

Dr David Kaplan

Volunteer from the USA on the "Ben Hecht"

This is the Way it Was

In early 1946 I was the radio officer on a troopship bringing home US Army soldiers stationed in Germany. The ship's electrician was Henry (Hank) Mandel and we were probably the only Jews in the crew. News from Palestine was the daily subject of our discussions, especially the news of Aliya Bet ships caught by the British Navy. We decided that whichever of us heard of a ship needing crew would notify the other. Henry and I separated after the troopship voyage, leaving our addresses with each other. Having sailed as a radio officer in the Merchant Marine from late 1943, I had no difficulty getting a Gulf Oil Company tanker on a regular run from Philadelphia to Venezuela and after a few trips received a message from Hank saying that he'd found a ship.

I came home, contacted him and he brought me to the offices of the American League for a Free Palestine in New York, where I presented my credentials and was signed on as radio officer. They sent me to the Gowanus Canal docks in Brooklyn where I saw this 750 ton private yacht, decommissioned Navy radar picket patrol vessel, with a slight starboard list looking like a bedraggled derelict. I did not know her history, built in Kiel, Germany in 1930, named Argosy, then Vita when she was used in the Spanish Civil War to transport the last of the Republican gold to south America when that war was lost, commandeered by the US Navy in WW II as USS Cytheria (PY 31) and sold to Tyre Trading Company, a front for the League, which in turn was sponsored by the Revisionist Party, which was in turn, an arm of the Irgun Tzvai Leumi. Money for the purchase was raised by the playwright Ben Hecht, whose Broadway production, "A Flag is Born" was written specifically for that purpose.

There were several changes of crew as men came aboard looked around and then left. Some claimed to have fought in the Lincoln Brigade but were soon gone. My job was to order and install the radio equipment, the only safety factor for which there were funds. Having been stripped of all Navy gear and untended for over a year, she required extensive refitting and repair. As a private yacht there were staterooms for approximately 12 passengers and a crew of about 12. The Navy manned her as a patrol yacht with 60 officers and men. Later, in France, she was to be prepared for 600 passengers and our own crew of 21. The summer ended with repairs proceeding slowly.

The ship was registered under Honduran flag, named Abril and the crew was supplied with Honduran seamen's papers. Rumor had it that the British C.I.D. knew about her purpose and there was an attempt to sabotage her by setting fire to a mattress factory opposite her berth. Stores were put aboard, mostly several thousand pounds of salami and a lot of grapefruit juice, plus a large supply of vitamin pills. On a blistery cold day in November repair of one of the running

lights on the end of the yardarm was needed, some 40 feet above the deckhouse. This job, usually reserved for the bosun, could not be undertaken by Walter (Heavy) Greaves, a 300 pounder whose weight could never be sustained by the yardarm. So the radio officer, 130 pound and six foot me, was elected. Never having been aloft, it was an experience never to be forgotten or repeated. A Captain was found, Robert Clay, who immediately purchased all the gold braid possible to be embroidered on his uniform (the rest of us were in khakis, chinos or whatever we could scrounge) and took command. After a short sea trial to Port Richmond on Staten Island, Abril put to sea on December 27 1946 with a crew of mostly inexperienced volunteers and a handful of seasoned sailors. The Captain took the bridge as we left port with the pilot boat guiding us to the Sandy Hook lightship where the pilot disembarked and we headed out into the ocean. The skipper turned green with seasickness, went below and was not seen again until we reached Ponta Delgada in the Azores.

We were fortunate in that our first mate, Robert Levitan was an excellent navigator with his entire sea time experience in the Pacific. He assumed command, with Louis Markowitz as second mate. Walter Greaves was third mate and James Heggie became bosun. The trip across the Atlantic was a stormy one, experienced hands had bouts of seasickness as Abril heeled past safety levels. Louis Binder, our 16 year old whocame aboard with false papers, had to be lashed to the wheel with a bucket alongside, to stand his watch. Our cook, Walter Cushenberry, a black man who did miracles with salami, managed to feed us under severe conditions.

With not one day of clear skies, day or night, for celestial navigation, Captain Levitan brought the Abril into Ponta Delgada in the Azores by dead reckoning. Here we refueled, and here I met the American Vice Consul, who knew our mission but did not discuss it with us. He asked if there was anything he could do and I said that we did not have any spare carbon brushes for the radio motor generator. When he said he knew about those items because he had worked in the General Electric Company plant in Schenectady, New York, I told him that I had relatives there and it turned out that he had dated one of my cousins! We left Ponta Delgada the following day and headed for Gibraltar, passing the Rock at dusk. At that point we were challenged by the British signal station's Aldis lamp, asking "What ship where bound"? to which I returned the message, "M/V Abril bound Arica, Chile", our listed destination. There was a long pause while they tried to understand why we were heading into the Mediterranean when Chile was in the other direction. At Bob Levitan's orders, I ignored the frantic signaling that followed.

Once in the Mediterranean there were severe storms damaging the superstructure and the Abril limped into Port de Bouc, a coaling port near Marseilles. We stayed there for the rest of January and all of February while the storm damages were repaired. The insides were stripped and the French workmen built shelves four and five high for the passengers to live on and sleep

in. On the last day of February and March 1st, we loaded some 600 displaced persons brought by railroad from the camps in Grenoble. They were mostly older people with some few younger men and women and children, survivors carrying small handbags and packages. When it was time to depart, the French pilots and tugboats called a strike and the captain had no choice but to try to go it alone. We got away from the dock with some damage to the bow railing but ran aground before we could make the turn out of the harbor. Then tugboats came and pulled us free.

Our course was set to follow the coastlines of France and Italy. For this part of the voyage most of us had two or more assigned duties. When not on radio watch, I pumped oil to some auxiliary unit and, because my father was a dentist, I was designated ship's doctor. The only time this became operational was when they brought a rather small, middle-aged man to me with a huge swelling in his cheek occasioned by a bad tooth. I could tell that by looking at the swollen gum all around it. There was no anesthetic and the patient kept asking me for "saam" which I later discovered meant the carbolic acid paste used in the "shtetls" of Europe to literally eat away the infected tissues. All that was available was a pair of electrician's pliers, so I asked two of the crew to hold him and, for my first experience in dentistry – which was to become my profession later on, I extracted the offending molar with great difficulty. The only mouthwash available was grapefruit juice and I still cringe when I think of what that must have felt like on the bleeding gums.

This part of the trip was beset with problems starting with stormy weather which plagued the passengers with seasickness. Then, one of our two fresh water tanks leaked overboard. To top it off, a piston rod in one of the twin diesels broke through the crankcase. Our chief and first assistant engineers were Norwegians who were not volunteers. Haakom Lilliby and Erling Sorensen. They, Louis Brettschneider, our second assistant and Hank Mandel, under terrible conditions, removed the damaged piston and patched the hole in the crankcase which left that engine working on five cylinders – when it was working – and reducing our speed. Now, the Abril, called by the press, a "sleek black gunrunner", barely made 8 knots. Combined with a failure of communications with the Irgun, this was to cause us to miss a planned rendezvous off Tel Aviv. A week after leaving France, British Lancaster patrol aircraft spotted Abril, flew low over our decks, frightening the passengers and left. The next day three British destroyers arrived, surrounded us, and told us via loudspeakers that we were approaching Palestinian waters. At this point, we replied saying that we were bound for Chile and requested to bring aboard food and water. This was denied so we hoisted the Israeli flag and that afternoon we were boarded by British Fleet Marines 10.3 nautical miles off the coast of Palestine, in international waters.

This was well outside the three mile territorial limits and, according to international law, piracy. But to whom to complain? I kept sending SOS messages telling the radio world of this attack until a Marine pointed his rifle at

me in the radio shack and told me to get out and down below with the rest of the crew. Many of our passengers were in tears and worse, some threatening to jump overboard. In the boarding process Abril, now called Ben Hecht although the name never appeared on her sides, sustained bulwark damage as she was towed into Haifa harbor. Had contact been made, and speed maintained, the plan was for Abril to arrive Friday evening under cover of darkness. As it developed, the Irgun did shut off the power to Tel Aviv so that the Abril would have been met with disembarking parties to bring the DP's ashore.

Instead, Abril was tied up to the dock at Haifa where elements of Sir Oswald Mosley's Red Devils (the fascist group of British soldiers who were told to enlist for Middle East duty after WW II) forced the passengers off the ship and onto the British prison ship across the quay and taken to Cyprus.

There were several pregnant women on board and I was understandably relieved when a British medical officer showed up to take charge. Some of our crew blended with the passengers and went with them to Cyprus. The two Norwegians were separated from the rest and repatriated. Two crewmen who were there as free lance news reporters were also sent home. The rest of us, all American citizens, were taken to the Haifa lock-up for the day and then transferred to Acre Central Prison, a medieval stone fortress with stone walls sixteen feet thick which had successfully withstood Napoleon's attacks – his cannon balls can be seen embedded in the stones. We were all housed in cell no. 26, a large airy room, with pallets made of old British uniform scrap, a hole in the floor with two stone foot rests as the sanitary facility and a water faucet nearby. The food was Arab prisoner fare which most could not manage and if it were not for the Yishuv sending us rations, it would have been much worse. Of course, what the Yishuv sent us was salami! Several of us were very ill and were sent to the "hospital", another cell but with bucket facilities, where medication for amoebic dysentery was provided in insufficient quantity to cure.

We were counted several times a day and had some pleasure in doubling back in or slipping out of line to cause either an over- or short count. The American consul showed up one day, obviously annoyed at being disturbed, bearing a pack of cigarettes and a Life magazine for the twenty of us. We were led one morning into a courtroom in front of an Arab judge complete with wig and with British officers standing beside him, and were sentenced to 17 years at hard labor for the crime of Aiding and Abetting Illegal Immigration. Each day we were led out to the exercise yard where we met Irgun men who had been caught in raids etc. including some incarcerated for two or more years for possession of weapons and a group that had successfully sabotaged power lines and railroads one night and were caught on the beach before they could escape. The top man in Acre Central at that time was a man called Chaim Luster, whose name and face was on the British poster of MOST WANTED with a price of thousands of pounds on his head. This was Eitan Livni's alias, one of Begin's top officers who in later years would be a member of Knesset from Tel Aviv.

It was he who arranged for the almost incredible escape of almost all Irgun captives, whose photos for their false identification papers were taken by a tiny Super Eljy camera I had brought with me and was never discovered by the British. Hank Mandel had brought some flashlight "D" batteries with him and these were used to set off the explosives in the break-out of Acre Prison by the Irgun. At that time, Dov Gruner was being tried by the British for possession of arms and when the death sentence was announced, the British prison commandant told some of our friends how sad it made him to have to carry out the punishment!

Back home in the USA much publicity was directed at the capture and imprisonment of American seamen on a mission of mercy. One of the objectives of the American League for a Free Palestine was to take advantage of this to gain support for establishing the Homeland promised by the British and to enlist American aid, political and economic, in this struggle. It is now obvious that Abril would be caught. The British knew all about the ship, its origin, its purpose, its itinerary and even the men who were instrumental in buying and outfitting her.

Petitions to President Truman, the Senate and Congress were signed by thousands organized by the families of the crew who selected my mother, Mrs Esther Kaplan, to represent their demand for our freedom and the lifting of the blockade. Within a few weeks of our capture, over a million petitions were on Truman's desk and his representation to the British Government was the key element leading to our deportation as undesirable aliens. And deported we were. One day, manacled, we were taken to Haifa and marched aboard the S/S Marine Carp. Captain Snow, her skipper, regarded us as terrorists and wanted to keep the handcuffs on but was persuaded otherwise. The trip home was marred by the news of Dov Gruner's hanging and cheered by the news of the successful breakout from Acre.

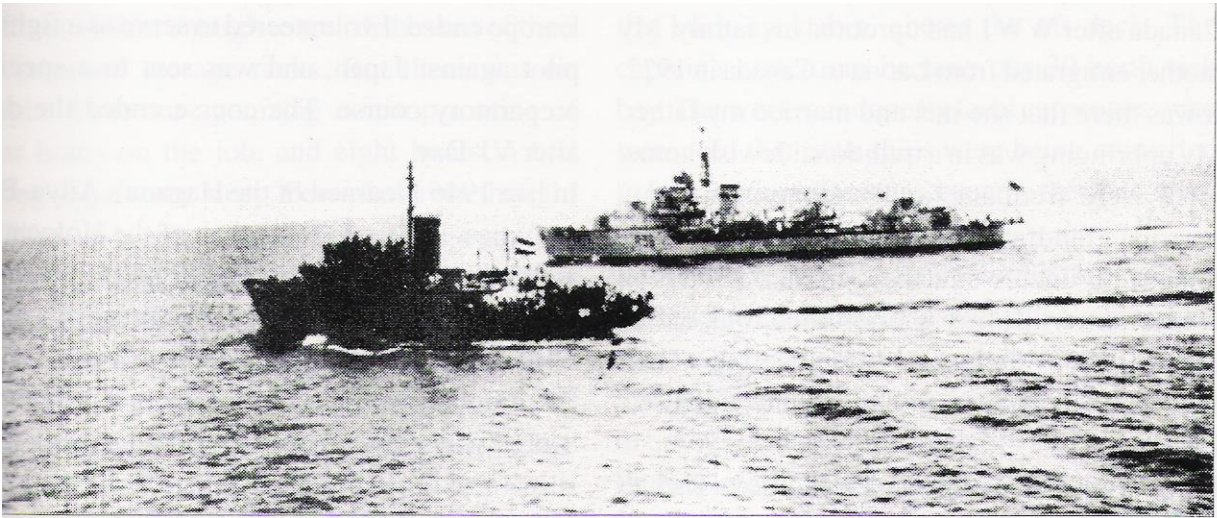
Postscript:

Somewhere in the 1980's one of the Ma'apilim, Abrasha Aaronson, who had kept my address (which by then was at least 40 years out of date) managed to get a message to me and we began an erratic correspondence to date, visiting with him when in Israel.

In 1987 an Aliya Bet reunion was held in Israel with publicity inviting any Ma'apilim to meet with the crew members. One of the Ben Hecht passengers, Mrs Esther Miron, introduced herself and as we spoke it developed that her daughter was employed as a researcher at Columbia University and her office there was only 100 feet from my own!

Over the years we lost touch with each other until about 1992 when, with wife Ellen, we went to Israel for a Bar Mitzvah and called Aaronson to ask him to locate Mrs Miron whose last name I had forgotten. I had left my address book at home, so, no address – "Abrasha, just find a lady named Esther who was on the

Ben Hecht 45 years ago"! He did! Not only that, but he also located two other passengers and this couple came to our hotel before Esther Miron. When she walked in and saw Mr and Mrs Tayar (he was an MK from Tel Aviv at the time) they all became hysterical. The Tayars had met on the Ben Hecht, were friends of Esther Miron who baked their wedding cake for them and hosted the party after they all reached Israel and lived near each other for several years, then moves some distance from each other and this was the first time that they had met in years! These memories last forever.



The ship "Ben Hecht" with 626 illegal immigrants and Jewish American volunteers detained by British destroyer at sea