

## The Voyage of the “Ben Hecht”

This vessel was built by the German firm Krupp as a private yacht. It changed hands and was used, at one time, to smuggle the gold of the Republican Government from Spain to Mexico, shortly before its fall in the Spanish Civil War. Finally it was purchased by the US Navy and used as a coastal patrol vessel. In 1946 it was purchased by a company called Tyre Shipping of New York, which served as a façade for the “American League for a Free Palestine”, an organization that was connected to the Revisionist Movement. The ship was named for the author and screenwriter Ben Hecht (at right), a Jewish American who was active in Revisionist circles. The proceeds of his successful play, “A Flag is Born” which dealt with the subject of Aliya and the fight against the British - were used to help purchase the vessel.



Ben Hecht sailed on March 1<sup>st</sup> 1948 from Port de Bouc, France, carrying 626 Ma’apilim and two Palyam men accompanying them; Moshe Shwartz and Simcha Berlin. The crew of 18 was made up - for the most part - of American volunteers. Two American journalists were also on board. On March 9<sup>th</sup>, when the vessel was close to Palestine, it was intercepted by two British destroyers. A British force took the vessel under its control, facing almost no resistance. The vessel was towed to Haifa, whereas the Ma’apilim were transferred to Cyprus. The American crew was arrested but the men were freed and deported back to the USA, following diplomatic intervention.

The “Ben Hecht” was the only Revisionist vessel that participated in Aliya Bet after the end of the WW II. Since Aliya Bet was regarded as something that was of common interest to all the political movements of Palestine, the Hagana aided in preparation of the vessel in New York and later in France.



In the summer of 1948 the vessel was taken out of storage in the port of Haifa ‘shadow fleet’ anchorage, and refitted as a vessel of the Israeli navy called: “Maoz” [Hebrew: Stronghold] K-24. She participated in the War of Independence and served as mother-ship for the ‘explosive launches’ which sank the Egyptian flagship “Emir Farouk”.

During the 50’s the ship was sold to Italians and was used as a ferry in the harbor of Naples. In 2008-2009 the vessel was once again refitted completely and used as a private yacht with the name of Santa Maria Del Mar. As of 2010 it is known that the vessel is for sale and one would hope that some Israeli or private Jewish factor would be interested in purchasing her. So far as we know, this is the only vessel from the period of Aliya Bet that is still afloat and one can hope that it will be returned to Israel and used as a floating museum of Aliya.

(Compiled by Tzvi Ben-Tzur)