

## **“The Exodus” - Exodus from Europe – 1947**

“The Exodus” is justly considered the flagship of the Aliya Bet Operations. This dramatic and well-known story caught the attention of the whole world to the saga of the illegal immigration to Palestine. In a dangerous and dramatic maneuver, the ship sneaked out of the harbor of Sete, France on July 11<sup>th</sup> 1947, carrying 4,530 Holocaust survivors, who had come from the displaced persons camps of Germany and Austria. The ship, which carried a crew of American volunteers and was accompanied by young Israelis of the Palyam and Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet, made its way to Palestine and was followed continually by a large contingent of British warships. The commander of the ship was Yossi Harel and its captain was Yitzchak “Ike” Aharonovitch. The Palyamnikim who accompanied the vessel were Micha Perry, Tzvi (Miri) Katzenelson and Sima Shmuckler. The Gideonim (communications personnel) were Azriel Einav and Max Cohen.

When the vessel approached the shores of Palestine, on July 18<sup>th</sup>, there was a severe clash between the British forces that tried to overpower the Ma'apilim and commandeer their vessel, and the Palyamnikim, the crew and the Ma'apilim, who defended themselves bravely. Two of the Ma'apilim and one of the American volunteer crew were killed in this encounter and hundreds were wounded. The sight of the battered vessel and its desperate immigrants had a strong impact on the UN committee members, who happened to be in Palestine at that time, and influenced the course of events which led to the memorable UN decision of November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1947.

The British altered their policy of sending the survivors to Cyprus and decided to return the Ma'apilim to the land from which they had set sail. The Ma'apilim were transferred to three deportation ships and sent back to Port de Bouc, France. There, a drama unfolded that inflamed world opinion; the Ma'apilim refused to disembark and accept asylum in France; they remained on the deportation ships, despite their terribly crowded conditions. Members of the Palyam at that locale, under the command of Nissan Levitan, who worked in close cooperation with Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet, kept close contact with the Ma'apilim. The latter were supplied food and medical assistance and encouraged in their defiance of the British. A stalemate of three weeks ensued, after which the British gave up and decided to return the Ma'apilim to a camp near Hamburg, Germany. There, they were taken off the deportation vessels by force and placed in a displaced persons camp. Returning the survivors to Germany practically completed the British defeat in the battle for world opinion.

(Compiled by Tzvi Ben-Tzur)



*The Exodus at Haifa Port, July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1947*



Port-de-Bouc, July 1947: Palyam members support the Ma'apilim on the deportation ships in their battle on world opinion

Left to right: Mikko Bachar, Marga Gothelf (in a nurse uniform), the Jewish American reporter – Ruth Grubber, Alfred (from the Mossad Aliya Bet) and Yair Braker.



Exodus 1947 on an Israeli stamp from 1997, commemorating the Ha'apala 1934-1948