

The Voyage of the “Biria”

The voyage of the 999 Ma’apilim of the “Biria” took place on two vessels: First, the Ma’apilim sailed on a vessel called the “Balboa”, (formerly the “Norsyd”, a Canadian navy corvette). (On its next voyage, this vessel was named “Hagana”.) The plan was that upon approaching the shore of Palestine the Ma’apilim were to be transferred to an old Turkish tub called the “Akbel”. This was done so that this good speedy corvette would not be captured by the British and would be able to make more voyages.

Both vessels bore the name Biria for this operation. They were named after the settlement near the town of Safad in the Galilee, mentioned in the Mishnah and the Talmud. At the beginning of 1946, there were several confrontations with the British forces, who tried to remove the settlement bearing that name and encountered fierce resistance from the settlers. In order to differentiate between the two vessels, the corvette is referred to here as the “Hagana” and the “Akbel” – as “Biria”. The vessel commander from the “Hagana” was Yehoshua Baharav (Rabinowitz) from the Mossad Le’Aliya Bet, who was accompanied by Betzalel Drori. The Gideoni (communications man) was Avraham Lichovski. The crew of the vessel - which was one of the American vessels the Mossad Le’Aliya Bet had acquired - was made up of Jewish American volunteers from the Zionist youth movements. They were led by Captain Aryeh Friedman and included Yaakov Frank (who later became a member of the Israeli Knesset), and Shamir Hyman (one of the first pilots in the future Israeli Air Force, 1948). The “Biria” was commanded by Bezalel Drori and he had no other members of the Palyam and no Gideoni with him.

The “Hagana” left from La Ciotat, near Marseilles, France on 23rd June 1946. She met the “Biria”, which had left Marseilles earlier, on 28th June, near Cyprus. On the following day the Ma’apilim were transferred by boats from one vessel to the other. The “Hagana” left the scene and sailed for Bakar in Yugoslavia, in order to pick up another load of Ma’apilim. The “Biria” was not built to take such a large number of passengers and the conditions aboard her were atrocious. The vessel began to keel over and an S.O.S. was broadcast. The British answered by accompanying the vessel but would not give the Ma’apilim water or food, nor would they tow her into Haifa. On July 1st she arrived at Haifa, where she was taken under arrest by the British. Since this was shortly after the infamous “Black Saturday” and the Atlit camp was filled with Israelis, the British ‘housed’ the Ma’apilim on the vessel “Max Nordau”, which was tied up in a corner of the port near the breakwater. The Ma’apilim spent ten days there under unbearable conditions and threatened to rebel. The Jewish Agency negotiated with the British and the latter agreed to move the Ma’apilim to a temporary tent camp, next to the permanent camp in Atlit.

The well-known American journalist I.F. Stone accompanied the Ma’apilim of the “Biria” on their journey and wrote a book describing it, titled “Underground to Palestine”. This voyage was offered to him by the Hagana, after he failed to sail - as was originally scheduled - on the “Josiah Wedgwood”.

(Compiled by Tzvi Ben-Tzur)



On board the Biria (Balboa)



The Akbel