



*Ben Hecht*<sup>1</sup>

## The S.S. Ben Hecht

By Judith Rice

[Editorial note: following are selected parts from J. Rice's original article [The S.S. Ben Hecht](#) - "The Mandate of Conscience". Only the parts that are directly related to the story of the S.S. Ben Hecht are presented here; the full article was published in the June 2010 Edition of the Jewish Magazine, see [www.Jashp.org](http://www.Jashp.org)]



*S.S. Ben Hecht shadowed by the British Navy*

Hillel Kook<sup>2</sup> was born in Lithuania in 1915, the son of Rabbi Dov Kook, the younger brother of Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the British Mandate in Palestine. In 1924, his family immigrated to Palestine, where his father became the first Chief Rabbi of Afula. Kook joined the pre-

state Haganah militia in 1930 following widespread Arab riots. In 1931, Kook helped found the Irgun, a group of militant Haganah dissidents, and fought with them in Palestine through most of the 1930s. He served as a post commander in 1936, and eventually became a member of the Irgun General Headquarters.

In 1937 Kook began his career as an international spokesperson for the Irgun and Revisionist Zionism. He first went to Poland, where he was involved in fundraising and establishing Irgun cells in Eastern Europe. It was there that he met the founder of the Revisionist movement, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, and became friends with his son Ari. At the founders' request, Kook traveled to the United States with Jabotinsky in 1940, where he soon served as the head of the Irgun and Revisionist mission in America, following the elder's sudden death in August. This assignment was clandestine, and Kook publicly denied he was affiliated with the Irgun many times while in America.

While in America, Kook led a group of Irgun activists under the pseudonym "Peter Bergson", supposedly to avoid embarrassing his family (particularly his famous uncle Abraham Isaac) with his political activities. The name "Bergson Group" or "Bergsonites" eventually became used to refer to all the members of Kook's immediate circle. Two American members of the Bergson Group were author and screenwriter Ben Hecht and cartoonist and graphic artist Arthur Szyk."<sup>3</sup>

Initially the Bergson Group limited its activities to Irgun fundraising and various propaganda campaigns. The outbreak of World War II saw a dramatic transformation in the group's focus. As information about the Holocaust began to reach the United States, Kook and his fellow activists became more involved in trying to raise awareness about the fate of the Jews in Europe... Ben Hecht's powerful pen and his biting aggressive writing ability scornfully screamed about the murder of European Jewry to America and Britain... Kook and his followers were widely opposed by large sections of the American public, particularly by many prominent American Zionist organizations.

World War II over, the Bergson Group operating under one of many cover names they created, such as the American League for a Free Palestine, (ALFB) continued to function. Their work was not complete. The Jewish Question had not been resolved. The nature of the work had changed. How to help the survivors of the Holocaust reach Palestine? How to help the survivors who wished to return to their ancient homeland and create a new homeland and new lives?

Starting late in 1945, the Jewish Agency and the Haganah energetically reactivated the Aliyah Bet. If the British would not permit legal immigration to Palestine of Jewish refugees, then illegal immigration would be used. From

across Southern Europe ships were purchased, refitted and overcrowded with refugees being sent to Palestine. Most were intercepted by the British. Still they kept coming.

Bergson remained an outsider to mainstream Jewish leadership. He was Revisionist to the Haganah, not to be trusted. Bergson had not sat by quietly while Jews were being killed, he was not willing to simply sit by now. The Group had to do their part to bring Jews to Palestine, to Eretz Israel, to build a future state. Money was needed to bring the people home. Bergson turned to Ben Hecht, to his pen, to his theatrical connections, to write a play for the American League for a Free Palestine. The purpose of the play was no secret:

"'A Flag is Born' is not ordinary theatre. It was not written to amuse or beguile. 'A Flag is Born' was written to make money--to make money to provide ships to get Hebrews to Palestine ... and [to] arouse American public opinion to support the fight for freedom and independence now being waged by the resistance in Palestine."<sup>4</sup>





*Marlon Brando, Celia Adler, Paul Muni*

"A Flag Is Born was a play promoting the creation of a Jewish State in the ancient land of Israel. It opened on Broadway on September 4, 1946. The cast included Paul Muni, Celia Adler and Marlon Brando. Hollywood's most successful screenwriter, Ben Hecht was the playwright. It was directed by Luther Adler with music by Kurt Weill. It was produced by the American League for a Free Palestine, an organization headed by Hillel Kook, known in America by the anglicized name Peter Bergson.

The play had only three characters. Paul Muni and Celia Adler, major stars at the time, played Tevye and Zelda, survivors of the Treblinka death camp who are attempting to travel to the Land of Israel, and Marlon Brando, who played David, an angry young concentration camp survivor.

The play opens as the older couple halts for the night and Zelda lights Shabbat candles on a broken tombstone. Tevye recites the Shabbat prayers, then dreams of the town where he was born as it was before it was destroyed by the Nazis. He then dreams of King Saul at the battle of Gilead and has a dream conversation with King David after which, in his dream, he stands before the council of the United Nations, England, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union, and pleads for the formation of a Jewish State. They ignore him. When Tevye awakens, he finds that Zelda has died during the night. He recites a traditional Jewish memorial prayer, Kaddish, and welcomes the Angel of Death who has come for him. As the young hero, David, considers committing suicide, three Jewish soldiers appear and promise to take him with them to the Land of Israel to fight for Jewish independence. In the play's stirring finale, David delivers a moving Zionist speech and marches off to fight for Jewish

freedom holding a Zionist flag made out of Tevya's prayer shawl.

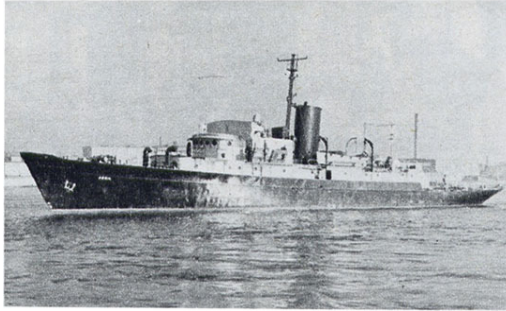
Although Marlon Brando had already been voted "Broadway's Most Promising Actor" for his role as an anguished veteran in Truckline Café, the play was not a commercial success and Brando was still young, relatively unknown and impecunious. Nevertheless, he explained that he desperately believed that the survivors of the Holocaust deserved to have their own land where they could live free from oppression and the anti-Semitic tyranny of the outside world. He accepted only the Actor's Equity minimum payment; enabling the play's proceeds to go to helping create the state of Israel.

In promoting the play the Bergson Group emphasized the parallels between the American and Jewish struggles for independence and the Jewish fighters in Israel to the heroes of the American Revolution. Ads portrayed Irgun fighters as "modern-day Nathan Hales," denounced London's policy of "taxation [in Palestine] without representation," quoted Thomas Jefferson's memorable phrase, "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God," and used the motto, "It's 1776 in Palestine!" When Tevya speaks in his dream to the council of representatives of England, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union, he compares Palestine in the 1940s with the American colonies in the 1770s. The cover of the program was sketch of three young Jews, one with a gun, one with a hoe, and one with a Zionist flag, and in the background the famous illustration of three figures from the American revolution playing drums and flute.

"A Flag is Born" played in six North American cities and raised more than \$400,000 for the ALFP, the largest block of funds it ever attained.....

The play was extremely popular, the Broadway run was extended and a tour was arranged. The sponsoring committee included many prominent people, including composer Leonard Bernstein, novelist Lion Feuchtwanger, New York City Mayor William O'Dwyer, and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Following the Broadway run, "A Flag is Born" traveled to Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Boston. It was also scheduled to play at the National Theater in Washington, D.C. However, in an early action of the Civil rights movement, Americans who opposed racial discrimination began a boycott to oppose the practice of barring blacks from attending Washington theaters, and the committee moved the play to the Maryland Theater in Baltimore. A special train brought members of Congress to the performance. [1] The American League for a Free Palestine and the NAACP cooperated to use the occasion to force the management of the Maryland Theater to abrogate its segregation policy (blacks restricted to the balcony) for the duration of the play's run which, in the context of the times, was considered a victory for civil rights."<sup>5</sup>



*The Abril (S.S. Ben Hecht)*

The funds raised by the play were used to buy a rusting derelict "yacht". She was built (1931) by Krupp Germania - Werft A. G. –in Kiel, Germany, as luxury private yacht. She was named the Argosy. She smuggled arms to the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War. During World War II, the U.S. Navy purchased the ship as a Coast Guard Cutter. She was renamed the USS Cythera (Pk-31). Classified as World War II surplus, the ship was sold in 1946. The buyer was a front for the Revisionist Zionists, the Tyre Shipping Company. The newly renamed 400 ton Abril was refitted in Brooklyn's Gowanus Canal. The ship was originally designed to carry fifteen passengers and a crew of twenty. The Abril sailed December 27, 1946 manned by an American crew of Jews and Christians. The crew was made up of men who came for many different reasons.

Yitshaq Ben-Ami, a Bergson Group leader, interviewed prospective members of the all-volunteer crew. "We had to weed through fiery idealists and adventurers, crooks, informers, and all other sorts," he later wrote.

The ones they chose were quite a colorful group. "We had twenty men, with twenty different reasons for joining up," Captain H. Robert Levitan recalled. Walter "Heavy" Greaves, for example, a beefy, tattooed sailor who survived three torpedo attacks in World War II, Greaves signed up for the Ben Hecht after meeting DP camp inmates face to face in Germany at the end of his service.

Elliott Roosevelt, son of the late president and himself an experienced yachtsman, initially offered to captain the ship, but withdrew after objections from his mother, former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

'We had a crew member who was Irish Catholic and hated the British,' Geno Berkovits, who served as a Messman on the ship, told me in an interview last year. "We had a Jewish crewman who was religious and put on tefillin every day, and there were others, like me, who weren't so religious but just wanted to help the Jewish cause." There were also two young Norwegians, Haakom Lilliby and Erling Sorensen. "They didn't speak much English and nobody

knew quite why they were there," Berkovits said, "but when the engines broke down, they worked 24 hours straight to get us going again."

And there was Walter Cushenberry. Tall, 33 years old, originally from Mayfield, Kentucky, he was living in Brooklyn at the time he volunteered for the voyage. Berkovits, who became particularly friendly with Cushenberry, remembered: "As a Black man, he knew what it was like to be kicked around, and he didn't like seeing the Jews get kicked around." Captain Levitan described him as "one of the gentlest men you could ever meet, and he just liked helping out the underdog."<sup>6</sup>

The Abril sailed, December 27, 1946, for Southern France and Port du Bouc. March 1, 1947, she left France for Palestine. Her decks were crammed with over 600 Holocaust survivors eagerly looking eastward. While at sea, the Abril was renamed the S.S. Ben Hecht.

Seven days later, March 8, she was spotted by British reconnaissance aircraft. British destroyers intercepted the Ben Hecht. She was boarded, impounded and towed to Haifa under British control. The refugees were sent to the prison camps in Cyprus. The American crew was arrested and sent to the infamous Acre Prison.

"Dealing with the American crewmen, however, was more complicated. While the British government pondered their fate, Cushenberry and the rest of the crew were taken to the Acre Prison fortress, where they were jailed alongside members of the Irgun Zvai Leumi underground militia. The British would soon regret that. The Irgun was planning a breakout, but one obstacle remained: how to photograph the would-be escapees in order to make false identity cards so they could get past British roadblocks. Captain Levitan solved that problem: he had smuggled a small camera into the prison. On May 4, the Irgun blew open the fortress's southern wall, in what the international media described as the most spectacular prison break of modern times. By the time of the breakout, the crew of the Ben Hecht was long gone. To London's dismay, the detention of the Americans had become a lightning rod for criticism from members of Congress, the media, and the U.S. Jewish community. After holding the seamen for a month, the British decided they were more trouble than they were worth and put them on a ship bound for New York. Arriving home on April 16, Cushenberry and his colleagues were honored at a City Hall reception hosted by the mayor and then feted at a gala dinner hosted by a very proud Ben Hecht."<sup>7</sup>

The Ben Hecht was absorbed into the new Israeli Navy in 1948. Again, she was renamed, the Maoz (Stronghold) and registered as the Q-24. She participated in the dramatic sinking of the Egyptian navy's flagship the Emir El Farouq and her escort minesweeper off the coast of Ashkelon, October 22,

1948.

The old ship was sold to Israel businessmen in 1955 as a cargo vessel and once again renamed the Abril. The Israeli businessmen quickly resold her to an Italian firm, Naviazione Libera di Golfo. The name Abril changed one last time to the Santa Maria del Mare. She became a ferry boat in the Gulf of Naples. In 2008 she was sold by the Italians to investors. She was refitted, repainted, refurbished and remade into the glistening private yacht she once was. (The S.S. Ben Hecht) The Santa Maria Del Mare is currently for sale for 15,000,000 Euros.

[Following the Altalena affair] Hecht wrote in his auto-biography: "I'll write no more of Palestine. I turned my back on it the same time Abrasha Stavsky did."<sup>8</sup>

"Six months after the establishment of Israel by the United Nations, Bergson and Hecht officially dissolved the organization which produced the fund-raising play, followed by a dinner in New York City where Menachem Begin appeared, saying, "I believe that my people, liberated and re-assembled in its country, will contribute its full share toward the progress of all mankind ... [and predicted] that all of Palestine eventually would be free and that peace and brotherhood would prevail among Arabs and Jews alike."<sup>9</sup>

Peter Bergson returned to Israel and reassumed his real name, Hillel Kook. He served one term in the Knesset. Kook died July 18, 2001.

Ben Hecht died April 18, 1964 in New York. He was 70.

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Historic Preservation

[www.Jashp.org](http://www.Jashp.org)

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben\\_Hecht](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Hecht)

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel\\_Kook](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel_Kook)

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel\\_Kook#Early\\_life](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel_Kook#Early_life)

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Flag\\_is\\_Born](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Flag_is_Born)

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Flag\\_is\\_Born](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Flag_is_Born)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.jewishledger.com/articles/2010/01/13/opinions/edit01.txt>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.jewishledger.com/articles/2010/01/13/opinions/edit01.txt>

<sup>8</sup> Ben Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1954

<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben\\_Hecht](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Hecht)