

The La Spezia Affair - 1946

Compiled by Tzvi Ben-tzur

The events related to the sailing in May 1946 of the two Aliya Bet vessels, "Eliahu Golomb" and "Dov Hoz" from the Port of La Spezia, Italy, are known as the "La Spezia affair". The "Dov Hoz" was already moored in the Port of La Spezia, ready to embark the ma'apilim. The activities connected with the preparations and provisioning of the vessel gave rise to a wave of rumors among the local population that a group of Italian fascists is trying to escape the country. These rumors reached the ears of the local authorities, themselves being ex partisans fighting the Mussolini regime. The convoy carrying the ma'apilim to the vessel was ambushed. 38 trucks, which were "borrowed" from the British Army by members of [Ha'Chavura](#) and carrying 1014 ma'apilim to the port, were stopped by the Italian police. The convoy's leaders convinced the police commander that they are transporting Jewish holocaust survivors, and the ma'apilim were allowed to board the vessel. The British became aware of the event though and took immediate action to stop the vessel from leaving port. Some of Ha'Chavura members were detained on their way back to their base (they faced military court, served time in jail and then discharged from the army).

A struggle between the ma'apilim, detained on the vessel and the nearby wharf, and the British authorities developed. The story received a wide coverage in Italian and international press and a wave of sympathy swept the country. The La Spezia's residents showed outstanding support for the ma'apilim. The port was declared Porta di Zion (The Gate to Zion), a name that is remembered to this day. As part of their struggle, the ma'apilim conducted a hunger strike which lasted 75 hours.



Intensive diplomatic negotiation between the British, Italian and The Jewish Agency (Hasochnut) took place. On site, the ma'apilim were represented by Yehuda Arazi, the head of [Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet](#)'s Italian branch. Harold Laski, the chairman of the Labour Party in Britain at that time, was instrumental in the negotiations. The British allowed another vessel, named "Eliahu Golomb", to join the "Dov Hoz" and thus make living conditions for the ma'apilim more bearable. After about a month, the British finally gave up, the vessels were allowed to sail, and the ma'apilim were promised legal entry into Eretz Israel. The vessels sailed La Spezia, to the cheers of thousands of people, on May 8th 1946 with 675 and 339 on board "Dove Hoz" and "Eliahu Golomb" respectively. They arrived Haifa on the 13th of May after an uneventful passage. The ma'apilim were disembarked in Haifa, received legal immigration certificates and their number was deducted from the yearly quota.



The people of Israel much appreciate the support for post WW-II Aliya Bet operations shown by the Italian people in general, and the residents of La Spezia in particular, as demonstrated by the following article:

A Gala Event in Honor of the City of La Spezia, Italy Ramot Menashe, 19th April 2012

Written by Sarah Osacky-Lezer & printed in "z'man yarok", Apr. 25, 2012



In a gala event which was attended by a large audience, and in the presence of an Italian delegation that included the Honorable Ambassador Luigi Mattiolo and the vice-mayor of the city of La Spezia, Maurizio Graziano (in the picture to the left), the members of Kibbutz Ramot Menashe thanked the Italian people and the population of that city for the identification and support shown by them in 1946. It was

exactly 66 years ago when a group of about a thousand survivors of the Holocaust gathered at the port waiting for a ship that would take them to their Homeland. The gates were locked by the British mandatory government. Among those waiting in the port was a group of “Builders of the Negev”, members of the Ha’shomer Ha’tzair youth movement, “graduates” of Auschwitz and other extermination camps. The British placed the port under siege and allowed no ships to leave. The immigrants, under the leadership of Yehuda Arazi began a hunger strike which made headlines in the world’s newspapers and brought to the public’s attention the plight of thousands of immigrants who had gathered in Italy after the war and had nowhere to go.

During this difficult period the people of La Spezia showed remarkable solidarity with the Jewish survivors. The city itself had suffered terrific bombing towards the end of the war and was in an awful state. There was a scarcity of food but nevertheless the people of the city shared the little they had with the survivors who were cramped at the wharf of the port for six weeks, not knowing what the future held in store for them. When the British finally relented and allowed the Dov Hoz and the Eliahu Golomb to leave, the town orchestra and the Fire Department – together with many of the city’s inhabitants, gathered at the port and wished them “Farewell”, until the vessels disappeared from the horizon.

The story of this event has been passed down in Ramot Menashe from generation to generation and in the past year one member of the founding generation of the kibbutz; Avraham (Abrashke) Vered published his memoirs, in which he again recounted the episode of La Spezia. That was the spark that lit the idea in the mind of the kibbutz member Victor Blitt to inaugurate a gala evening in honor of the city of La Spezia and its inhabitants and a wide circle of members harnessed them to making the plan a reality.

With the aid of the Italian Embassy in Israel, contact was established with the authorities of the city and it was decided that the affair should be held on the evening following Holocaust Day. Many people of Italian origin in the country, members of the kibbutz and of kibbutzim in the vicinity have gathered in the Ramot Menashe dining hall for this remarkable occasion, which included anecdotes pertaining to that period, short movies and photos, songs and of course a speech by the Honorable Ambassador, the secretary of the kibbutz, Giora Ratz and the Chairman of the Megiddo region, Hanan Erez. Several hours before the start of the gala evening a leading member of the kibbutz, Avraham Diamont passed away. He had also been among those who took part in the hunger strike. Despite our mourning it was decided to continue to hold this affair, which has become indirectly, a salute to the memory of Avraham, who did not have the privilege of being present.

Israel de Benedetti of Kibbutz Ruchama who immigrated to Israel in 1949 told how the young members of Hechalutz in Italy aided in purchasing vessels for clandestine immigration and Avraham Vered described the feeling of warmth and empathy that the survivors received from the city’s inhabitants. At the height of the evening Yaakov Pelech, one of the La Spezia immigrants took the center of the stage together with

four generations of his family and presented the vice-mayor of the city with a certificate of gratitude and a photo-collage of Ramot Menashe, the flourishing kibbutz that was created by the survivors of La Spezia. The vice-mayor, Sr. Graziano thanked the kibbutz warmly and told the audience that the city donates a yearly prize, called "Exodus" for those who do outstanding volunteer work in the community in helping minority groups or in education for community integration. The city also sends a group of youngsters every year to Auschwitz to learn about the Holocaust at first hand.

Ambassador Mattiolo declared that despite the black period of fascism in Italy and its part in WW II he is proud of the assistance given to illegal immigration by his country, during the three years from the end of the war until the establishment of the State of Israel. He promised to work for the continuation of that tradition and that he himself had learnt very much during his service in this country. Unfortunately there are too many who are still ignorant of the problems of Israel.

The evening concluded with the singing of the anthems of both countries and with the feeling that a long-term debt had been repaid by Ramot Menashe to the people of La Spezia; an unpaid debt of more than sixty years.

English translation: Aryeh Malkin

Hebrew source: <http://www.sarahozacky.com/904/904/>



A morning parade of the ma'apilim; moored to the wharf are the vessels "Eliahu Golomb" and "Dov Hoz"



The famous artist Salvador Dalí dedicated one of the paintings in his series "Aliyah, The Rebirth Of Israel" (1968) to the La-Spezia Affair. The name of this particular painting is "On The Shores Of Freedom"