

The Story of Willie Rostoker



Amongst those Jewish volunteers for Aliya Bet there were several who made more than one voyage, and when it was all over they themselves settled in Israel as Olim. Such a one was Willie Rostoker, who had been the chief helmsman of the “Ulua” (Chaim Arlosoroff). He was born in Montreal, Canada in 1925 and was a member of the Habonim Zionist Youth Organization.

After serving in the Canadian Air Force during WW-II, he heard when the war was over that someone was looking for volunteers “for the Land of Israel” to man ships of immigrants. That is how he ended up in Baltimore and joined the crew of the “Ulua”. Willie did not have any previous experience as a sailor, but was ready to do anything that would be useful. He proved to be a very good helmsman and even was complimented for his work by Gad Hilb. The two took a liking to each other and a fast friendship developed between them that lasted for about sixty years. The Captain of the “Ulua” on her way from the USA to Marseilles was an American named Schlegel, who then left the vessel. Gad took over as Captain in Marseilles and one of the first things that he did was to appoint Willy first-helmsman. Willy was quick to learn and started studying navigation and other seaman’s skills. Hilb was aware of Willie’s advance and suggested that Willie join him on the “Pan York” as 3rd mate, when he was appointed its captain in December 1947. This ship, and its twin sister, “Pan Crescent” each carried more than 7500 Ma’apilim to Palestine (but ended up in Cyprus).¹

While working for Aliya Bet during the years 1946 – 1948, Willie served on the following ships:

- “Ulua” – The “Chaim Arlosoroff” – arrived on 27th February, 1947.
- “Pan York” – The “Kibbutz Galuyot” – arrived 1st January, 1948.
- “Fabio” – “The Battle of the Ayalon Valley” – arrived 29th May, 1948.
- “Fabio” – “The Rebel” – arrived 17th September, 1948.
- “Kefalos” – “The Southerner” – arrived 23rd November, 1948.
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In addition to the above, Willie also took part in the “warm welcome” which the deported “Exodus 1947” Ma’apilim received, during the months, August-September in Port de Bouc, France. He also trained the Ma’apilim who traveled on “The Battle of the Ayalon Valley” before they boarded the vessel for its journey to Israel.

1. By Chaim Shenhav, “The Mandate and its Ruins”, publ. by “Am Oved” 2007, p. 177-8.



“Palyam Boys” waiting at Port de Bouc for the arrival of the deportees of the Exodus 1947.
(from left: Gad Hilb, Yair Braker and Willie Rostoker)