

The Tragic Story Of Hagana Ship 'Rafiah'

By Yehuda Ben-Tzur, translated from Hebrew by N. Goren and A. Malkin

On 26 November 1946, the 34th illegal Jewish immigrant vessel after WW-II left Bakar, Yugoslavia, towards the coast of Palestine. The S/S Athina was a small cargo ship built in 1893, tonnage gross about 650 and powered by coal. She made her way in a rough sea, carrying about 800 Ma'apilim¹, Holocaust survivors striving to reach the Promised Land.

The ship was renamed Rafiah, after a small Arabic town in the Gaza strip, where many members of the Hagana and Pamach/Palyam were detained at the end of June 1946. Reaching the Dodecanese Islands twelve days later, she was forced to seek shelter in a God forsaken harbor (pictured here), in the rocky Island Syrina, due to bad weather. While maneuvering to anchor in the tiny, very deep water harbor, the Captain lost control. The vessel was thrown on the rocks and sank within forty minutes. Most of the passengers succeeded to jump out, some of them were badly wounded. Eight bodies, including children's, were found and later buried on the island. (The total number of absentees is unknown).



Syrna – The Gulf

The "Gideoni" (wireless operator) on board the Rafiha, Abe Lichovsky, managed to operate the wet transmitter and sent a message to Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet in Athens. The Jewish Agency requested the British authorities to rescue the survivors.

On the third day of their stay on Syrina, a British craft hovered above them and parachuted food supplies, clothing, blankets and medical relief. On the fourth

¹. One of the Ma'apilim, Rafael Tadmor, claims that there were 785 and unofficially 870 passangers.

day, a Greek destroyer arrived and picked up the foreign crew members and 21 survivors who were sick or wounded, and transported them to Rhodes.

On 9th December 1946, two British destroyers (that were part of the 'Palestine Patrol', formed to hunt illegal Jewish shipment), HMS Chevron and Providence, arrived on the scene. After dark, in heavy rain and a rough sea, they carried out the rescue operation and transported the miserable passengers to a landing ship tank (LST) near the island of Crete. Like thousands of Ma'apilim before them on board nine ships that sailed during the summer of 1946, the Ma'apilim were transported to detention camps in Cyprus. They never forgot those who were left behind. With the assistance of the Israeli Navy, some of the survivors returned to the rocky island in October 1972 and brought the remnants of their loved ones and travel mates to a common burial in Haifa.

Although the rescue operation was carried out gallantly, in accordance with the best traditions of the Royal Navy, Prof. M. Shelah² found that a bill was sent to the Admiralty (FO 371/61838 XC/104207): *"On 6th January 1947 the Royal Naval Command, Mediterranean sent a telegram to the Admiralty in London: "The cost of rescuing and transporting of the ex-Athina Jewish survivors is 4,430 sterlings and 18 shilings. We hope this will be taken in consideration and the amount will be paid".* The claim was passed to the Foreign and Colonial Offices. Mr Beith from the Foreign Office added a marginal note: *"I doubt if the money will ever be returned... maybe it is better for them to present it to the Jewish Agency". Assuming Mr. Beith - who handled hunting illegal vessels very diligently – lacked a sense of humour and irony, one must take his words at face value. So, the Israeli goverment still ows the Admiralty in London a sum (annexed to the index plus interest) that might break them down".* This account is still open.

Twenty five years later, on 28 October 1997, the Palyam veterans held a reunion of the "Melavim", the Commanding Officers of the illegal ships of Aliya Beit. Three British geusts took active role in the discussions, presenting thier point of view³. I was honoured to present the Palyam activities. Mentioning the "Rafiha Failure", I addressed our British geusts: *"I don't know if at the time anyone thanked the British Navy for rescueing the survivors. If not, I am doing it now, but why ["the hell", I thought in my heart] were they transported to Cyprus and not to Palestine".* Nobody answered. Soon after, Samek Yanai, the last C.O. of the Palyam, exchanged letters with Admiral John D. Bush, at the time the Captain of

². **Menachem Shelah**, "The Yugoslav Conection – Illegal Immigration of Jewish Refugees to Palestine Through Yugoslavia, 1938-1948" (Hebrew eddition) p' 178-180.

³. **Ninian Stewart**, naval historian. **A.J.L. Tyler and E.J.P. Barrett** – both served in the Palestine Patrol.

HMS Chevron, who took part in the rescue operation. In his letter dated 14 November 1948, the Admiral wrote: *"...I remember very well the rescue operation. The wind blew strongly, it was raining... a horrible night. I felt very relieved... we succeeded to evacuate all of them from the island before they suffered dehydration and lack of food..."*.

Reading the letter, I decided to look for more information. I found some of it in Professor **Shelah**'s research: *"The grateful survivors thanked their 'enemies-saviours'; or 'The women and children were, not strictly in accordance with the mandate law, transported to Palestine. The men were detained in Cyprus. The Jewish Agency's request to the High Commissioner... [to let] the married men... [go] was rejected"*.

I spoke with **Gad Lasker**, the C.O. of Rafiah and **Binyamin Kopmer**, one of the leaders of the refugees. Both denied that the women were transported to Palestine and they remembered quite well the barrage of tear gas thrown into the bulk of the LST. Some women – sick or with babies – were rescued by a Greek destroyer that took them to Rhodes. Later they were shipped through Egypt to Palestine, to the Atlit detention camp.

GREEK SHIPS SET OUT

FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT

ATHENS, DEC. 9

Two destroyers and one landing craft of the Royal Greek Navy, with medical relief, clothing and food supplies, sailed to-day for Syrina. The Athens representative of the Jewish Agency to-day applied to the British Embassy asking for British help for the marooned, and was informed that all arrangements had already been made by the C.-in-C., Mediterranean Fleet, and the R.A.F. Mid-East Command.

(Compiled by Yehuda Ben-Tzur, translated by N. Goren and A. Malkin)

[Syrna / Sirina](#)



[Desolate isle \(west of Tilos\)](#)

