

**Sklar, Leonard (Lenny)**

Born in 1917 in Lithuania and emigrated to the USA in 1938

Volunteered from the USA to sail on the "Exodus" in 1947.

**This is the Way it Was****Personal information**

I was born in Lithuania in 1917 and moved to the USA in 1938. My family remained in Lithuania and were all killed by the Germans and Lithuanians during the Holocaust. I was drafted into the American Army and served five years in the USA and overseas during WW II. In 1946 an emissary of the Hagana came to us and told us that he was looking for volunteers to help in the immigration of survivors of the Holocaust to Palestine. I had been interested in this even earlier, so I volunteered because I wanted to help. As a result, I was sent to join a group, mostly Jewish, that was working on a ship called "President Warfield", which in due time became known as "Exodus 1947".

I had spent 5 years in the US Army but had no previous experience at sea. Neither did most of the other fellows. I was assigned to work in the galley together with a Protestant minister who had volunteered to be a ship's cook. A rumor spread among the Jewish community of Baltimore that the ship was to sail to Palestine with immigrants from Europe, but this was denied by the Hagana. However, the fact that most of the crew was Jewish did not serve to dispel the rumor.

Our first try at sailing to Europe did not succeed and we almost sank. Thanks to the help that we received from the U.S. Coast Guard we were saved. We returned to Baltimore and underwent additional repairs. When we finally left port the second time the British were already sitting on our tail. The British government tried to convince the Italian and French governments not to allow us to use their ports or supply us with various necessities. The British did manage to have the ship put into quarantine when it was in La Spezia but thanks to the efforts of Ada Sereni we were finally able to leave. We were then told that our next stop would be at Sete, a small port near Marseilles, and we would pick up the immigrants there, who will have arrived from Germany.

When we saw the long line of refugees/ survivors of the Holocaust, each with a knapsack containing all their worldly possessions, we were very moved and it was at that moment that we felt the importance of what we were doing. We helped them onto the ship and noted that they came from all over Europe and even from North Africa, but a great many of them spoke Yiddish. We waited for a pilot to take us out of the harbor but he didn't show up. Finally our Israeli captain took the initiative and brought us out of the harbor and we started our journey eastward. Once again the British remained on our tail from the very outset and we thought they intended to attack us. Some time during the night there was a collision and they tried to board the ship as they came alongside. We were ready for them with whatever we could find. I grabbed a fire extinguisher and threw it at a soldier. He managed to grab me and hit me on the

head with the butt of his rifle. I lost consciousness and may have had a concussion. I was taken to the ship's doctor and after a short rest I was back to normal. Several of our people had been killed and there were many who were wounded. Meanwhile the British had taken control and we were being towed to Haifa. In Haifa we were transferred to three deportation ships. I found myself on the ship with the others who had been injured, The "Ocean Vigour". There were probably about 1,500 people on our ship but there were none from the Palyam so we had to organize ourselves. A committee of the Olim was formed in which I also took part.

It turned out that the British were not going to take us to Cyprus as they had done until now with other immigrants. They intended sending us back to France. French officials who were cooperating with the British announced that they were ready to have us settle in France and help us in settling there. The Olim decided unanimously that none would get off the ship in France and demanded to be sent to Palestine. (There were several however who did agree to leave the ship in France.)

We received some measure of encouragement from the Palyamniks in France and from local Zionist organization leaders. They came out to the ship in small boats to encourage us. Living conditions and food, on the ship, were very poor, but with time, the JDC sent packages that helped improve the food and the morale. The ship committee organized the children into age groups and leaders worked with them to keep them occupied. We also organized Hebrew lessons for the immigrants. Rumors galore abounded about where we would end up, but no one really knew.

The uncertainty ended when we sailed to Hamburg and were sent to two camps in the part of Germany under British control, Poppendorf and Amstau. Conditions in the camps were better than those aboard the ship. We discussed among ourselves the possibility of reaching Italy and getting to Palestine from there. The American sailors (there were now about 10 of us) were able to get passes and go to town. I did not tell anyone that I was an American and did not want the British or the immigrants to know that I had US citizenship. Some time later we were given the choice of going back to the States or going to Palestine with certificates under fictitious identities. I chose to go to Palestine and was glad to meet people in Palestine who had come to Israel on the ship on which I had been a volunteer.

With the founding of the State I volunteered for Tzahal and served in the Negev and the center of the country as a gunnery officer. When the first Cease Fire in fighting took place, I decided to go back to the USA to study. I received an MA in Social Work, gained practical experience in this field and then returned to Israel. I continued to do Social Work in Israel until I retired in 1985. I am married, and have a married daughter and two grandchildren. We all live in Jerusalem.