ship.

After 3 sleepless nights Brganiski came to Ruth and the two decide to continue the operation in spite of the opinions of the other activists. That night they convinced Zameret to join the "Mutiny" and later on Barpal and Shind also joined it. Zameret went to Constanza to take care of the repairs, and had to promise the "Fat-man" half the ship if the sailing succeeds.

At same time Shind traveled to Bulgaria to raise money and recruit more pioneers.

On the 17th February the Darien left Constanza with 460 passengers on board, and reached Varna- Bulgaria next day. There it lost her anchor and drifted away from shore, but with the help of one of the passengers, Olaf Bergenson, it was safely tied to the quay. Bergenson a Norwegian, the only non-Jew among the passengers, was a ship agent as a young man and had also been a navy officer and had experience in sailing ships. The next day the Bulgarian authorities arrested the Captain and one of the sailors, and returned them only after 2 days. Aba Berdichev suspected the Captain and enclosed him under guard in his cabin and appointed Bergenson the Captain.

Only on 28 February the Darien left Varna, after many delays, among them an idea that she'll tug a barge with 400 more people on it (this barge was later known as "Struma"). Yet when Shind got the news that the German Army has arrived in Bulgaria he gave an order to sail at once, he himself escaped from his hotel by the back door as the German officers arrived in the front door.

The Darien left Varna with 750 people aboard, including 40 survivors from the "Salvador" disaster and some criminals that the Bulgarian police forced them to take. Just out of Varna the Darien met a ship sailing from Odessa with legal immigrants. The passengers from both ships stood and sang together, some say they sang the "Hatikva" others say the "Techezakna" ("Be stronger" in Hebrew), most probably both.

On 2nd March the Darien arrived in Istanbul, collected 40 more Salvador survivors (that had remained in Istanbul) and a group of 15 refugees whose transit visas had expired. The Darien anchored in the Bosphorus up until Brganiski managed to raise money to buy coal. Meanwhile, David Hacothen arrived and tried to disembark the passengers on an unpopulated Greek island, but Brganiski sent the Darien on its way disregarding Hacothen. He hired an old Turkish Navigator who together with Bergenson managed to bring the Darien safely to Haifa, on the 19th March 1941.

The Darien reached Haifa with 792 people on and was caught and confiscated by the British Mandate government. The Refugees were in Atlit detention camps for 15 to 18 months.

Darien was the last boat of the Mossad before it started to operate again towards the end of the World War II.

Timetable

- **1933** — Hitler becomes Germany's Chancellor
- **March 1938** — Anschluss Austria becomes part of German Reich
- **November 1938** — Kristalnacht, pogroms all over Germany.
- **1st September 1939** — Germany invades Poland, World War II starts.
- **29th November 1939** — Eichman gives permission for 1000 Jews to leave Vienna for Bratislava, they board the "Uranus"
- **15th December 1939** — Uranus reaches Yugoslavian border, 1000 Jewish refugees transfer to 3 river boats.

- **17th December 3** — River boats stop at Kladovo anchorage on the Danube near Rumanian border.
- **January 1940** — Danube freezes. Ruth sends the "Hilda" with 728 refugees.
- **May 1940** — Belguim & Holland surrender to German army. The refugees leave the river boats and live at the village of Kladovo.
- **29 May** — Shmaria buys the Darien in Athens.
- **June 1940** — The Zionist leaders decide to stop Aliya Beth. Shmarya gets orders to keep the Darien in Greece.
- **June 1940** — German Army marches in Paris. Italy joins the war on German side.
- **July 1940** — Arazi & Shind sell the Darien to S.O.E Special Operations Executive.
- **August 1940** — Darien sails to Alexandria.
- **September 1940** — Refugees go up the Danube to Shavetz Yugoslavia. Brganiski, Ruth Kliger & Darien arrive in Istanbul.
- **9 November 1940** — Darien waits at Constanza Rumania for refugees from Shavetz, Shmaria arrives in Istanbul.
- **20 November** — Rumania & Bulgaria Join war on German side, prosecution of Jews in Rumania.
- **30 November** — 160 Pioneers board the Darien and sail to Sulina Danube Delta.
- **12 December** — Illegal boat "Salvador" sinks near Istanbul 202 refugees drown. Shind arrives in Istanbul.
- **30 December** — Darien sails for Constanza hits a reef and dragged to Constanza. Barpal & Arazi come to Istanbul.
- **2 January 1941** — Meeting in Ruth's room, decision to hand over the Darien to Arazi.
- **5 January 1941** — they rebut their decision.
- **21-23 January 1941** — Pogrom in Bucharest Rumania.
- **17 February 1941** — Darien repaired leaves Constanza with 450 refugees.

- **27 February 1941** — The Darien leaves Varna Bulgaria with 750 refugees including survivors from Salvador disaster. David Hachon arrives in Istanbul.
- **11 March 1941** — Darien leaves Istanbul with 800 refugees. All Mossad personal leaving Ruth behind in Istanbul.
- **March 1941** — 150 youths who got certificates leave Shavetz for Israel.
- **19 March 1941** — Darien arrives in Haifa, refugees enter detention camp for 18 months.
- **6 April** — Germany invades Yugoslavia.
- **October 1941** — all the men that remained in Shavetz shot into death trenches.
- **April - May 1942** — Women & children of Shavetz murdered by Gas trucks.
- **January 1945** — Ruth reaches Paris and meets Holocaust survivors.
- **7 May 1945** — Germany surrenders.