

On Both Sides of the Crypto

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By

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משני צדי הקריפטו

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Chapter 2: “Exodus”

The nights are warm and pleasant on the French Riviera in the month of July. A ship carrying 4,500 passengers on its deck is waiting to sail. She is waiting for the pilot who will guide her out of port and into the open sea. The launch did not arrive so someone went to his house to call him. The ship’s crew is on edge; dawn has come and the British have spotted the vessel in the port of Sète, west of Marseille, and demanded of the French government to block our exit. The French procrastinated as they were aware of the precarious situation of the passengers, the remnants of the Holocaust. They preferred to cast a blind eye and not to intervene. The hours go by; we must leave tonight. The young captain of the ship, an Israeli, a member of the Hagana - Yitzchak (Ike) Aharonovitz - decides to leave without the pilot, at night, under cover of darkness. On its way the ship runs into a sandbar and with great effort manages to pull itself off and to continue. This is the beginning of a long journey which became a focal point in modern

Jewish history. The story of “Exodus from Europe – 1947”, better known as the “Exodus”, started several months earlier with the preparation of the vessel for its journey.



Port-de-Bouc, en route to the deportation vessels, August 1947
Right to left: Alfred from Hechalutz, an American journalist, Marga,
Nahum Hillel

In June of 1946 I was working in a Camp called “Scout Hill”, located at a villa overlooking the port of La Ciotat, about 40 kilometers east of Marseille, on the French Riviera. This little port has served as a departure point for a number of vessels. Several days after one vessel would depart, another would come in and we would start on her. I and several of my friends went out for a short

ride in a motor launch and we visited a neighboring bay. When we returned, we noticed a group of girls swimming in a sheltered spot in makeshift swimming costumes. As we drew closer we realized that these girls were candidates for sailing on the next ship to depart for Palestine. They were part of a group of about twenty young men and women, who had volunteered to set the camp in order and clean it up. This they did quickly, efficiently and with enthusiasm. They belonged to a group of English Habonim that had been in a training commune before coming to France. One of this group was Marga and as happens between young people, we took a liking to each other. I learned that Marga had arrived in England on a kinder-transport from Germany only months prior to the outbreak of WW II. This transport had brought 10,000 orphans or part-orphans to England in 1939. For a while she wandered about England until she ended up on the Habonim farm in southwestern England, where she did very difficult farm work.

Shortly after the end of the war she arrived in southern France with some of the members of her commune. She was a beautiful girl and she caught my eye (and she has remained so even today)! Her eyes had a look of understanding and we became and have remained firm friends. Directors of the Mosad for Aliya Bet decided to train some of those ma'apilim who knew Hebrew as Gid'onim. Marga and some others of her group and more from other groups participated in this course. When they completed the course they joined the crews of the ships as full-fledged members

of the Palyam. Marga worked with me on preparing the “Exodus” for its journey.



Port de Bouc, 1947

Right to left: (sitting) Gad Hilf, Shaul Biber, (standing) Willi Rostock, Nissan Leviatan, Marga in a nurse uniform, (sitting left) Yair Barka

Arranging for the organization and care of 4,500 passengers entailed a good deal of work. During the months of May and June hundreds of survivors streamed into Marseille every week. The Mosad for Aliya Bet and the Hechalutz movement hired the Grand Arénas camp from the French authorities. This had been a camp for prisoners and refugees during the French War against Viet

Nam. The bunch that was to direct the camp consisted of seamen, Gid'onim and other emissaries. The place had to be cleaned up and fixed to handle 3,500 survivors. The other 1,000 were scattered in various other camps in the vicinity. Meanwhile, the ship and its commander arrived at Sète, about 200 kilometers west of Marseille. Yossi Harel had experience as the commander of several vessels that had carried a large number of passengers. He had been in command of the "Knesset Yisrael" which had taken on 4,000 passengers in Yugoslavia at the end of 1946. I was to be in charge of the 4,500 ma'apilim of the "Exodus". This was not a simple job but I did it in close cooperation with Yossi Harel. The ma'apilim were organized into groups the size of which was dependent upon which holds they were to be in and how many would be in those holds. Each group had its leader and we tried to keep these groups as homogenous as possible.

Each group contributed a number of its members to work for the general needs of the vessel, such as guard duty, policing and sanitation. Each group had a number designating on which deck and in which hold it was to be. This system later proved itself, and made the embarkation of the passengers on the ship proceed smoothly. The Mosad people in Marseille developed excellent relations with the local authorities and were also responsible for the supplies of the ship. The Joint proved very useful in organizing the supplies for the journey. Several days before the ship was to leave, a strike broke out among the truck drivers union of France

and there was danger that this would interfere with delivering the ma'apilim to the ship, but due to the good relations with the truck drivers union, 150 drivers were given permission to carry them. Often the roads to the ports were very crowded but due to the strike they were now completely clear.

The ship took on the ma'apilim during the night and on the morning of the 10th July the vessel "Exodus" was ready to pull out. That same morning "things started to get hot". The British demanded of the French authorities to delay the sailing of the ship. The crew, with young captain Ike at its head, decided not to take any chances and in a daring maneuver left the port without a pilot or help of any sort. It reached the open sea and kept going. The ship reached the shore of Palestine but was overtaken by the British Navy. The ma'apilim were transferred to three deportation ships and returned to Port-de-Bouc, France, not far from Sète, the port of embarkation. They arrived back in France on 31st July 1947. For three weeks the ma'apilim refused to leave the deportation ships and the French government refused to have them disembark by force. Marga, who had been in one of the camps near Marseille, acted as a nurse and a contact with the Palyam on the ship and on shore during this period. She boarded the ship every day together with the doctor. After three weeks of stalemate the British government ordered the ships to sail to Hamburg in Germany, which was in the British area of control. The ma'apilim were removed from the ships and again incarcerated in a prison

camp in Germany. They were freed after not too long a delay and most of them made their way back to Israel. The “Exodus” was the vessel that had carried the largest number of passengers that had ever left from France.

After 60 years: We Were All Exodus

For many years, Marga and I have been contemplating a journey to visit the places where we met. The opportunity presented itself from an unexpected source, and gave us a chance to see the area and relive the experience. To commemorate 60 years of the departure of “Exodus”, the French Second Television Channel (France II) had a full-length documentary film produced, which tells the story of this ship’s historical voyage. For the sake of the younger generation, I should point out that the story became quite famous when a book by Leon Uris entitled “Exodus”, was the base of a feature film by that name made in 1960 by Otto Preminger – a renowned American producer. The film, starring Paul Newman, told a story based on the ship’s voyage, but borrowed facts from other ships and ended in Cyprus, to where the refugees were supposedly deported. To give credit where credit is due, it is important to note the incredible contribution of the novel as well as the movie, to spreading this story of the refugees throughout the world, arousing public opinion, awareness and support to the founding of the State of Israel as the Jewish Homeland.

The documentary film was born in the mind and pen of the French director Jean-Michel Vecchiet, who was fascinated with the tale of “Exodus”. He knew the story from the American commercial film. He searched in libraries for additional material and was surprised to discover that no documentary film existed, and that the true story is even more complex and shocking than that portrayed in the movie. He wrote a new script, chose to use testimonials from those who took part in the voyage, immigrants and Palyam activists, as well as news reels from all over the world, who followed – in real time – the evolving drama. The production crew came to our house to interview us, and during several hours listened, recorded and took photos. On their way out, with the crew already in the car, the director turned to us and asked whether we would be willing to come – as their guests – to the South of France, to continue filming on location. Needless to say we accepted. The production company invited a few immigrants who were on the Exodus and three Palyam members who took part in the odyssey, to film on location in Sète – the port of departure and in Port-de-Bouc – where the deportation ships returned, before continuing to Germany.

In July 2007 we arrived in Marseille, together with a few of the immigrants. We stayed at a hotel near Port-de-Bouc. We were taken to the port where – 60 years earlier – the three British deportation ships, had brought the 4,500 immigrants of the “Exodus” back to Europe, in a symbolic, cruel and mean act, and moored for 21 days in July 1947. We were received by the town’s

mayor, a charming woman in her 20's and a supporting crowd. Only then did we realize that the French people and especially the town's citizens were very proud of their role in the ordeal, in the help and support they had provided to the refugees at the time.



Marga and Uri (right) with the film director – Jean-Michel Vecchiet (center) and Michelle Hassoun, November 2007

We realized that the “Exodus” ordeal became part of the town’s history. And indeed, the support offered by the town’s citizens to the refugees, who stayed on the ships for 21 days, was crucial to their survival. It included medical help and supplies, food and water, but most of all, it brought moral support to the refugees’ struggle. The survivors refused to disembark from the ships.

An impressive ceremony was held at the town hall plaza, with greetings and moving encounters with the younger generation and some members of the community of 60 years ago, whom we remembered. Among them was the town's physician who took care of the sick on board the ships. We also met the sailors who sailed the tug boats which brought food and other supplies to the ships, and brought Marga, who was the liaison between our people and the men and women on the ships. Here, 60 years later, we learned that Marga was nicknamed "the Spy", as they could not explain the role of this refugee-nurse-communications person who spoke Hebrew, English and German fluently.

We were treated to a lunch buffet that was very pleasant. We then left for Marseille, where another reception was held in our honor by the local Jewish community. Here too, we met some old friends who helped the "Exodus" as well as other ships that took off from the South of France. Another day was dedicated to a tour of the comprehensive exhibition laid out by the town, displaying the history of the Jewish communities in Europe and the story of "Exodus". We then went on to a day of shooting film in Sète, where the "Exodus" sailed from. This visit was extremely meaningful and exciting to both of us, as I am sure it was to the rest of our group.

The film's producer, the director and other members of the crew came to Israel to take part in the pre-opening screening, which was

held on 20 November 2007 in a community center in Ashdod, with many recent immigrants from France who live there. It was also screened in the Atlit camp. The film titled “We Were All Exodus” was aired on France II on November 29th, to commemorate the UN resolution regarding the establishment of the State of Israel in 1947. The film producers hoped it would be screened on television and in cinemas in Israel.



12 July 1947 - Preparing for the departure of Exodus in Sète, France, Uri directing the embarkation



60 years later, 12 July 2007, the port of Sète, France

Uri during the documentary filming