

## A Time Tunnel: The Rafiah 1946 Haganah Ship The Saga of Shlomo Reichmann, A 10 Day-Old 'Illegal' Immigrant

This is the story of the ship *Rafiah* – 1946, one of the illegal immigration ships organized by the *Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet* (an arm of the *Hagana* underground organization; a.k.a the *Mossad*, but not to be confused with Israel's national intelligence agency) that tried to reach the shores of Eretz-Israel (the Land of Israel - Mandate Palestine) but failed to reach its destination. In the aftermath of World War II, "illegal" immigrants (*ma'apilim*) – Jews who survived the Holocaust – were grouped together by Emissaries of *Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet* and concentrated in temporary camps until they could be brought to *Eretz-Israel* (an operation named *Ha'Bricha*). Among them were my late parents.

I was born in an abandoned German military camp used by representatives of the *Mossad* to house 'illegal' immigrants who had been brought together from all sorts of countries in post-war Europe. The camp, in a small fishing village in Yugoslavia, had a hospital where I was born.

*Rafiah* was originally a Greek ship, named Athina, that had sunk at the end of World War I and was purchased by the *Mossad*, raised from the depths of the harbor in Piraeus – a port outside Athens, and renovated to carry 'illegal' Jewish immigrants to *Eretz-Israel*. The original name of the ship was Greek and the vessel – which was quite small – had served as a vessel for transporting 100 head of cattle. The ship's name was changed, designated *Rafiah* after members of the *Hagana* Underground had been apprehended by the British and deported to the Egyptian town of Rafiah in Northern Sinai.

The *Rafiah*, with a Greek captain at the helm, sailed for Yugoslavia after it was repaired and renovated, adding bunks that were only 1 meter by 40 cm. so that 800 *ma'apilim* could be taken on board at the Yugoslavian port in November 1946. This was the dead of winter and weather conditions and rough seas that made it impossible to depart. After some time it was decided to set sail – charting a two-week voyage through the Greek Isles in an attempt to evade the British.

At a certain point, the ship's captain decided to find refuge from high seas in a small cove of one of the islands. The situation reached hellish proportions. Eight hundred *ma'apilim*, including infants a year old and above, and youngsters age 13 and 14, the other passengers being only a bit older – all suffered from crowding and lack of conditions. The commander of the ship, Gad Lasker – a member of *Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet* ordered the captain to anchor in a small cove off the island Sirina, north of Rhodes. In the course of trying to navigate the anchorage in the small cove, the ship hit a rock and water began to gush in. It is hard to describe the panic and shock at that moment: 800 souls in a leaking tub trying to save their lives, under the worst weather conditions possible, in the freezing cold, with 6-7 meter waves,

clothed only in their underwear or robes jumping onto the rocks and the raging waters.

I am only 10 days old. My mother is very sick, and I am not being nursed because she lacks milk. I'm being fed honey from a container my father hung above her bunk, and thus he fed me in this manner every time I cried or was hungry. When the ship hit the rock my father had gone up on deck to get a breath of fresh air with another young man. Without hesitating for even a moment, my father wrapped me in a blanket and yelled to people who had succeeded in jumping onto the rocks – to catch me. Unfortunately I fell onto a flat rock, as the young man next to my father had tried to dissuade him from such an act. But my father ignored his advice and threw me onto the rocks. A young woman of about 18 years of age saw the blanket and wanted to get it. Her first attempt was unsuccessful, but in her second attempt she succeeded in retrieving the blanket – still unaware that I – a newborn – was inside. After she opened it and found me inside she began to yell to those on the ship not to throw infants overboard. My savior and I only met 56 years later in the first reunion marking the 55th anniversary of the sinking of the *Rafiah*.

This young woman indeed saved my life, and took care of me for three days when she couldn't find my parents. Only after my uncle – who was only 14 at the time – recognized me, and my mother was found on another part of the island by one of the *ma'apilim*, were we reunited together with my father. The entire island was an unoccupied stretch of mostly volcanic rock with a few caves above the waterline where we found shelter from the rain and the wind.

Many were injured with lacerated feet, some had been crushed between the ship and the rocks, and some had drowned – 45 minutes in hell until nothing was left. Only the Almighty knows how almost all the 800 *ma'apilim* managed to survive. The next day eight bodies washed up on shore, the others drowned. The young people tried, unsuccessfully, to tie the ship with ropes to the rocks.

The *ma'apilim* were regrouped together by the commander of the ship and the radio operator (*gideoni*) who tried to stabilize the situation. It was decided to send some people to reconnaissance the island, and indeed a small 20 square-meter church was found where the injured and the children were taken, and a shepherd and his family was encountered, whom it turned out had been placed on the island by the Greek Government which provided him with water and food and all his needs to 'hold the island' to prevent it falling into Turkish hands. The shepherd was asked to help with a small quantity of milk, water and a bit of meat. In negotiations that ensued he demanded jewelry and gold, which he received and we got meat and water and the infants got milk. The radio was fixed and contact with the *Mossad* in Eretz-Israel was established, relaying how the ship had been shipwrecked and calling for help.

The irony of the story: Who if not the British, our enemies, came to our assistance after the late Golda Meir appealed to them to save us. After a number of days, food, clothing and first aid was parachuted onto the island and the situation stabilized. Parallel to this, a British warship was dispatched to evacuate us.

It was clear to everyone that the way to Eretz-Israel was blocked. The men were sent to an internment camp on Cyprus – including my father. The women and children and the injured were sent to a hospital on Rhodes. The rabbi of the local Jewish community took me and my uncle under his care and took care of us until my mother recovered. Then we were taken by a Greek ship to Alexandria in Egypt and they didn't let the British catch us. Only four months later we arrived in Haifa, and from there we were sent to the *ma'apilim* internment camp in Atlit, south of Haifa. Transferred from camp-to-camp, miraculously we meet up with my father, and thus the family was re-united, and we arrived, after our release, in Kibbutz Ramat Hakovesh.

Forty years I searched for my history and my family's – and I was never told anything. Only hints. Thus from age 14 I began to try and uncover my past. In time I made contact with the *ma'apilim*, and I researched and interviewed them and I also made contact with the Mevo'ot Yam Naval School at Michmoret and the Cellcom cellular phone network, all of whom I should thank for finally piecing together the story and the surrounding circumstances.

The story is very complex and a search for my roots that I conducted in Hungary filled in the missing parts of the picture. I will give more details in a two-hour lecture, including a documentary prepared by Israeli investigative journalist Ilana Dayan under the auspices of the Telad TV channel franchise. I would be glad to offer lectures and additional explanations to interested parties.

Shlomo Reichmann – 'The Infant'

### Memorial on the Island

