

## **The Voyage of the “Pans” - Pan Crescent & Pan York, Atzmaut & Komemiyut<sup>1</sup>**

[Both names mean Independence]

The “Pans” operation was testimony to the planning, administrative and logistic ability of Ha’Mossad Le’Aliya Bet and its leader - Shaul Avigur. Two sister ships, 4,570 tons each, were purchased in the USA by Ha’Mossad Le’Aliya Bet through a front company of the Hagana. The “Pan Crescent” and the “Pan York” sailed for the Mediterranean in May 1947 with American professional crews. Each vessel was to be prepared for carrying 7,500 Ma’apilim. The “Pan York” was sent to Marseilles, France for this purpose. The American crew left the vessel there and a new crew signed on. Gad Hilb became captain of the “Pan York”, accompanied by Estaban Hernandez (Captain Steve) as First Mate and Ephraim Tzuk as Chief Engineer. The rest of the crew consisted of former Spanish Republicans and Jewish American volunteers. The “Pan Crescent” was sent to Venice, Italy and its American crew was replaced by an Italian crew.

In August, the Palyamnikim, led by Berchik Magen came aboard. Berchik was appointed commander of the “Pan Crescent” (later renamed “Atzmaut” – [Independence]); Nissan Leviatan became commander of the “Pan York”, (renamed “Kibbutz Galuyot” – [The Gathering of the Diaspora]; It was renamed again “Komemiyut” – [Independence] after it left Cyprus). Yossi Harel was appointed overall commander of the operation. Additional Palyamnikim were: (for “Atzmaut”) Micha Perry, Meir Avraham, Eliezer Armon, Grisha Shenkman, Betzalel Feldman, Geda Shochat, Avraham Fradkin and Yitzchak (Ike) Aran (Aharonovich), who took over from the Italian Captain when the vessel reached Famagusta, Cyprus. There were also a number of American volunteers in the crew: Avi Livni, Charlie Weiss, Sam Schulman, Teddy Vardi and Eugene Alexander. The Gideonim were Gad Lifshitz and Chaim Goldis<sup>2</sup>. Palyamnikim accompanying “Komemiyut” were Zalman Perach, Akiva Offenbach, Willie Rostoker, David Lowenthal, Irving Weingarten and the Gideonim, Reuven Oren and Malka Rofeh.

Meanwhile, Rumania had agreed to allow 15,000 Jews to leave; the only condition was that they depart from a Bulgarian port. She also agreed to allow the ships to be prepared for the Ma’apilim in Constanta, Rumania, after British pressure on France and Italy had forced the ships to leave Marseilles and Venice before this work had been completed. In order to finish the job, a team was formed with Geda Shochat in charge. The team left for Constanta at the end of August on the “Pan York”. The “Pan Crescent” was delayed because it was sabotaged by the British in Venice and had to be repaired. Finally, it left for Constanta at the end of September.

The British had these vessels under observation from the moment they entered the Mediterranean. They were aware of the purpose of these vessels and pressured the Americans to use their influence in preventing their use. They claimed that ‘a whole brigade of Bolsheviks were to be brought into Palestine’. The American government was of the opinion that the Yishuv in Palestine did not have a chance against the Arabs, so it was also willing to help the British in limiting Aliya. The Americans put tremendous pressure on Moshe Sharet and others in the Yishuv, to halt the departure of these two vessels for Palestine, with the contention that their sailing would damage the efforts to carry out the UN resolution of the 29<sup>th</sup> November. Sharet bought the argument of the USA and wanted to arrest the sailing of these vessels; he asked Ben Gurion to give the order. Ben Gurion tended to agree with Sharet’s view of the situation. Before reaching a decision, Shaul Avigur - the head of Ha’Mossad Le’Aliya Bet - came to Palestine on December 9<sup>th</sup>, to try to dissuade them from halting Aliya. Shaul reported that there were thousands of survivors who had been left without shelter or clothing for the winter, and a delay in their coming to Palestine would be a catastrophe for them. Ben Gurion changed his mind.

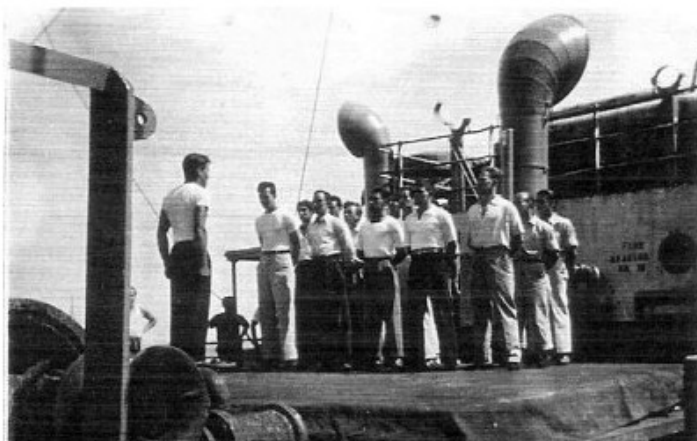
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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with “LeKomemiyut” – [To Independence]

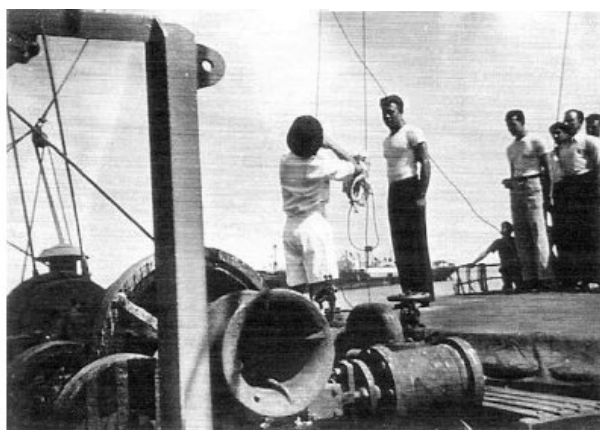
<sup>2</sup> Chaim Goldis had been the Gideoni on the “Bracha Fuld”. He was killed during the War of Independence near Hulda, where he had been communication officer of the Jerusalem convoys.

A team headed by Yankale Salomon, a former Commander of the Palmach 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, organized the trains that carried 15,200 Holocaust survivors from all over Rumania to the port of Burgas, Bulgaria. The two vessels left port on December 26<sup>th</sup>. En route, an agreement was reached with the British, under the terms of which the two vessels would sail directly to Cyprus. The crews of both vessels were not to be arrested and the captain of each ship, Gad Hilb and Ike would continue to service them with the aid of a small crew, while they remained at anchor near Famagusta. When Israel became independent these two vessels carried most of the Cyprus camp inmates to the new State of Israel.

(Compiled by Tzvi Ben-Tzur)



*15 May 1948 – Nimrod Eshel, the First Class Seaman, heading the parade on board the Pan York*



*Gad Hilb - the Captain raising the Israeli flag*



*5 July 1948, the Komemiut (Pan York) bringing released inmates from the Cyprus detention camps to Haifa*