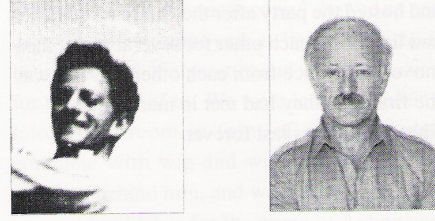


Eddy Kaplansky

Volunteer from Canada on "The Jewish State"

**This is the Way it Was**

I was born in Montreal, Quebec, Canada in 1925, the first of three children. My father was born in the Old City of Jerusalem, and immigrated to Canada after WW I had uprooted his family. My mother emigrated from Latvia to Canada in 1922. It was there that she met and married my father. My upbringing was in a traditional Jewish home/there were frequent family gatherings at my paternal grandfather's house, where I'd hear my father and uncles talk of their childhood days in Jerusalem while my grandfather told of the carpentry jobs he had all over Palestine. Their tales instilled in me a sense of identity with Eretz Israel.

It was in the Montreal of the author Mordecai Richler that I grew up and had my schooling. It was then Canada's most important city, and had its largest Jewish population. Quebec Province was under the strong influence of the Catholic Church, which ran most French language schools. In the 1930's we lived in a mixed area of few Jewish families. A Catholic school stood between our house and the school I attended. Going to school alone was an invitation to a beating by its students, so, to feel more secure we went in small groups. There was no avoiding the anti-Semitic insults they would hurl at us as we passed their school, and we would often have to defend ourselves against students spoiling for a fight. Their teacher priests would stand by in silence, tacitly approving of their actions.

In 1943, when I was old enough, I joined the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). As a Jew, I felt duty-bound to join the fight against Hitler. After graduating as a pilot a year later I was assigned to various courses. One was to prepare pilots for convoy escort and anti-submarine patrols, which also qualified me as an air navigator. I was still in Canada when the war in Europe ended. I volunteered to fight as a fighter pilot against Japan, and was sent to a special preparatory course. The course ended the day after VJ Day.

In late 1946 I learned of the Hagana's Aliya Bet activities. Fully aware by then of the Holocaust and the plight of the survivors in Europe, I felt that only a Jewish State could offer them a safe haven and guarantee the future safety of the Jews. So, although never a formal Zionist, I readily agreed when invited to be crew on an Aliya Bet ship. It was in April 1947 after Pesach that my friend, Laz Kahansky, and I boarded a train to New York. We continued to Baltimore a few days later. On arrival we took a taxi to Brown's Wharf, at the foot of Front Street near the Sailor's Institute. Our first sight of the "Northland" gave us a jolt, so disheveled did she look.

Our crew was mostly volunteers like us, landlubbers who never had sailed before. Of the officers, only the radio officer was not a hired professional. The

“Northland” was a former US Coast Guard icebreaker, which during WW II patrolled off Greenland and sank a few German submarines and surface craft. She had been acquired as war surplus for the Hagana’s Mosad for Aliya Bet for \$50 000.00. She was in the last stages of overhaul and outfitting: paid for by a local Jewish philanthropist. For the next week or two we cleaned the ship, and took on supplies and foodstuffs for our voyage and future passengers. The ship’s donkey engine wasn’t working so every item had to be carried aboard manually. We also took aboard lumber, used later in Europe to enclose the space above the aft-deck and for the shelves that would be bed and home for our passengers.

Laz and I were to share a watch on the bridge as helmsmen under the 2nd Mate. We left on April 30th and sailed down Chesapeake Bay for the open waters of the Atlantic. Upon rounding Cape Hatteras we encountered a fierce Atlantic storm. Our little ship, only 216 feet long and 39 feet wide, pitched and rolled violently in waves up to 30 feet high. Everyone was soon seasick, including the Captain. The ship’s motions were at times violent enough to toss dishes out of their “stormproof” storage racks. But there was no respite from our agonizing nonstop routine of four hours on the job, and eight hours in bed trying to get some sleep. Few of us even thought of food.

We docked at Port de Bouc (near Marseilles) on May 23 after a trying 23 day voyage plagued with technical problems, including consecutive engine failures due to blown gaskets. On one dark, stormy night, when Laz and I were on duty in the wheelhouse, the ‘good’ engine blew a gasket while the other was being repaired. We wallowed helplessly for many hours; for a while in total darkness, before an auxiliary generator started operating. On one occasion a bushing had to be turned on the ship’s lathe, but nobody in the black-gang knew how to operate it. Being experienced with machine tools, Laz volunteered and saved the day. But with his technical skills now known, he was promptly promoted from helmsman to 3rd engineer.

All but one of the hired officers signed off at Port de Bouc. The Chief Mate, Danny Maltese, stayed on and became our Captain. Two Hagana agents joined us to take charge of the Aliya Bet operation. They were like owner’s reps, but carried no rank or title. Ram assumed the administrative functions, while Yoske dealt with technical matters. Because of the secretive nature of our mission, we’d refer to them as ‘shu-shus’. In early June we set sail for Bayonne in France, on the Bay of Biscay, near the Spanish border. It was almost midnight when we reached our destination 10 days later, but we had to wait for proper tidal conditions before entering the harbor. Since our donkey engine wasn’t working, had we dropped anchor it would have been impossible for us to raise it later. So we sailed back and forth offshore until after daylight.

Several days after we docked, the “Paducah” our sister-ship-to-be, tied up near us. That summer, both vessels were drastically modified to suit their future role. Interior cabins were ripped out, and three-tiered shelves about six-feet deep were installed in every conceivable space including the built-up ‘cabin’ above

the aft-deck. The Captain's stateroom became our 30 berth sick bay. The work was done by local carpenters, who were told that both ships were being converted to fruit carriers. "Bananas" became the code word for our future passengers. We felt very much at home during our summer in Bayonne, adjacent to fashionable Biarritz. Our various duties were mainly accomplished by day, except for gangway watch, leaving us ample time to enjoy the delights of both towns.

In July world attention was fixed on Port de Bouc, near Marseilles, where the British were trying to convince the 4500 "Exodus" passengers to disembark from their deportation ships. As the French didn't allow the British to use force, few disembarked despite French willingness to grant refuge to anyone who came ashore voluntarily. Ultimately the British gave up and sailed for Hamburg where they forced the bedraggled refugees to disembark. During the two week standoff at Port de Bouc the British somehow convinced the French to levy a fine on the registered owners of the "Exodus" for its having left France with its human cargo without proper clearance. Since the "Northland" and the "Exodus" were both owned by Weston Trading Company, our ship was arrested to secure payment of the fine. This happened shortly before we were due to sail together, so the "Paducah" sailed alone bound for the Black Sea and we followed a week later after a security bond had been posted. Our Captain was Evan Morgan, who had been the "Paducah's" Chief Mate.

On two other occasions that summer was there excitement involving our two ships. In face of a rumor that we would be running guns to the Algerian rebels rather than carrying fruit, the carpenters suddenly stopped working. Only after their union leaders were let in on our secret did they start work again, with renewed enthusiasm. Some local papers announced in a front-page headline: "Deux bateaux Clandestine Israellienne en Bayonne." Within days the British consul from nearby St Jean de Luz appeared on the pier to take pictures of our ships. As the "Exodus" affair showed, British policy now was to deport captured prisoners to their original port of embarkation. The Hagana responded with arrangements to load Aliya Bet ships, starting with ours, at Iron Curtain ports to where the British would be unable to return the illegals. Furthermore, our two ships together would carry almost as much passengers as did the "Exodus" to further frustrate the British.

Hoping to avoid detection as we passed Gibraltar, we entered the Mediterranean during the night without lights, like a fishing boat. But we were detected by a British warship, which first challenged and then followed us. Our British escort grew to several warships by the time we reached the Aegean several days later. They stayed behind when we entered the Bosphorus. When we docked at Burgas, Bulgaria the "Paducah" was already there. It was evening on September 21st when a train from Bucharest arrived with our passengers. I was at the gangway to count the passengers as they came aboard, with the "Paducah's" Captain at my side. It was hard to suppress tears when the first of them started up the gangway. Suddenly, we understood fully the seriousness of the task before us.

It was almost daybreak when the loading was completed. We anchored in the Bay to await the "Paducah", which was undergoing mechanical repairs. It was late in the day and almost Yom Kippur when our chef, exiled Spanish loyalist Enrico Lopez, was ready to feed our charges. Some Rabbis aboard urged that no food be distributed until after the fast, but others thought that the law of 'pikuach nefesh' applied. But as the people hadn't eaten a proper meal since leaving Bucharest, our shu-shus decided to make food available for those choosing to eat.

Several hundred male passengers observed Yom Kippur in a make-shift open air synagogue on the foredeck. Looking at the moving sight from the bridge, I noticed Captain Morgan in their midst with talit and kippa to show that he identified with them. Next day a floating mine was sighted, seemingly drifting towards us. Rising to the occasion, Captain Morgan dived over the side adorned in a swim suit and swam out to push the mine out of harm's way.

On our third day we had to load 80 more souls, teen-aged orphans, as the "Paducah" was bursting at the seams. We sailed with about 2700 people; while the "Paducah" had 1400; together not much less than the 4500 of the "Exodus".

Toilet facilities were rows of wooden outhouses on either side of the deck, their rears facing the open sea. As we entered the Bosphorus there was concern that the Turks might impound our ships on safety and hygiene grounds. But when the Turkish officials left Captain Morgan's cabin to go ashore at Istanbul, they were all smiles while in his hand were signed clearance certificates for us and for the "Paducah". Awaiting us as we entered the Aegean were British warships, whose number grew to seven over the coming days. Despite that ominous threat and the crowded conditions, our charges were in good spirits. There was a brit mila for a baby born on the train from Bucharest, who was named after our radio officer's father as a gesture of gratitude to the crew.

Late in the day of the expected British attack, in full view of the warships a few of us were on the foredeck distributing blocks of Hershey chocolate to the passengers that we had loaded in Baltimore months earlier. Soon we defiantly raised the Star of David flag and tied a banner across the flying bridge bearing the new name of our ship in Hebrew and English, "The Jewish State". Our plan was to remain beyond the 12 mile territorial limit until nightfall and then try to make a dash for the beach. Apparently anticipating our intentions, the British soon announced that they intended to board us and that the blood would be on our hands if we resisted. Then they enveloped us in tear gas, and our bridge was abandoned as a destroyer tried to get alongside us. The auxiliary wheelhouse promptly took over, with telephone direction provided by two lookouts at open portholes on either side of the ship. I was the lookout with the port-side telephone.

Our evasive action was successful initially, despite the restricted fields of vision and tearing eyes. When darkness fell enemy ships could be seen only when

almost upon us, making evasive action all the more difficult. The lop-sided cat and mouse game was suddenly interrupted when our icebreaker bow hit a destroyer with a force that cut a huge gap in their hull and sent a shudder through our ship as she rolled violently. Soon a destroyer came alongside and used her powerful engines to press against us long enough for a party of Royal Marines to jump aboard. Just as the first of them approached our engine room, our black-gang stopped the engines and escaped with a change of clothes under their arms to mingle with the passengers. The "Paducah" was already there when we arrived under tow at Haifa the next morning.

In British eyes we were 'aiding and abetting illegal immigration', a 'crime' punishable by up to eight years in prison or a fine of £10 000 or both. Our entire crew was therefore 'discharged' at Bayonne a new crew signed on; the same people with new names. We now assumed various guises to avoid being recognized as crew. I became Menachem Goldenberg with a 'wife' and family. One bearded sailor became a rabbi accompanied by several Talmudic scholars. Captain Morgan, a non-Jew spoke only English was a deaf-mute with a guide, (a sailor) at his side. Only several male passengers, in their twenties, were detained as suspected sailors.

My overnight transfer to Cyprus with several hundred passengers , included an unforgettable incident after our caged-in landing craft dropped anchor off Famagusta. We were taken ashore about 100 at a time on a barge from which we disembarked about 10 at a time for DDT delousing before boarding a truck. I was on the barge in the front row waiting to debark with the next group of twenty, standing face to face with a young red-cheeked British soldier. He looked me in the eye and loudly said: "So you want to go to Palestine, do you, bloody Jew. You'll go alright, over me dead body." I pretended not to understand a word, but knowing I spoke English people nearby asked in Yiddish, "What did he say?" I replied in Yiddish; "I don't speak his language so how should I know?"

We spent about one month and a half in Cyprus, where life in the camps was tolerable. Food was ample but hardly nourishing. We were issued a pack of cigarettes daily, which non-smokers used as barter in the camp's thriving black market. The people were content, knowing that after release they would finally be in the Land of Israel. We sailors were impatient to get out. Initially, I shared a tent with radio officer Irving Meltzer, Chief Mate Ben Berg and my friend Laz. We passed the time mostly on our cots dreaming of how to escape. We thought of digging a tunnel under the fences, walking to Nicosia at night and then stealing an airplane which I'd fly to Palestine. Since Ben had spent a few years in Palestine he would guide me to a safe landing field, Irving would operate the radio and Laz would effect any necessary repairs. It was a mad scheme that would probably have killed us if implemented. When they learned of it the shushes begged us to abandon the plan, not knowing that it was just a dream.

We woke one morning to the first rain to find the tent floor a sea of mud. We promptly abandoned the tent, taking our blankets and cots we crossed the

bridge to the next camp and forced our way into the crowded Niesen hut housing our "Northland" and "Paducah" crew-mates. When the time came to leave we assumed the names of others whose turn it was to proceed to Palestine under the normal monthly quota of 750. When we reached the port of Haifa there were buses and military vehicles waiting for us to take us to the Atlit Detention camp. Two Paducah sailors, Syd Abrams and Elihu Bergman, avoided Atlit by brazenly posing as journalists with notepads in their hands while standing on the bridge. They were spotted by a British officer who escorted them off the ship while explaining that journalists were not allowed on board.

As our convoy of escorted buses left the port for Atlit, Peter Gilbert, a Hebrew speaking Paducah sailor, asked the driver to try to create a diversion so that some sailors might try to escape. As we entered Jaffa Road, our bus, which was second or third in the convoy, suddenly overtook the others and side swiped the first bus. The convoy came to a sudden halt amidst the shouting of our British escort, to whom our driver explained that his bus was supposed to be the first one in the convoy. Many sailors made their escape in the confusion but were soon rounded up because they were not familiar with the area.

My few weeks in Atlit were largely uneventful, except that it was my birthday on November 22nd. Our next 'home' was at Kiryat Shmuel, a camp run by the Jewish Agency as the last stage of internment for 'illegal' immigrants. We were awakened one night during my brief stay there by joyous dancing and singing in celebration of the UN's adoption of its partition plan for Palestine. By early December we were 'free men' again, wearing decent clothes and staying at Haifa's Carmelia Court Hotel. My official Palestine Identity Card bore my picture and the name Natan Alperovici.

I soon met the heads of the newly created Sherut Avir to offer my services. Since they had virtually no airplanes then, they asked Uri Michaeli to hire me as an Aviron Ltd pilot. But as that would require my Canadian pilot license with a name on the British "wanted" list as an Aliya Bet sailor, I decided to return to Canada and come back when my services could be utilized. The nascent Israeli Air Force (IAF) already existed when I joined it in June 1948. My material contribution to the 'cause' during my 15 months as an IAF pilot was surely much greater than as an Aliya Bet sailor, but the latter experience was surely the more personal enriching one.



The two ships "MEDINAT HAYEHUDIM" (The Jewish State") and "GEULA" at the Haifa "Pier of Tears" dock with 4052 illegal immigrants, towards deportation