

## Captain Steve Tells Us About Himself

(Translated from Hebrew by Aryeh Malkin)



I was born in 1905 into a Catholic family, in the town of Somorsatro, not far from Bilbao, Spain. I received my elementary education in the town primary school, as did most of the kids my age, but when I turned eight I began to work after school hours, selling milk. At that time my father worked in a shipyard. A friend of mine told me that his dream was to be a sailor and I was bitten by that bug. We decided to take the entry tests to the naval school. We were 12 years old at the time.

I was accepted and graduated within two years, although the curriculum was for three years. I sailed as a Cadet when I was only 14.5 years old. In 1922, when I finished my 'Sea Time' (time allocated to serve at sea that a seaman must complete in order to be promoted), I was bestowed an officer rank. In 1927, at 22, I was certified as a captain.

In 1933 I left the ship company I had been working for due to an argument and I went to work on a fishing vessel as a captain, till the Civil War began in 1936. I volunteered to fight in the Republican Army against Franco's armies, where experienced seamen were needed. I was assigned to a submarine, first as first-mate and soon after as commanding officer. Toward the end of the war in 1938, I took command of a ship that was designated to bring the International Brigade back to the USA.

(Photo: Steve in uniform of the Republican Navy).

### Wandering in Various Countries

The war had ended and I immigrated to Mexico with my family. My efforts to support my family living on land were unsuccessful, and I soon took a job with a French shipping firm as a captain, where I worked during WW-II. I planned to return to Europe in 1946, when the war was over, when I met some of my old Jewish friends, who suggested I go to work for them, bringing vessels from Panama to Europe, sailing under a British flag. Since it had been my desire, like many other war refugees, to go back to Spain and continue the fight against the Franco regime, I found this opportunity would serve my goal completely. Some of my Spanish friends asked to sail with me, so that we could all get back to France and join the Spanish refugees who had gathered there.

I organized a group of 24 Spaniards most of whom weren't seamen, except for one who became my chief mechanic and another, an Englishman who was a radio operator, and we flew to Panama. (It was impossible for Spanish Republicans to get visas to the USA). I asked the British Consul for "clearance papers" and he asked me rather naively how I expected to cross the Atlantic without [professional] seamen... We left Panama with a 2,200 ton vessel named "Marton", a mixed cargo - passenger ship. It was to go from the Pacific through the canal to the Atlantic and then to Europe. We crossed the Atlantic and arrived safely at Marseilles. The Jewish owners tried to get the vessel's flag changed, but were unable to do so. I spent a few months

in Marseilles where I met other Jews who suggested that I work for Aliya Bet as a captain.

### My First Acquaintance with the "Pan York"

I came aboard the "Pan York" with a Spanish crew, officers, a machinist and I as captain. When the "Pan York" was about to sail I was faced with a disappointment: the organizers of the expedition informed me that they had an Israeli captain and chief engineer. "If you don't trust me I shall pack my things and leave", I said. I was presented face to face with Gad Hilb and his chief engineer, Ephraim Tzucker. After a long talk with Gad I changed my mind.

The "Pan York" was sent to West Africa to load phosphate. On the voyage back we ran out of fuel and had to stay in Rouen. The Jewish community of the city enabled us to get the fuel from Bordeaux, though the cost was tripled.

The Israeli Radio-Operator ('gideoni'), nicknamed 'Pupchen', didn't have any documents. I addressed the Panamanian Consulate and found out that the Consul was my friend from the Civil War. He immediately supplied us with the necessary documents and we paid him in kind with two boxes of bottled orange juice. We then continued our voyage to Marseilles. In the Straits of Gibraltar we tried to find out what vessels were scheduled to go through. We were planning - if asked for our ship's name - to provide the name of an American vessel that was scheduled to pass through an hour later. Our plans proved irrelevant, as a British destroyer shined a strong searchlight on us, exposing our name. We ignored it and headed for Marseilles, accompanied by the destroyer.

In Marseilles we took aboard supplies and installed air conditioning in order to be prepared to take on as many Ma'apilim as possible. The British did not waste their time and contacted the French authorities, in an attempt to prevent the vessel from leaving port. Joe Baharlia, a French Jew who had supplied us with provisions, told us that we had to leave immediately before the British had time to detain the vessel in port.

### Leaving Marseilles in a Big Hurry

We finished all our business and took off quickly. We noted that the British destroyer waited for us to leave and continued to accompany us as far as the Dardanelles Straits. As we entered the Straits we bid her goodbye as she could not continue further. When we reached Constanta we saw our sister ship, the "Pan Crescent" which was already there. This was the 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 1947. We made changes in the sleeping quarters in order to take on 7,500 refugees. We also added cooking facilities, a hospital, an operating room, toilets and air conditioners. This was where I met Geda Shochat for the first time. I had never met someone like him in my life and I have met with many. He worked like a demon and was as kind-hearted as a baby. His organizational skills were tremendous. He was an idealist and a man of extraordinary nature.

In Constanta we also outfitted the vessel for resistance to a potential attack by the British, should the vessel be captured. We placed the cranes in a high position so

that we could lower them to prevent the British from boarding the vessel. We also put in a supply of barbed wire.

Both ships then sailed for Burgas, Bulgaria, where we anchored for three days, loading Ma'apilim day and night. Here I saw for the first time these poor people carrying their few miserable possessions in the cold of the month of December and I could not - for the life of me - imagine how they were all going to fit into the two vessels. We were almost finished when we were told to add 500<sup>1</sup> more Ma'apilim from Bulgaria. They were entrusted with several duties onboard which they carried out perfectly as disciplined and polite people.

We left Burgas on the 26 December with the "Pan York" carrying 8,200 people and the "Pan Crescent" carrying 7,500 people<sup>2</sup>. Amongst the Ma'apilim were 32 doctors, who had this little hospital room and a great deal of medical supplies. Dr Ashkenazi - a famous surgeon, and his wife - were also among the passengers, following a bitter battle with the Rumanian authorities, who attempted to hold them from leaving. I offered Dr. Ashkenazi my cabin but he declined, saying he was a Ma'apil and his place was with the Ma'apilim.

#### Encounter with the British

On the 28<sup>th</sup> December, at two in the morning, we arrived at the Dardanelles. As soon as we had left the Straits we ran into two British destroyers that had been waiting for us all this time. We greeted them "good morning". The next day, there were four destroyers and on the following day a fifth one arrived, the Cruiser HMS South Hampton.

On 31 December we were called by the Cruiser: "Where are you heading?" Our answer was: "Colombia". They replied that they knew we were heading towards Haifa. Finally they asked for permission to board our vessel. We answered that they would be allowed to board if they did not carry any arms and if they would make no effort to discover who the Captain or other officers were. On 31<sup>st</sup> December at 5 PM, 50 officers and men boarded our ship and another 50 boarded our sister ship. At midnight we had a party and I was a bit drunk. I recall clearly enough that Gad was close to tears when he was ordered by Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet to give in without resistance. On January 1<sup>st</sup> 1948 we were still in the harbor of Famagusta and started to unload about 100 Ma'apilim. When we were allowed by the British to enter the port the foreigners among the crew intermingled with the Ma'apilim. Nissan Leviathan was responsible for the foreign crewmen. He told them they could intermingle or stay onboard, but the Mossad could not vouch for their safety, had they stayed onboard. At the end, the crewmen decided to go to the camp, fearing the British would overtake the ship. I gathered the Spanish crew members and tried to convince them to go with the Ma'apilim and that no harm would befall them, but they said bad things about me and all but 5 men decided to stay on the ship. When the men on the other ship heard that we remained on our ship, they decided to remain on theirs. Once the Ma'apilim disembarked, we received a large amount of fuel and food and 50 soldiers remained on the ship.

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<sup>1</sup> There were about 400 Bulgarians (Yehuda Ben-Tzur)

<sup>2</sup> The Pan York carried 7,600 Ma'apilim and the Pan Crescent 7,736. (Yehuda Ben-Tzur).

### The British are screwed

We sailed from the port of Famagusta to a small bay called "Bogaz", where a British destroyer parked herself next to us. We had a radio transmitter on our vessel and one night we managed to smuggle it into the camp. Every few days we would ask to load up with more fuel. The British became suspicious and started to check how much fuel we had. First, they boarded the "Pan Crescent" and saw that they had sufficient fuel, so they would not give her any more. Then they boarded the "Pan York" and I told them we did not have sufficient fuel. We managed to play a little trick on them and they fell for it. In time, we returned all the Spanish crew to their homes, replacing them with Ma'apilim who managed to escape from the detention camp in Cyprus. Two or three Spanish crew members remained on the ship.

On May 15<sup>th</sup> 1948, when Israel was declared an independent state, the British left our vessel, trusting we did not have enough fuel to go anywhere. (The truth was that the stock we had, had been accumulated some months before). We, Pan York and Pan Crescent, left Famagusta and arrived to Haifa. We raised the Quarantine flag, as Haifa port was still controlled by the British. A British destroyer signaled us that a berth was ready for us in Haifa. Since Haifa was still under British control we delayed our entry to port as long as possible, and waited for instructions from the Mossad. The "Pan Crescent" did allow the British to board. Later the British approached our ship with tugboats and boarded it without using ladders. They arrested Gad and although I was very angry I thought it best to shut up.

Several days later we entered port. After the British had cleared out we made many trips to Cyprus and back, transporting as many Ma'apilim as we could to Israel. As for me, I had never thought of settling in Israel but in fact, I had no other home. I met many good people in Israel and also found the life in kibbutz interesting, so I decided to remain in Israel.

*(Interview by Ayala Dan)*