



Aliya of American Pioneers

By **Yehuda Sela** (Silverman)

From Hebrew: Arye Malkin

A) Aliya¹ Attempts During WW II

The members of the Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair² Zionist Youth Movement searched a long time for some means to get to the shores of the Land of Israel (Palestine). They all thought that making Aliya was preferable to joining the Canadian or the American Army, which would possibly have them fighting in some distant war, unrelated to Israel. Some of these efforts seem, in retrospect, unimaginable, or at least naïve. There were a number of discussions on this subject in the Secretariat of Kibbutz Aliya Gimel (hereafter: KAG) and the question raised was whether individual private attempts to make Aliya should be allowed. The problems were quite complicated, and rather than deciding against the effort to make Aliya, it was decided to allow these efforts in special cases. Later on the Secretariat decided against these private individual efforts.

The members attempted several ways to pursue this goal, but none were successful. Some applied for a truck driver position with a company that operated in Persia, building roads to connect the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. Naturally, holding a driving license that did not qualify one for heavy vehicles did not help.

Another way was to volunteer to be an ambulance driver in the Middle East, an operation that was being run by the Quakers; this was a pacifist organization that had carried out this sort of work during the First World War. An organization called 'The American Field Service' recruited its members from the higher levels of society. Our members filled out the forms and these were endorsed by Edward Norman, a well-known figure in American society. He was from a very wealthy family and a friend of Zionism and of Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair in particular, because he was partisan to the American communes of the 19th Century. It turned out that these forms were usually accompanied by a sizable check, so it came as no surprise that none of the applicants was accepted.

Some members thought it worth the effort to try to learn Arabic before they were recruited, hoping that the American Army would be interested in such skill and would send them to the Middle East. Two members signed up for a short intensive course in Arabic in Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. The famous archaeologist and linguist, Professor Albright headed that department. To the dismay of these members, attendance at this course did not delay their call-up, and they had to leave the course and report to the army soon after the course had begun.

¹ Aliya – Immigration of Jews to the Land of Israel / Israel, a return to their historic homeland.

² Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair: [Hebrew: the Young Guard] - a youth movement; also referred to as Ha'Shomer; the members – Shomer, Shomrim

The only thing that led close to the desired result was getting a seamen's book for the American or Canadian Merchant Marine. There was no trouble in getting work on ships in those days, but the route the ship would take was always unknown. It was a case of "cast your bread upon the water" and hoping one would end up in the Middle East. The idea was that once a ship would reach a destination such as Beirut or Port Said, the sailor would jump ship and make for Palestine. There was no problem getting a job on the ship, because of significant losses in ships and sailors during the War. The US Merchant Marine was increased a great deal during the War, in order to supply both men and materiel to the war zone. Three members of Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair managed to get to Palestine this way. A fourth started on the journey, but gave up shortly after, as he was dismayed of arriving in Palestine.

Yehuda (Applebaum) Hanegbi - (Appie) (now deceased, formerly a resident of Jerusalem) was a member of KAG and a graduate of a flying course in New Jersey. He tried to volunteer for the Royal Canadian Air Force, with the intention of serving in the war against the Nazis, hoping of getting somehow to the Middle-East. But the Canadians were not interested in him; he changed direction and decided to get onto a cargo vessel, hoping to end up in the Eastern Mediterranean, sooner or later. Once there, someone would definitely be interested in the fact that he had a pilot license. He had a long and arduous journey around the world that led him to South Africa, where he joined the group of Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair members. He spent some time there, working in the educational movement with younger people. He later spent several months in Australia, where he contacted the Ha'Bonim³, as there was no Ha'Shomer movement there; he acted as a leader in this youth movement. In between these youth movement interludes, his long months aboard ships with the likes of characters out of Jack London and Joseph Conrad's novels, weren't pleasant or easy. Finally, after three and a half years of circling the globe with only one short break of a few days at a US port, (Los Angeles), Yehuda finally reached Egypt, where he was able to make contact with Jewish soldiers, one of whom (from Kibbutz Ein Ha'Shofet) he had known in the USA.



Benny Bugoslavsky was born in Ottawa, Canada to a family of worker radicals, but grew up in the Montreal Branch of the Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair movement, a member of KAD (Kibbutz Aliya Daled). He had a strong urge to reach Palestine and to fight the Nazis. His wife, **Chana** recalls: "At the very outset of the World War, Benny started looking for ways to get to Palestine. Secondly he looked for a way to get into the fight against the German Fascists. People did not yet know of the terrible German atrocities, but the youth was more aware of what a terrible fate awaited the world, were the Nazis to win. Therefore, at the very beginning of the war and before a call-up even started, Benny was looking for means

³ Ha'Bonim (The Builders): A Zionist youth organization.

to get into the fight against the Nazis.” Since he was a leftist radical, he was not too eager to volunteer for the British Army, so he chose to go to the merchant marine instead. He crossed the dangerous seas for some time, until he finally reached Cantara/Port Said, Egypt, in 1942. He jumped ship and had to hide from the British and Egyptian authorities, because anyone who jumped ship was subject to imprisonment. He managed to mingle with a group of Jewish soldiers, who protected him until he was on board a train, safely across the border into Palestine. They helped him get to Kibbutz Ein Ha'Shofet, where he met a former leader of his and other friends from Montreal.

Benny spent several months at Ein Ha'Shofet and decided to volunteer to the Palmach⁴. This was at the time of the El Alemein crisis. After all, that had been his original aim – to fight the Germans; it was for that reason that he had left Canada. Due to his sea time experience, he volunteered for the naval unit of the Palmach which later became known as the Palyam. **Benny** spent three years in the Palyam, during which he was active in Aliya Bet⁵. While in the Palmach, he met **Chana**, who was a member of Kibbutz Sha'ar Ha'Golan. They married and made Sha'ar Ha'Golan their home, where their son was later born. During the War of Independence, **Benny** transferred to a platoon of the Palmach, which rushed to the aid of Gush Etzion. He fell together with all the others of the platoon of 35 men, who were on their way to help Gush Etzion.

Yoel Wolf, a member of KAG from Toronto went aboard a ship as a sailor in the fall of 1940 and arrived in Palestine with very little difficulty, compared to those mentioned above. But since he was all alone, he decided to enlist in the British Army. He transferred to the Canadian Army and served in its ranks for many years. He resides in Canada at the present time. In a letter to the secretariat of KAG in January 1941 he wrote: “...I experienced troubles and travails of all kinds and a whole lot of bad luck. Of one thing I am certain – I do not regret what I have done. Not only because of all the adventures, but mainly because I was doing something that I believed in completely. I am only sorry that it may be a very long time before I ever see my old friends again.”

In a letter written from Rishon Letzion on October 2nd 1941 he wrote: “I am at present at a kibbutz of young people from the Israeli movement (Kibbutz Eretz-Israeli Gimel) and I find that they are very attentive to cultural issues and are ready to devote sizable sums of money to that end. The grounds of the kibbutz are lovely and there are many flowers and other greenery. They have a music room and they have a large record library. I allowed myself to buy them a record from the money of KAG. They have long and tiresome discussions in order to solve simple problems. (We are not the only ones who suffer from that same fault.)”

⁴ Palmach: The striking forces of the Hagana

⁵ Aliya Bet - the clandestine organized immigration to the Land of Israel, 1934-1948. In Israel, the word Ha'apala is much more commonly used to refer to Aliya Bet.

The fourth in this group of sailors was **Tzvi Stein**, from kibbutz Gat. As mentioned earlier, there was no problem in getting a seamen's book. His first sailing took him to South Africa and back to the USA. He figured that the dangers of sailing were greater than the chances of arriving to Palestine, so he decided to join the American Army. He became a machine gunner on a Flying Fortress and participated in 30 missions over Europe and then returned to the USA.

Thus ended the attempts by individuals to make their way to Palestine. It would be difficult to try to assess, objectively, the success or failure of these attempts. During a time of war, individuals do not always make decisions cool-headedly or objectively. One thing was certain: wherever a soldier or sailor found himself, he looked for contact with others from a youth movement or for other Jews, and he never lost sight of his aim of reaching Palestine.

B) Aliya Attempts After WW II

A special chapter in the story of Aliya by the pioneers from America was written by Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair of North America where, at the end of WW II there were three nuclei of Aliya groups: KAG, KAD and KAH⁶, all ready to make Aliya. However, possibilities were very limited, as explained above. KAG had been ready even before the start of the war, as this group had consolidated its nucleus in 1939. A number of members were chosen to make Aliya in 1940, but for reasons that are still unclear, no one made Aliya during that year. In September of 1940, the KAG met again and chose a group of 30 members who were to make Aliya. However, it was too late, as Italy actively entered the war and attacked Greece, and the Mediterranean was closed to commercial traffic. This closed the door indefinitely on the possibility of KAG reaching Palestine in the foreseeable future.

KAG made contact with Ha'Kibbutz Ha'Artzi⁷ even before the war started. It was obvious that individual attempts to make Aliya were not going to answer the problem of the whole group of KAG members, and that some unusual method of moving the whole group to Palestine would have to be found. The same was true after the war for KAD. At this point in time, KAH became the group that was active in leading the national movement so that the older nuclei of KAD and KAG would be free for Aliya. It was mostly from these two groups that volunteers for the Hagana ships that began to leave the States in 1946 were taken. Volunteers of KAH who went along ended up in Palestine, long before the bulk of their other kibbutz members, who had remained in the States.

⁶ Kibbutz Aliya G, D and H, where G, D and H correspond to the Hebrew alphabet letters of Gimel, Daled, and Heh.

⁷ Ha'Kibbutz Ha'Artzi – the organization that coordinated the work of all the kibbutzim of Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair movement and directed which nuclei should join which kibbutz.

On January 2nd 1946, an assembly took place at Carnegie Hall, at which Rabbi **Stephen Wise** was the main speaker, and **Ruchama Kalbersh** of KAG represented the Pioneers. This assembly was devoted to the renewal of Aliya from America, after a halt of five years due to WW II. The Americans suddenly found many ways of making Aliya. Canadians had no problem at all, because they held British passports⁸.

C) Aliya Daled⁹

Most of the members of these three nuclei made Aliya by what was termed Aliya Daled. The men took out seaman's books and looked for ships sailing to the Eastern Mediterranean or looked for a passenger ship which would also dock at Haifa, among other ports. At Haifa there was an arrangement between the members of the Hagana at the port and the Immigration Department of the Jewish Agency, which aided those making Aliya from the States to move through or around the British customs and immigration authorities. This called for devising creative alternatives frequently, in order to keep one step ahead of the British, who caught on to what was being done. When pressure was applied upon the authorities in America so that visas would not be issued there, a copy of the visa stamp was made which only facilitated the process.

The operatives of the Hagana at the port of Haifa were very efficient and I do not know of any case in which they failed. The episode of the **Kolka** family (formerly of kibbutz Hatzor and in Jerusalem at present) is typical: They were approached by the Hagana representative at the port and told to hand over their little girl to him, to facilitate their entry. This placed them in front of a dilemma; were they to hand over their child to some person, unknown to them? They finally decided to do so and handed over their child. After several hours of fear and worry their child was back in their arms eating an ice cream cone.

Shortly after the creation of the State of Israel, an American ship (Marine Carp) arrived in Beirut and all the young men on it were imprisoned for several months. One could continue to tell many anecdotes about the workers of the port of Haifa, the bus-drivers and the Hagana men in the port area, who helped get the Palyamnikim off the immigrant ships and got them safely out of the port area. They dressed them and fed them and gave them a place to sleep and brought them safely out of the port. All those who benefited from their deeds, which seemed to them as if taken from some Hollywood movie, would never forget them. Remember, there was a whole British officialdom out looking for the crews of these ships, and they never succeeded in catching any of them. There were searches on the roadblocks, there was a curfew and there were ID checks anywhere and everywhere. The American sailors had no IDs; nevertheless, they all made it safely to their destination in

⁸ As members of the Commonwealth, Canadians held British passports

⁹ Aliya Daled - "legal" immigration to Palestine using false documents.

Palestine, except one. One of the boys on the 'Chaim Arlosoroff' was caught and jailed for several months.¹⁰

A number of the Americans were World War veterans and had the right to go to University under the GI Bill of Rights. They signed up to study at the Hebrew University or the Haifa Technion¹¹. However, they did not use that right and once they reached Palestine they proceeded to their respective kibbutzim. Some Americans were invited to various conventions in Palestine and received visas from the British to attend these affairs. Many of them did not return to America. Other Americans who took out seaman's papers and went to work on ships, knew where these ships were heading this time, so they signed up to arrive in Haifa and jumped ship when they docked there. In wartime the ships' destinations were not disclosed when the ships were in port.

There was another interesting episode in which our American boys were involved. There were shipments of military equipment smuggled out of the US during the period 1946-1948, in which they were involved¹². Here, as in other cases where utmost secrecy was required, the Hagana turned to the Zionist Youth Movements to mobilize people for this job. The US government had placed an embargo on weapons to the Middle East and the Hagana had to find ways to circumvent the embargo. A large warehouse was found, in which the materiel was stored and packed; 7-8 people worked at the warehouse, half of them from Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair. When there was a large shipment, other members at the training farms would be called in, to get the job done on time. One day there was a mishap and a crate fell and broke open. The port workers were surprised to see dynamite spill out instead of agricultural equipment. Some people were caught and fined, but most got away and damages were comparatively light. The procurement of arms and their shipment continued steadily. **Bat Sheva Livney** (kibbutz Barkai) recalls two other incidents in which she and others were involved: One of these was a case of smuggling gold by way of Mexico to Czech¹³, in order to pay for equipment needed for the War of Independence. This involved a fair amount of personal danger. When she had completed her job as the carrier of the gold she arrived in Marseilles, France. She had to wait there for her turn to make Aliya, as she was promised. The Aliya from North Africa was just beginning and people were needed to help in that work. She agreed to do her part along with several others. This delayed her Aliya by one year, but in the meantime she had also set up and was running a school for children. The others worked as nurses.

¹⁰ Several members of the crew were arrested for several weeks. Most of them were transferred to the Cyprus camps together with the Ma'apilim.

¹¹ One of them, **Harold-Tzvi Monash**, crew member of the 'Hagana', used his right. While studying in the Technion he volunteered to the Palyam Cadet Course, which was carried in the same building

¹² The arms ship Kefalos sailed directly from Tampico, Mexico to Tel Aviv in Aug' 1948. The Captain and four crew members were Jewish Americans.

¹³ The gold was smuggled from Mexico to New York.

D) Aliya Bet

Absolute secrecy surrounded the work of Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet. No protocols of meetings were written, for fear of a leak¹⁴. Working conditions were such that those operating in this field had to rely mostly upon their own judgment, depending on what their assessment of a situation was. Such underground activity was bound to fail from time to time, but the leadership of the Yishuv in Palestine had complete confidence in those doing the job in the field. Incidentally, almost all of them were members of kibbutzim.

Europe was in complete chaos immediately following the end of WW II. This actually assisted in getting the work which had to be carried out in the USA - done. In the beginning of 1946 the US cooperated with the British government in all things relating to military equipment in the Middle East. So far as the British were concerned, the Holocaust survivors were also not more than war material. Towards the end of 1945, a mission of the Hagana arrived in the USA for the purpose of raising funds for buying equipment. The Mission wanted to buy ships that would be able to transport survivors from Europe. The men of Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet were those that actually procured these ships. At the head of this work stood 'Danny' - **Ze'ev Schind**, a member of kibbutz Ayelet Ha'Shachar. The mission, with the aid of the Zionist Organization, contacted Americans who were knowledgeable in the shipping field. These men, despite the danger involved with helping the Hagana in this sort of work - did all they possibly could, willingly. Ten fairly large ships were procured; most of them were quite old. They transported over 32,000 Holocaust survivors during 1946–1948. The last vessel, the Mala - 'Calanit' arrived in Israel shortly after the State had come into being, so these survivors became legal citizens immediately upon arrival. With a total of 66 clandestine voyages of the Hagana¹⁵, which brought over 70,000 survivors in all to the State of Israel, the American vessels brought close to half the total number (46%).

Note from the author: There is very little in writing about the part that American Jews played in Aliya Bet. What I have written here is gathered mostly from those who actually took part in this whole operation. This has not been a simple task, as almost 40 years have gone by since the actual events had taken place. People scattered about, changed their names and addresses or simply forgot many facts. Some also passed away or were killed during the Wars of Israel. No doubt this review is incomplete, but we thought it worthwhile to record on paper the little we could get our hands on. There is one testimony that I know of, that was written immediately after the events occurred. That is the testimony of **Shabtai Breen**, a member of kibbutz Hatzor, who wrote his memoirs shortly after arriving in Israel. All the others wrote their memoirs after a number of years had gone by.

¹⁴ In 1947 the Headquarter of Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet in Paris started to write an Operational Logbook. It was published in Israel in 1991.

¹⁵ One ship, Ben Hecht, was organized by the Revisionist party in the USA.

The testimonies of the Palyam members who were the commanders of the vessels or held other responsible positions were taken from their reports, immediately following their voyages or from personal interviews. There is something unexplained in the almost complete non-mention of the participation of the Americans in Aliya Bet. There were quite a few books that were written by the participants in Aliya Bet, most of them emphasize the activities of their authors. It is obvious that they were not able to run the vessels by themselves; nevertheless, the participation of the Americans is missing or appears in microscopic proportion. At most, they are mentioned in an offhand manner, such as: "There were some Americans in the crew and they did this or that; there were other problems also..." and that was the end of that. I have tried to analyze the "why" of this fact several times. After all, the mere fact that Americans, most of them Jews, participated in Aliya Bet is in itself an abnormal occurrence. Usually a vessel was purchased along with its crew of foreign sailors, and this cost a great deal of money. There were usually no more than two or three Palyamnikim on the vessel, aside from the survivors themselves. It is simply incomprehensible why when the reports were written at the conclusion of a voyage, the role of the American sailors was simply absent¹⁶.

I would therefore at this point like to mention some of them. The advantage of an all-Jewish crew was the total independence that the commander had over the destiny of the vessel; he was no longer dependent upon a captain and crew who were paid a great deal of money to do their job, but would have preferred to be elsewhere. Sometimes these foreigners were affected by the humanitarian aspect of what they were doing, but this was the exception rather than the rule. Some voyages failed because of cheating and the crew did not honor its contract. In other instances a failure was prevented thanks to the intervention of the Palyamnikim that saved a catastrophic situation. Here we had a case where the Mossad was given a dependable crew that took a large vessel from the States to Europe to Palestine, carrying over 2,000 Ma'apilim¹⁷, and this crew is hardly mentioned and receives no credit.

It is astounding that nothing of national importance was seen in the volunteering of hundreds of young men from the American Diaspora for this important work. They did not take notice that this was done voluntarily and not for money. This was done out of complete identification with the goals of the Mossad and with complete cooperation with the Israeli men participating in the work being done. How did they not realize the Zionist significance of their participation? These fellows were ready to do whatever had to be done, even though they did not know how to do their assignments very well, or what the final consequences might be.

¹⁶ Aviva Halamish, *Exodos – The Real Story*, 1990 (Hebrew) dedicated one chapter, titled 'The Yanks are coming'.

¹⁷ Ma'apilim is the Hebrew word (plural; singular: Ma'apil) for immigrants via clandestine Aliya; it is most commonly used to refer to the immigrants of Aliya Bet.

They simply wanted to identify with the task of saving the Holocaust survivors, and they were ready to do more than just talk about it. After a long thought I have reached the following conclusion: Most of the voyages took place under very difficult physical conditions. There was little or no time to think about anything else other than the immediate task at hand. As the voyage continued, new problems arose that needed solution, while travel conditions of the Holocaust survivors kept worsening. The sanitary conditions were terrible and diseases and sicknesses were rampant. More than once the vessels lost their balance and sailed along as they keeled over dangerously. Several times, SOS calls were sent out.

Then, when that voyage was over, back the boys went to Europe and to another such job. The Americans scattered and were 'lost in the crowd'. Those who were not of the Zionist youth movements returned to America and to the life they had left for a period of time. Those of the Zionist youth movements joined the nuclei of their friends, who had been eagerly awaiting their arrival and they were swallowed up into the tempo of kibbutz life and forgotten.

There was another factor, perhaps even more important; two members of the Mossad who had been responsible for activities in the USA died at an early age: **Zeev (Danny) Schind**, who was responsible for all the Mossad activity in America until relieved by **Davidka Nameri**; perhaps in later years they might have written about the American volunteers, but they died early. Davidka had been responsible for receiving the Americans when they arrived at the port of Haifa; he took care of arranging their ID's and getting them clothing and lodging and whatever else they needed. He kept contact with several of them.

In the Hagana Archive (at the Golomb House in Tel Aviv), there is a folder for each of the vessels of the Ma'apilim, containing telegrams sent by the commanders of the vessels to Hagana headquarters, or by Hagana headquarters to the vessels. These contain much material about the quality of the vessels, problems that arose during the voyage and solutions that were found. Here and there can be found various estimates or recommendations. There is hardly a sentence regarding the American seamen. Sometimes there is a conflicting testimony given by several members of the Palyam team on the same vessel. These testimonies show a complete lack of understanding of what the American crews were, or what they were supposed to do; most important, they are not all of the same opinion.

For instance, on the 'Wedgwood' there were 30 crew members; five of them were Israelis, three of them specialists including the Captain and the First Mate. The other twenty-two were all members of youth movements who intended to remain in Palestine. **Dov Magen**, the commander, writes in his report that the crew was of low standard, technically. We may suppose that the estimate was correct, but what did he expect? Aside from the specialists (who were experienced seamen and gave him a great deal more trouble), the rest of the crew learned the job while the vessel was

in the shipyard or was en route. If the vessel reached its destination then one must conclude that the crew did its job well enough.

Israel Auerbach, another Palyamnik on board the 'Wedgwood' writes: "The crew was not bad. The men were disciplined and ready to do whatever had to be done. Most of the trouble was with the Captain and the First Mate (who were usually uncontrollably drunk). The relations between the officers and the Palyamnikim and sailors were warm and good. My conclusion is that it is always better to work with our own people than with foreigners. We can get along with our own people better". Auerbach continues that the number 30 (including five Israelis) is the minimum required for a crew. It is interesting to point out that on the sister ship, the 'Hagana', on which an operation was carried out of transferring 1,000 survivors from one vessel to another (the 'Biria') in mid-sea, there was a crew of twenty three and they went through all the stages of hell on their voyage (more about that later). This ship had three Israelis and 18 crewmen, all of whom were from youth movements and intended remaining in Palestine. This means that a crew that was less than the minimum, according to Auerbach, did everything that had to be done and did it well. Another matter which the Palyamnikim were not told: when the vessels were ready to sail, no trained additional crewmen could be found. Only the amateurs from the Ha'Bonim and Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair youth movements were ready to go and do the job, voluntarily.

From the moment the Hagana started to buy vessels, it was clear that local men would have to be hired to man them. The vessels had to be made safe for crossing the ocean with thousands of passengers. For this purpose, 'The Palestine Vocational Service' office was established in New York. This agency worked clandestinely and found its candidates from amongst Jewish sailors who were recommended from mouth to ear. There was not too large a choice so there also could not be too much of a selective process. Actually, just about anyone who applied and had the proper papers was accepted. Since this process took quite a long time, the first two vessels, the 'Wedgwood' and the 'Hagana' (they left the States in April 1946) had a minimum of trained, experienced seamen and a maximum of men from the Zionist youth movements. As has been mentioned, because of the necessity of secrecy, there is almost no written material about this period at all. **Akiva Skidell** of kibbutz Kfar Blum who worked for this agency estimates that there were probably between 200-250 volunteers for these vessels.

From the estimates I have collected from four vessels, I figured that the correct number would be closer to 300 volunteers. The vessels which left the States in the beginning of 1947¹⁸, such as 'Ha'Tikva', 'Chaim Arlosoroff' and 'Exodus' were manned by a larger proportion of Jewish seamen and a smaller proportion of men from the youth movements. When those of the youth movements who were trying to

¹⁸ Actually, at the end of 1946

make Aliya saw that their chances of boarding one of the Hagana vessels were slim, they sought other ways by which to get to Palestine. In the latter half of 1947, when the vessels 'Geula', 'Medinat Hayehudim', 'Atzmaut' and 'Kibbutz Galuyot' (later renamed 'Komemiyout') left the States, there was an even higher proportion of American sailors as well as a good number of Israelis who had completed their British Army service and went to work on these vessels. In the spring of 1948 one vessel was bought in the USA called the 'Calanit'¹⁹. By the time she was ready to sail the State of Israel was already founded and the War of Independence was on in full swing. The Palyam people were busy in various jobs that were important for them to do, so there was room for many of the youth movement members from the States, who volunteered to man the vessel, as they were eager to take part in the defense of the new State.

Despite the lack of written material, it was not too difficult to contact those crew members who had settled in Israel. We learned from them that one quarter of all the Americans that took part in Aliya Bet either remained in Israel or came back and settled here a few years later. The others, who had had no background of movement or Zionist education returned to the States and went back to what they had intended to do before participating in the fleeting episode of Aliya Bet. Of the 70 men who remained in Israel, 40 were from Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair.

When we go from the realm of general description of the events to look at the individual stories of various men, we come face to face with another problem. Each of them had the same experience of encountering the Holocaust survivors for the first time, what left a very strong impression upon them. Each of them faced obstacles and problems as rookies in the field of seamanship, and these problems had to be overcome. This must have given them a tremendous sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Some of them did not report to the New York office for reasons which will be explained later, while others reached the vessels by devious or indirect ways, which we will try to clarify as well.

As mentioned earlier, **Benny Bougoslavski** arrived after sailing for many months and volunteered for the Palmach, transferring to the Palyam when his seaman's experience was brought to the attention of his superiors. **Chaim Myers** of kibbutz Shoal (formerly of KAH), served in the US Army unit, which took him to Normandy and from there through several countries and into Germany. He maintained constant contact with Ha'Shomer movement and was also aware of the fate of the Jews of Europe. When the war was over, he decided that he would make Aliya illegally, in order to let another person use his certificate. While on a pass in London he was given the address of Kibbutz Buchenwald, which was not far from his own camp. When he was back in Europe, he contacted the Buchenwald people and learned of their plans. He wrote to his friends in KAH, informing them that he had decided to

¹⁹ Original name Mala, Theodore Roosevelt's yacht

make Aliya with the Buchenwald group and once in Palestine - would let his future plans of where to live - work themselves out with time.

The Buchenwald group had been promised that they would make Aliya fairly soon, but this 'soon' took about six months. This was a dangerous period of time for Chaim, as he was now AWOL from the US Army and his arrest could have led to a long imprisonment. Kibbutz Buchenwald was living as a commune in Antwerp, Netherlands at the time and Mapai²⁰ activists did their best to convince their kibbutz that the whole kibbutz movement should unite, but there was a large proportion of people from Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair in the group and one member of kibbutz Ruchama. He and Ha'Shomer people were interested in maintaining their separate identity and intended to join the Kibbutz Artzi movement in Palestine. While this debate was still ongoing, members of kibbutz Buchenwald embarked on the 'Tel Chai' vessel. Chaim, who had been a mechanic in the US Army volunteered to be in charge of the generator which operated the wireless equipment.

Yehuda Sela continues his narrative: My 'romance' with Aliya Bet began with my discharge from the US Army in early 1946. **Yona Yanai** of kibbutz Ein Ha'Shofet, an emissary to the youth movements in New York City, told me of the hardship of the many thousands wanting to make Aliya, with all legal ways to do so being blocked by the British. This was, of course, not altogether unknown to me. I had also heard of the Hagana buying ships and of the Aliya Bet operations. It was clear that only a certain number of men would be able to leave with the ships as crewmen. Yona asked me if I would be willing to go to Europe and work there for Aliya Bet for a period of time, and then board one of the vessels coming from the States when it arrived in Europe, en route to Palestine. In France I was to receive a promise from those responsible for Aliya Bet, that any members of the American Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair who arrived in France would be put aboard one of the vessels arriving from the States, along with the Ma'apilim. I also had a talk with **Zeev Schind**, the head of the Mossad in the USA and he promised me that a place in the crew of one of the vessels would be reserved for me. He told me whom I was to contact in France – the secretary of the Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair of the Jewish Brigade. In Paris, I met **Israel Hertz** of kibbutz Ein Shemer, who was then an emissary in France and I also met the secretariat of the Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair movement. If I recall correctly, **Yehuda Tubin** and **Moshe Gross** were also present at that meeting. They gave me their agreement to the arrangement made with Yona and with Zeev Schind and I notified Yona to that effect. Following that meeting, five members of kibbutz Gimel and Daled left for France. These are their stories:

Benny Kalbersh arrived in Southern France together with **Ruthie Geshinski-Cohen** (both of them later from kibbutz Hatzor). They arrived at a spot where a new camp for married couples was to be erected. Benny was appointed camp

²⁰ Mapai – a labor party, established in 1930, which was the dominant force in Israeli politics until its merger into the Israeli Labor Party in 1968. By the early 1930s, David Ben-Gurion had taken over the party, and had become de-facto leader of the Jewish community in Palestine (known as the Yishuv).

commander and Ruthie was in charge of the kitchen. When, after a period of time the occupants of the camp boarded one of the Aliya Bet vessels, Benny and Ruthie remained at the camp. At the very same time, Ruthie received a very urgent message from her family in the USA and had to return there immediately. Benny was co-opted to a course for 'Gideonim' (radio operators) as he had been a radar technician in the US Army. That was a good introduction to becoming a wireless operator. There were about 10²¹ people at this course; some were from the Ha'Bonim movement in England and others were survivors who spoke Hebrew well. The course was organized by men of the Jewish Brigade and the chief instructor was **Menachem Keller** of kibbutz Kfar Gil'adi. The course lasted for several months and as soon as it ended, most of the participants were assigned to vessels and went to work as communication persons.

Benny joined the crew of the 'Geula', one of the vessels that had been procured in the USA and which teamed with the vessel 'Medinat Hayehudim'²², also procured by the Hagana. Both vessels were sent to Burgas, Bulgaria. "We loaded our passengers at night and sailed; when we passed through the Dardanelles, the British destroyers were there waiting for us and accompanied us until we reached the territorial waters of Palestine. We had planned to resist the boarding of the British marines, so we destroyed the good wireless equipment we had been using, and hid somewhere with a small sender and a little generator. We maintained our contact in that manner. In the end, we were transferred to a deportation ship and arrived at Cyprus, where I joined the group of Palyamnikim already there. This whole journey had taken me 13 months; I had left the USA in the summer of 1946 and I arrived at kibbutz Hatzor in November of 1947."

Shabtai Breen, also of kibbutz Hatzor went through a similar experience with one big difference. He was mobilized as was Benny Kalbersh. He was also put in command of a camp for survivors in Southern France and served in that capacity for nine months. He faced many problems there for which he had received absolutely no training and found himself alone in the camp in several instances, when all the survivors were shipped to Palestine, but him. He finally left on 'La'Negev' in January 1947. This vessel was also caught by the British and he ended up in Cyprus. He was appointed to be the contact between one of the camps and the British authorities and he fulfilled this job for several months. The Palyamnikim then saw to it and he was sent to Palestine with other members of the organization. As soon as he arrived at the kibbutz, he sat down and wrote his memoirs, while they were still fresh.

Regarding his voyage on the fishing boat 'La'Negev', Shabtai said: "When the sea was calm the boat rocked tremendously, as if we were in a storm. The first night at sea was an adventure in itself; I had never previously seen in my life such a concentration of suffering and general discomfort of so many people, all crowded

²¹ The course started in November 1946 with 19 people

²² 'Medinat Ha'Yehudim' was originally the Northland. Geula's original name was Paducah

onto this tiny boat. It was not only the crowded conditions; the sanitary conditions were terrible and food and water were scarce. There was a leak somewhere and water filled the hold, but the pump did not work and the water had to be emptied by buckets. The pace of emptying them was slower than the pace of the water coming in, and there was a danger that we would be flooded and sink. Somehow, the mechanic managed to fix the pump and that danger passed²³.

Once the survivors had reached Cyprus, Shabtai was re-appointed as head of a camp. Shabtai describes how the survivors of the vessel 'Shabtai Luzinski' were received in the camp, and the strike of the inmates of Camp #50 against the reduction of the number of certificates that they received. This reduction was caused by the mess created when the Israelis and survivors were jumbled together, before being sent from Palestine to Cyprus. This strike ended in a catastrophe, when the soldiers opened fire upon the camp inmates without warning, in answer to the request of the inmates to meet the camp commander. One Ma'apil was killed and five were wounded in this incident. Shabtai's odyssey from the USA to the kibbutz had taken 11 months.

Lotti (Spier) Yahalom and **Yehudit (Jacobson) Nir** of KAD took the same route as Benny and Shabtai, but theirs was shorter. They arrived in France and boarded the vessel 'Latrun', eventually ending up with a few months stay at Cyprus, before reaching Palestine. **Hillel (Grossman) Haramati**, also of KAD came sooner than they, because he went to Europe to visit the gravesite of his younger brother, who, as a US soldier, had been killed in the war and was buried in Europe. Hillel was also mobilized to fulfill various duties, mostly of a technical nature, in the camps. Hillel writes: "At first I traveled two or three times with trucks that picked up survivors on the French-German border. I don't know exactly where, because we traveled and picked them up at night. We would pick up the survivors who would arrive by train and we had a sort of agreement with the soldiers guarding the boundaries. We put them on American Army trucks and an officer present at the scene must have been "co-operating" with us. Hillel was also added to the crew of the 'Latrun' and arrived at Cyprus with the two girls from his kibbutz. The American members of KAD concentrated at Nachlat Yehuda, near Rishon Letzion, before going to settle at kibbutz Ein Dor.

Kibbutz Aliya Heh was founded in 1943. When the war was over they took over the job of leading Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair movement so that the older members of KAG and KAD would be able to make Aliya. Some of them also volunteered for work in Aliya Bet. Since they arrived in Palestine long before other members of their kibbutz, a number of them continued working on vessels of the Mossad. **Gideon Bolkin** of kibbutz Barkai arrived in Palestine by himself. Recognizing the importance

²³ Shabtai didn't mention that the Ma'apil Herbert Lazar (RIP) was killed on board 'La'Negev' by the British. Before his name was known to the 'Mossad', the next ship was renamed 'Ha'Ma'apil Ha'Almoni' (The unknown ma'apil).

of the Mossad activities, he joined in and served on the vessels 'Nachshon' and 'Komemiyout'. After the creation of the State of Israel he continued working in 'Shoham' Co. (later 'Zim').

If we summarize here the work of the members of Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair from the USA in the Aliya Bet operations, they worked mostly on the ten vessels that had come from America. Each of them had unique experiences and I will recount some of them below. It is remarkable how much the British Secret Service agencies knew about the Mossad's activities. There were many agents of theirs in all of the ports of the Mediterranean. The problem of the British was that despite their appeals to the authorities of these countries, France, Italy, Bulgaria, Rumania and others, not to allow the work of the Mossad to continue, they did not meet with a positive response to their requests. In Italy for instance, the Mossad found more Italians who were willing to help, usually for humanitarian reasons, than the British could find to help them. When the British realized that they could not halt the flow of survivors to the Mediterranean ports, they built the Mediterranean fleet – The 'Palestine Patrol' – that would stop the survivors at sea. The British Navy was free for this task once Germany had been defeated.

The British Secret Service knew of the two corvettes, the Balboa/Norsyd ('Hagana') and the Beauharnois ('Josiah Wedgwood'), which had formerly belonged to the Canadian Navy, when, despite their efforts to the contrary, these two vessels were on their way to Palestine. The British requested the Canadian Governor General to demand the Canadian Government to halt any future sales of vessels to the Mossad. In a second letter they wrote that once the vessels have been sold they know that the Canadian authorities have no control over how the vessels were used, but nevertheless, an effort should be made to ascertain that the vessels were used only for legal purposes.

Yehoshua Baharav, the commander of the 'Hagana', describes the appearance of the vessels and the American sailors: "Suddenly we see the appearance of two wonderful things; ships that were purchased in America and they are of a different league altogether. They are in ship-shape condition, with engines that run, hulls that are whole and do not leak. They were purchased in the USA. In addition, it turns out that the crews are young Jewish boys, most of them are from youth movements. In short, we have a ship with everything ready to go". The vessels were made ready from the beginning of the year until Passover 1946. It was then that the vessel, later renamed 'The Josiah Wedgwood' - sailed. "We arrived in Genoa and then Savona. That is where the Palyam boarded under the command of Dov Magen, (Berchik) from kibbutz Ramat Ha'Shofet. They then began to outfit the vessel to take on passengers. For me and for my companions this was a terrific and unforgettable experience. This voyage was relatively uneventful. The vessel was captured by the British and taken to Haifa. There were five members of Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair on the 'Wedgwood'.

In a telegram from British Naval Headquarters in Haifa to ships at sea in the Mediterranean, there are some interesting details, showing the reaction of the British to the appearance of the 'Wedgwood': 1) There is some suspicion that the crew of the vessel will try to transfer to another vessel at sea, so that it will be able to bring another load in the near future. 2) There is a chance that the survivors would be transferred to smaller boats that would try to land in various locations along the coast, and 3) there is a possibility that the survivors will jump from the vessel and while the British were busy gathering them from the water, the vessel would make a getaway and return to Europe.

We may remark that the British imagination was not far off the mark. There was a plan to transfer the passengers of the Norsyd to the Beauharnois (renamed 'Wedgwood'), but this plan was dropped. One month later the transfer of the survivors from the 'Hagana' to the 'Biria' did take place at sea. One interesting detail: of the 23 crew members of the 'Hagana', 18 intended remaining in Israel and eight of these were from Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair.

Yehuda (Silverman) Sela continues: "We sailed from a small port near Marseilles, named Set, and there were no mishaps. The French were very helpful. Loading the survivors was done smoothly and quickly. There were many young people among the survivors and there was also a group of partisans, friends of Abba Kovner (among them, his wife Vitka). We engaged about ten of them to work with us as part of the crew, and they were very helpful. Working together made a great impression upon both sides. The Europeans, after years of suffering and despair, heroism and hope, isolation from the outside world or from their movements, suddenly found themselves in the company of those who thought and felt as they did, and had the same aspirations – that were to bring us to our common goal. Many of the crew had been in Europe during the war, but for those for whom this was their first contact with the remnants of the Holocaust, this was a very great shock.

From the outset, the crew gave up its quarters for special needs of the survivors, such as rooms for the sick. We went to live on deck in the open air, above the bridge. For every three men we kept one hammock as we all worked a three shift schedule. Every evening we and the partisans sat there singing songs of the Homeland, known to all of us, despite the geographic distance between our original homes. The partisans told us some of their stories and what they had gone through during the war. One could easily discern the sadness in their faces – the result of years of a difficult and dangerous life.

One Friday night, while at sea, the commander called a meeting of the whole crew for the first and last time. We were told then of the plan to transfer all the survivors to a small old tub, so that our good vessel would be able to return to Europe and bring another cargo of survivors. We were told to keep the matter secret, so as not to excite the survivors unnecessarily. Only the partisans were to be told, because they

could be depended upon and help keep control, if necessary. The following morning we gathered the survivors and informed them of the plan of the transfer. Luckily, there was no undue excitement or upset among them and we were able to get their full cooperation. One can draw from that very fact that the survivors had complete confidence in the Palyamnikim and in the crew who were carrying them to Palestine.

Betzalel Drori describes in his account the travails and dangers that he experienced: "We had two small motor launches which we could use for an emergency or to approach the shore. We lowered them into the water. At the same time a small boat named 'Akbel' approached us, and it was to this little vessel that we were to transfer our passengers." Betzalel and several of the partisans went over to the 'Akbel' and had to convince the Turkish captain, in a rather forceful manner, that he had to honor his agreement with the Mossad. The transfer of the passengers began then. Some carpentry work was necessarily done in order for the vessel to carry all the survivors, because the captain had not made any of the improvements he had promised to make, when he had agreed to a deal with the Mossad in Marseilles. When the barometer started to fall and the weather took a turn for the worse, there was a real danger of the vessel going down. Large waves rocked the vessel dangerously and Betzalel decided to send out an S.O.S. In reply to the signals, a British destroyer, the 'Virago', showed up. A ship's officer asked what the situation was and was told exactly. To our great surprise the British vessel turned and left the scene, leaving the vessel in the hands of fate. The destroyer returned some time during the night and then disappeared once more. When we finally reached the territorial waters of Palestine, the ship was taken in tow by another British destroyer.

Yehoshua Baharav recalls: "I find it important to make note of the devotion of the crew. I think that with a crew like this, we could have done anything; the crew was so loyal and so dependent. This American crew is simply outstanding."

In the meantime, the mother vessel, now known as the 'Hagana' returned to Europe. Its first stop was the Greek island of Melos, where she took on food and fuel. To the great surprise of the crew, there were two Israelis waiting for us on this God forsaken island: **Binyamin Yerushalmi**, an active young member of the Mossad who spoke Greek, and a doctor who had come from Palestine especially, to give us an inoculation against some disease. This inoculation was troublesome, as we all had fever as a reaction, and were unable to do anything for several hours. However, we recovered and when we took on survivors we did not notice that any of them was sick. It was only years later that we discovered the real reason for the inoculation: When the British destroyer had received the call for S.O.S. they did not want to answer it while on the high seas, because the ship would not be theirs legally, so they informed the British Admiralty. This was only a trick to postpone the capture of our vessel. They then declared that the ship was infected with a plague, and that was the excuse for not replying to the S.O.S. The people of Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet

suspected that the British were playing a trick, but to be on the safe side and avoid endangering the Greeks, it was thought wise to inoculate all on the vessel.

The British knew that they had played a trick and took the survivors captive, divided them into two groups and kept them isolated in a corner of the port, near the breakwater, where the “shadow fleet” was kept. After all of the travails of the journey the British held the survivors captive on the vessels in a corner of the harbor, for several days. Meanwhile the ‘Hagana’ had arrived at Yugoslavia and was preparing to take twice the number of survivors as it had taken on the first voyage.

Yehuda Sela recalls: “On July 30th 1946 we received notice that the survivors were to arrive that night, board the vessel and we would leave immediately. In early evening a long train appeared and halted right by the quay. When darkness fell, the Ma’apilim started to board the vessel. This process took many hours, it seemed endless. At first sight the human material seemed somewhat different from those we had met on the Biria / Akbel. There were older people, younger ones and a good number of young children. There was a group of Shomrim from Hungary that boarded the vessel with their flag flying high. Once the hold of the vessel was completely filled, more survivors were put into every possible cranny on deck. All in all we took on 2,700 Ma’apilim.

Yehoshua Baharav adds: “I would like to tell about the American Jewish crew that we had. I called the crew together and told them we were taking everybody; we have no choice in the matter. I told them that the crew would have to give up its quarters and there was no room in any of the holds for the use of the crew. Everything was needed for the Ma’apilim, for the sick and the children. The crew received all this without a word of objection; what would have been the reaction of a hired foreigner’s crew?”

Once all the Ma’apilim were on board, the ship sailed. The scenery along the coast and between the islands was beautiful, but as soon as we were out at sea, trouble started and we forgot the scenery. The air conditioner was built for the normal number of the crew on such a vessel and was soon overloaded because of the mass of humans in the holds. Those below soon felt the lack of fresh air, very many came down with sea-sickness and the vomit only added to the smell. The sanitary facilities and toilets were soon overtaxed and failed and there was little we could do to alleviate the situation.

All this was of little importance, compared to our biggest mishap which occurred that night. For no apparent reason the engines failed and the boat lost its balance, keeling over dangerously to one side. We had to broadcast an S.O.S. to the whole Mediterranean Sea, yet, no one answered our call. Since the engine had died the air-conditioning system stopped working and the terrible conditions in the hold went from bad to worse. We could not inform the Ma’apilim of what had gone wrong

and if they had started to go on deck en masse, there was no doubt that the vessel would have flipped over. The angle of the keel was 27⁰, a very dangerous angle. The Ma'apilim did not panic and this was another proof of their faith in the commander and the crew.

Dave Baum (RIP), the second engineer of the crew and one of the Shomrim formerly of kibbutz Sasa writes about this event: "We had a problem with the fuel. People were everywhere and we could not get to the fuel pipes to check what the situation was in the fuel tanks. It seemed that we might have drawn too much fuel from one tank, in the bottom of which water had accumulated. This caused the boilers to shut down followed by the engine cutting out. Once the vessel did not have generators or engine operating we were at a standstill, of course. We went down to the engine room and moved the fuel pipe to a different tank. At first we used the wood from what were sleeping pallets and after burning quite a large amount of them and also with the help of a hand-held fuel pump, the boilers finally started to heat up, the engines were once again in motion and the ship started moving. The whole job took 6-8 hours. The temperature in the boiler room during this period of shutdown reached 48⁰, so people could only work there for a short period of time. The partisans helped us a great deal in this whole operation."

Yehuda Sela, one of the crew, continues: "While the ship was in a stage of crisis, the commander²⁴ - **Yehoshua Baharav** was sending telegrams to the Mossad Headquarters in Haifa, giving them a running lowdown on our situation. Of course, at that time there was no official government, no navy and there really was nothing that they could have done. However, after sending the SOS several times, a British warship finally appeared and put a strong searchlight onto our vessel. From the British warship it was easy to see what our difficulty was. Someone there addressed us and asked who we were and what was the nature of our journey. We answered that we were a vessel of Jews on their way to the Holy Land and we needed help. They asked the same questions two and three times and always received the same answer. Suddenly the searchlight went out and the destroyer took off, leaving us in the dark. Finally our crew solved all the difficulties and when the engines were running again we took off and were on our way. With all the excitement and the days passing by, we even had the birth of two babies to celebrate. Their names were symbolic of our voyage: Nachshon and Gonen²⁵. This was later the background for one of Nathan Altherman's poems, titled '*A Conversation between Nachshon and Gonen*'.

A look at the British archives gives us their view and assessment of the situation: One article sees the appearance of the two corvettes as a threat to the British fleet. A telegram from the Admiral of the Mediterranean Fleet to the Admiralty reports: "One should note that the appearance of these speedy corvettes makes the

²⁴ The Captain was Arye Fridman, member of kibbutz Sdot-Yam

²⁵ Nachshon was a famous Hagana operation, which took place at the time

work of our patrol boats much more difficult. That will be even more so during the winter months. Catching such a ship is limited to territorial waters. Sooner or later there is liable to be damage to one of our ships and there is also the danger that the vessel with its load of immigrants is liable to capsize.” In another article relating to the appearance of a destroyer near the ‘Hagana’ after the S.O.S. had been sent, having been in danger of sinking, the commander writes: “There was no complaint of importance after we appeared, other than the S.O.S., except that the people were suffocating.”

When our vessel reached territorial waters, we received an order to halt. She continued towards Haifa at full speed. The British commander wrote: “Our shot across the bow was totally ignored; we may have to shoot a volley from the Lewis gun into the bridge.” When the canon shot was ignored, the British destroyer nudged our vessel with its prow. Our vessel was lifted out of the water and the propeller broke. We were stuck and could not use the helm. The first attempt of the British marines to board the vessel was repulsed with everything that came to hand. However, it soon became obvious that resistance was hopeless and would endanger the Holocaust survivors. The crew members changed their clothes and mingled with the survivors, to make it harder for the British to identify them. The Hagana people at the port saw to it that all of the crew members were soon removed from the scene and each one was delivered to his kibbutz. Later, other people coming to the port without certificates were also removed in this manner, which had been perfected by the Mossad.

When this voyage had come to an end, **Dave Baum** discovered that he was the first one from KAH to have arrived in Palestine. Since he was an experienced engineer, he continued to work for the Mossad in preparing vessels that were purchased in various ports in Europe and in America. Once the State had been established, he was drafted into the Navy and helped convert the two corvettes of the ‘shadow fleet’ – with whom he was already familiar – to become a part of the newborn Israeli Navy.

There were three members of KAD on the ‘Chaim Arlosoroff’. This vessel was to have a number of interesting adventures, some of them because it was not built to cross the ocean, despite its good construction. It had originally served in the coast guard. The original crew took the ship from the USA to Europe and then returned to the US. In Marseilles, France, a crew assembled by the Mossad took over. All the sailors had the proper papers but they were not all good sailors.

The story of the voyage of the ‘Ulua’ was told in the book written by its commander, **Lova Eliav** - *The Voyage of the ‘Ulua’*. The vessel went all the way to Sweden to take on Holocaust survivors that had assembled there during and after the War. These were mostly young women. Count Bernadotte had been chiefly responsible for their reaching Sweden, where they were given good care and treated



very well. In all, the vessel carried 1,348 survivors. She approached Haifa surrounded by British destroyers and managed, by evasive maneuvers, to escape them and beach at Bat Galim. The British vessels were unable to follow and remained offshore. However, there was a

large detachment of British soldiers on the shore that surrounded the beachhead and gathered up the survivors. The crew was also taken to Cyprus where they spent six weeks before being released.

Kalman Michaeli has an interesting testimony: Three men from his group went ashore in some forsaken little town in Portugal, in order to get water. As usual in such surroundings they looked for any Jews they could find. Their questioning led them to an old man, who took them to the ancient synagogue which had been preserved as it had been at the time of the Inquisition. There were no Jews living in this village, yet the people saw it as their task to preserve the synagogue. The man said that many years ago his family used to use the synagogue, so perhaps he was from a family of Marranos [Hebrew: Anussim].

Yaakov Ben Israel (RIP) of kibbutz Shoval was very young when he volunteered for Aliya Bet. He was in the crew of the vessel 'Ha'Tikvah' which brought more than 1,400 Ma'apilim to Palestine, by way of Cyprus, in the summer of 1947. They had an uneventful voyage but after reaching Cyprus they had a very unusual experience. This small group together with several girls from among the survivors helped prepare a bomb under the direction of the Palyamnik, **Moshe Nachshon**. They managed to place this bomb on board the deportation ship 'Empire Lifeguard' despite the tight security. This bomb exploded after all the survivors had left the ship in Haifa.

Moshe Nachshon, the Palyam saboteur, describes his encounter with the American volunteers of the crew, who had been languishing in Cyprus for several months with nothing to do. Aside from their complaints about the conditions in the camp, they complained that they had volunteered to work on ships and not to sit around doing nothing. The moment that he suggested that they help the Palmach with its work in 'The Ranks of the Defenders' they all volunteered. This entailed teaching the younger Ma'apilim judo and giving them fitness lessons to improve their physical condition. They also helped in digging the tunnel. The crowning touch was participating in the preparation of the bomb that was to blow up the 'Empire Lifeguard' in the port of Haifa.

Eight members of Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair, including three from Mexico, were crew members on board the 'Exodus 1947'. The story of this vessel has been told many times and even a movie was produced, based on its story. The fight that took place between the Ma'apilim and the crew of this vessel with the British, when the vessel drew near the coast of Palestine, was one of the highlights in the battle waged between the British Navy and the Mossad for Aliya Bet. In this battle, three men laid down their lives and many more were injured. The Ma'apilim refused to debark the three deportation ships in Port-de-Bouc, France – the port of departure to which the British had returned them. The repercussions to this whole episode, no doubt, played an important role in the path that led to the creation of the State of Israel.

Shmuel Be'eri of kibbutz Hatzor writes: "I never imagined that I would be a part of an historical event, but our 'Old Lady', the 'President Warfield' – its fate was sealed and this ship will never be forgotten. This vessel arrived in Europe, unknown and unannounced, but later became known to the whole world as: 'Exodus from Europe - 1947', which carried 4,500 Ma'apilim to the shores of Palestine and fought off the attack of six British warships for two and a half hours, turning the downtrodden and suffering Holocaust survivors into the heroes of this battle against the might of the British Empire."

"My job was to remain below in the engine room and I did that despite the tear gas grenades that were thrown through the ventilation pipes. We had given maximum power to the engines in our mad and hopeless race to the shore, before we would give in. We almost succeeded in doing so. Only when the British soldiers on the upper deck threatened to throw tear gas grenades on the women and children did we give in. Once caught, we were brought to Haifa and transferred to the deportation ships and we thought that we were now on our way to Cyprus. Only on the following day, 24 hours after the start of our voyage were we told that we were being sent back to France. To anyone who was not even in our position, such a decision would look as a frontal attack on the whole Aliya Bet operation and a most cruel sort of a trick contrived by the British Colonial Office. However, as I stood there among the crowd of survivors, the mass of men, women and children, who – upon hearing this bitter news – broke out in the singing of Ha'Ttikvah²⁶ in full voice. That was the reply of the survivors and I stood there and cried unashamedly".

"One must admit that the Ma'apilim had guts and were really brave. They believed that they would soon arrive at the one place, where they would be able to build a new home and a new family and become free upstanding men and women. They refused to see themselves as prisoners in a cage. When I saw the pallets prepared for them on the ship, with less than a meter between them, which was to be their bed for the voyage, I thought they would refuse to accept them. They accepted

²⁶ Ha'Tikva – the Hope, the Israeli National anthem

the difficult conditions of travel and did not offer a word of objection, neither the men, nor the women nor the children”.

“One night, when I was on my way to stand my shift, an old man approached and asked me; “Ven Kimen mir tzu Palestina” (When do we arrive in Palestine?). They were not idealists seeking to solve a theoretical problem or to create an idealistic society; they wanted to live a life for themselves and their families, as free men in their own country. There are a large number of Shomrim on this vessel, but the nicest is a group of Hungarian kids, who continue with all of their Shomer activities even under the crowded conditions of the vessel. This gives me renewed belief in the value of Ha’Shomer movement”.

Avi Livney (RIP) of kibbutz Barkai also served on the ‘Exodus’. After that he was a crew member on the vessel ‘Atzmaut’. Prior to these he had been a seaman in the American navy, where he served as a medic. This prepared him for his task on the ‘Exodus’ – he had to arrange for all the medical supplies that would be necessary to take along on the voyage. Avi recalls: “For the duration of the voyage I was a nurse. Once we were ready to receive people I was sent to the camps in the vicinity of Marseilles, France, in order to find others in the medical field, while I also saw to preparation of the medical clinic aboard the vessel. I interviewed a doctor and a nurse and ordered whatever they thought they would need for the journey. During the journey I oversaw their job work. At first, no one worked because everyone was seasick. When we returned to France some of the crew members were told to leave the vessel, because they were needed to work on other vessels”. While the survivors were waiting in Port-de-Bouc on the deportation ships, Avi was busy bringing them food.

Teddy Vardi (RIP) was a member of KAH at the time and later settled in Jerusalem. He worked for three years on vessels of the Ma’apilim: the ‘Exodus’, the ‘Atzmaut’ and ‘Mishmar HaEmek’. He had many interesting and unusual adventures. Especially emotional was the occasion when the ‘Atzmaut’ arrived at Constanza, Rumania. The plan had been for the vessel to remain at that port until it would receive permission to sail. At that time, there were discussions at the UN about the future of Palestine. The political leadership of the Yishuv was of the opinion that if two large ships, the ‘Komemiut’ and the ‘Atzmaut’, carrying thousands of survivors were to sail at that same time that would draw a negative reaction from a number of UN delegations. On the other hand, the people of the Mossad for Aliya Bet were adamant that these two vessels should leave for Palestine immediately. They also pointed out that these thousands had given up every possession, and could not remain on the vessels and just wait and wait. One could not disappoint them! Not only that, but a cancellation of the journey would cause the delegates of Eastern Europe to view the Jewish cause adversely. In the end, a compromise was reached and the two ships sailed directly to Cyprus.

While waiting, Teddy, who was born in Satmar, Rumania, received permission to visit the city of his birth. This was a very emotional visit, although he was very young when he left Rumania. He found the house in which he was born and an old woman living in that house, who remembered his family. He even found some members of his family who had survived the Holocaust, and convinced several of the younger ones to make Aliya on his vessel.

A much less pleasant incident occurred when the 'Atzmaut' arrived in Cyprus: Teddy was recognized by British detectives as having been on the 'Exodus'. They interrogated him and beat him and he was detained in prison for several weeks. He was then sent into the camps where he joined the Palyamnikim already there and finally arrived in Palestine, when a group of them was shipped back. He then went back to Europe to join the crew of the vessel 'Mishmar HaEmek', and when this vessel arrived in Cyprus he was, once again, arrested and imprisoned. This time he was accused of fleeing from Cyprus. He spent two months in jail and finally made Aliya.

There is no more suitable conclusion to the story of Aliya Bet than what was written by an unknown Ma'apil of the 'Exodus'. He wrote in his diary (which was taken from him with all his other personal belongings when he boarded the deportation ship in Haifa). The diary was written in French and translated by the British to English. Here, we can get a better feeling than from any other position and from first hand, how the Ma'apil saw these young Americans, who were helping them get to the Land of Israel. The whole diary is an important and emotional testimony²⁷:

"When I began to write in the diary I described the excellent organization of our vessel. The longer I am here - the greater I appreciate what has been done. The kitchens give out the food on time and all the jobs are carried out by trained people. One can only admire those who are doing all these things on the ship. This is such a tremendous enterprise! They took a ship that was almost worthless and made it seagoing. Can one imagine how much work and how much money had to be put into such a transformation? Once all has been prepared, the ship crosses the ocean and ends up in a French or Italian port. That doesn't seem very much, but do you know how powerful the British influence is in this region? This required a Herculean effort. I want to tell you again that this ship was not built to cross the ocean; it is a shallow river boat which would never hold up in a storm. However, we are in no danger as this is not the season for storms. But the crew that crossed the Atlantic with her showed great courage in doing so. Had there been a storm and the ship did sink the crew would have gone down – they knew this when they left port. The crew knew this, so imagine what idealism they have. They are risking their lives to help their sisters and brothers, isn't that the true meaning of heroism?"

²⁷ Another diary was written by Avner Gilead ("Scandy"), a Palyamnik who stayed on one of the deportation ships for 22 days. He kept writing a daily diary describing the life onboard.