

The Voyage of the “Theodor Herzl”



This vessel, named after the ‘Father of Modern Zionism’, was built of metal in 1907 and had a dead weight of 1,768 tons. Its engine was fed by coal and it could develop a maximum speed of eight knots. The vessel was bought for Ha’Mossad Le’Aliya Bet in the USA¹. It was prepared for its voyage by the Marseilles team of Geda Shochat and Nachum Carmeli-Shamir. The commander was Mecca Limon (pictured here), accompanied by Yosh Halvei, Betzalel (Tzolo) Feldman and Chaim Wineshelboim. The Gideoni was

Nachman (Bob) Burstein. There were several journalists who accompanied this voyage; their leader was Moish Perlman, a British citizen, who later on became the head of the Israeli government’s newspaper desk.

The vessel set sail on April 2nd 1947, from the port of Sete, France, carrying 2,641 Ma’apilim. En route, she was to pick up an additional 1,000 Ma’apilim from Italy, but because of numerous technical problems, the Palyamnikim on board decided to head directly for Palestine. A further rendezvous was planned to take place somewhere along the coast of Turkey, with the vessel “Shear Yashuv” in order to pick up her Ma’apilim, but it was also cancelled due to communications problems.

On April 13th the vessel was caught by the British navy. One of the most severe battles of the Aliya Bet operation took place between the Ma’apilim and the British soldiers, in the course of which, three Ma’apilim were killed by gunfire: Aharon Dov, Pinchas Weiss and Menachem Samet (RIP). The wounded and the sick were interned in the Atlit detention camp, while all the others were deported to Cyprus. The reports of the commanders of the destroyers that participated in the battle point to a lack of control and confusion, due to the high number of casualties:

“The most unusual feature of the arrest was the level of employment of firearms by the boarding party: of over a score of casualties among the immigrants, ten suffered gunshot wounds, of which two died at the time and one died later.”

After the creation of the State of Israel, this vessel was taken from the ‘shadow fleet’ in the harbor of Haifa and used to bring Olim to Israel, with the aid of the team of Palyamnikim, who had done this earlier. In 1950 she was sold to private interests and in 1952 the vessel was scrapped.

(Compiled by Tzvi Ben-Tzur)



¹ She is not included in the 10 ships that came from the USA with Machal crews.



Preparation for boarding the "Theodor Herzl"



Following the battle, the Ma'apilim carrying two bodies of those who were killed. (a third was severely wounded and died later)



The Ma'apilim demonstrating against the deportation to Cyprus. The banner said: "The Germans destroyed our families and homes, don't you destroy our hopes"