

The Voyage of the “Shabtai Luzinski”

This vessel was named in honor of Shabtai Luzinski, (code name Shimon), known as Shimon Hazaken [Hebrew: old Shimon], who was one of the first Zionists who went to Italy after WW II, to help the Holocaust survivors. He was particularly remembered for his work with the orphans of Salvo, who had been gathered in a camp in that town, by the soldiers of the Jewish brigade. He died in Rome, in a motorcycle accident, on January 18th 1947.



The vessel was prepared for its voyage by Avraham Zakai, Avraham Shavit, Betzalel Drori and several other Israelis, at Porto Venere, Italy. The skipper and crew were Italians. Its commander was David Maimon (pictured here), who actually functioned as the captain, and the Gideoni was Arie Chaikind. Other Palyamnikim on the vessel were Betzalel Drori, Yehoshua (Ossie) Ravid and Avraham Karni.

“Shabtai Luzinski” sailed on March 4th 1947, from Metaponto, Italy, carrying 650 Ma’apilim. In order to ease the crowded conditions on the vessel, the “Albertina”, the Mossad’s ‘errand boy’ took off in her wake, with Dudale Ben-Chorin in command and Oved Sadeh as the Gideoni. She carried 173 Ma’apilim, who were transferred to the “Shabtai Luzinski” at sea, five days later, bringing the total number of Ma’apilim to 823. The “Albertina” went back to Italy.

The vessel arrived at the shore of Nitzanim on the morning of March 12th, without being intercepted by the British. She ran up onto a rock near the shore, where a team of palyamnikim, under the command of David Nameri was waiting to help the Ma’apilim debark the vessel. A unit of the 4th Battalion of the Palmach under the command of Avraham Yoffe came to their aide. For three hours the Ma’apilim left the vessel, swimming to shore, or using a long cable, as an omega. Meanwhile, the British became aware of the situation and called for reinforcement, to catch the Ma’apilim before they were spread out into the local population. To preempt that move, the Hagana mobilized hundreds of citizens to come to the scene and mix with the Ma’apilim, rendering the effort of identifying the Ma’apilim much more difficult. The British arrested several hundreds of people and took them all to Haifa, by truck. There, they tried to identify the Ma’apilim and separate them from the locals. About 240 were so identified and freed; 700 were deported to Cyprus, on board two British vessels. Of these, on March 15th about 250 were returned to Palestine, and on March 28th another 75 were returned. Of all those returned to Palestine, there were about 85 who were Ma’apilim, who succeeded in fooling the British.

The poet Chaim Hefer admitted that his popular song, “Shoshana” was inspired by the story of this vessel, whose code name was “Shoshana”, originally - “Susanna”.

(Compiled by Tzvi Ben-Tzur)

