

Frank Lavine

Volunteer from the USA on the "Exodus 1947"

**This is the Way it Was**

I was born on the West End of Boston, Mass. on April 3 1924. Both my parents come from the vicinity of Kovno, Lithuania. My father was a truck driver while my mother kept home and was later a seamstress. I have no formal Jewish education but spoke only Yiddish until I was six years old. My neighborhood was made up of almost all Yiddish speaking Jews. When I was ten I was taught to sail by an old Yankee Brahmin who set up a sailing club on the nearby Charles River for the kids of the neighborhood. Later, I learned to sail larger boats and spent some time sailing off the Atlantic coast until I left to join the military.

I volunteered for the Army Air Force during WW II and served from 1942 until 1946. For a short period during my service I was stationed at Chanute Field, Illinois. There, not too far away, at the University of Illinois I met some young Jews who were studying agriculture with the intention of immigrating to Palestine after the war. In our many conversations they learned that I had sailing experience. We kept in touch. After my discharge from the Army I received a call from New York asking if I would help Jews. A short time later I was on my way to Baltimore and the SS President Warfield / "Exodus".

I worked on the ship until we shoved off for Europe. We were involved in a storm at sea and returned for repairs that kept us from our mission for a while. We arrived in France and moved to various ports, preparing the ship for our passengers. We loaded the ship in France and shoved off. We were at sea in international waters when we were attacked by the British. After the battle, in which I received a head wound, some of the crew, myself included, were put on prison ships. I stayed with the passengers on the Ocean Vigour all the while that these prison ships were off the coast of France. This was in July and the weather was very hot and uncomfortable. After some weeks we were given an ultimatum and sailed for Germany.

We were beaten off the ships at Hamburg, Germany, where I was wounded again. I was a prisoner at Poppendorf camp in Germany until our escape. Few people born in the United States have gone through the displaced person's experience. Twelve members of the "Exodus" crew did, and I'll try to tell about this little known part of the story. This is the Odyssey, seen mostly through my eyes, of twelve crew members who traveled through post-war Germany carrying

false papers and disguised as refugees. David Holly in his book entitled "Exodus 1947" mentioned this incident but didn't go into great detail.

David Millman, Dov Miller, Lennie Sklar, Reuven Margolis, Shmuel Schiller, Avram Sygal, David Staryck, Vevie Siegal, Myron Goldstein, Ben Foreman, Shmuel Baer and myself made up this group.

At least one quarter of the crew hadn't been smuggled off the ship in Haifa. Some of us chose to stay with the refugees. Needless to say this was a definite morale builder for us, as it was for the refugees. They had found it difficult to believe that any soft Americaner would stay and share whatever would befall them.

This portion of the story took us across Germany from the British zone through a series of displaced person's camps, and then into the American zone, and from there to France. It wasn't until we got out of Germany that we could resume our real identities. The false excuse that the Bricha used to smuggle us out of the American zone of Germany, was for us to take jobs in France. After being driven off the prison ship "Ocean Vigour" by club swinging English troops in Hamburg, Germany, we were put on heavily guarded trains and taken to Poppendorf and Amstau internment camps. Most of us ended up in Poppendorf. This took place in the British zone because that was the only zone they could take us. The place had been hastily prepared, and upon arrival I saw those who I later found out to be Ukrainians, putting the final touches on the barbed wire surrounding the camp.

We were constantly under the eyes of the English soldiers who were in guard towers around the perimeter. I'm sure this arrangement was very similar to prison camps in Atlit and later Cyprus. We quickly adjusted to the primitive living conditions. Hoping to break our morale, our captors immediately put us on the German economy which consisted of a ration of 1,100 calories a day, the same as German civilians. We started marking time. Immediately the groups began to reorganize setting up schools, and adult study groups to learn Hebrew. The refugees were very resilient and took everything in stride. They had been through so much already that nothing seemed to faze them. We took our clues from fellow refugees and adjusted as best we could, making friends and scrounging like the others. This also gave us an opportunity to improve our Yiddish because most of the people in the camp spoke it. Lennie Sklar disappeared for a few days and when we next saw him we discovered that he had been smuggled out of the camp and into the Russian zone, where he had searched for relatives from Lithuania.

After a few weeks, the JDC began supplementing our rations. Once a week we got a can of sweetened condensed milk, a can of sardines, a small carton of Gruyere cheese and a pack of cigarettes. I have no idea who decided to get us out of detention but after a while we were told to prepare to leave. We packed our few belongings into sacks and stood by. The Bricha had arranged for a soccer team from another displaced person's camp to come to Poppendorf

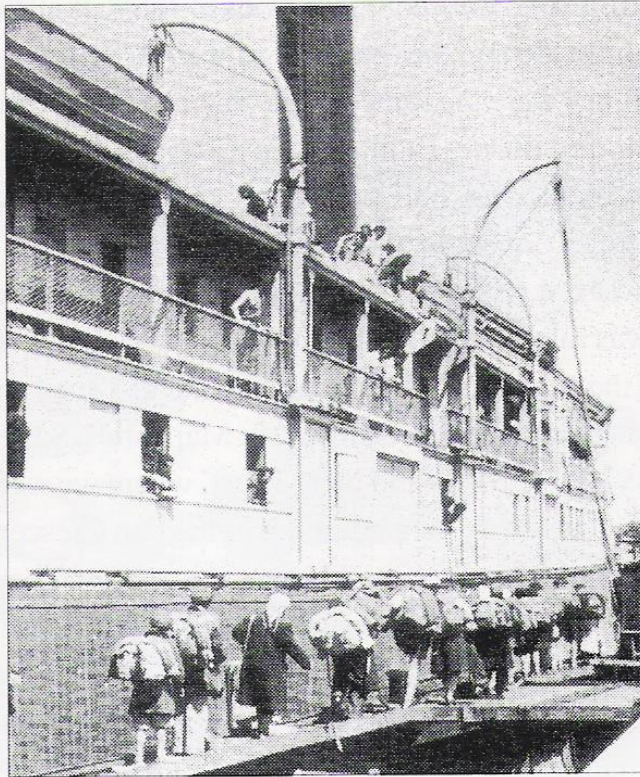
camp to play one of our teams. Very simply, after the game the players from the visiting team remained and we replaced them on the truck that had brought them in. The British had the same count as they had before and we were out of the gate and on our way. Lubeck, a short drive from our prison camp was our first stop, and there we were given our first decent meal in what seemed to me to have been a private mansion. We were then outfitted with new clothes. These clothes must have come from a warehouse nearby and were something to see. The problem was that every bit of clothing given to us matched almost exactly, every other garment. We were all dressed alike! After our meal and clothing change we were again put on a truck and began our two day trip to Munich. Our driver was from the Bricha. They worked all over Europe and their job was to smuggle refugees across borders and to drive the vehicles that transported them from displaced person's camps to ports where they would board the Aliya Bet ships. These guys were real characters; they were Jews, mostly deserters from the Russian and Polish armies. They were tough and thought that because we were Americans, we were soft and they called us Chocoladniks. They offered us rot gut vodka that could eat your insides out, but we drank it toast for toast with them to show them that we could take it.

The Bricha had a variety of trucks at its disposal. No questions were asked as to where they had originated from, but all of them that I ever saw had United Nations Relief Agency markings. Once again all of us got into our truck and began our trip to the American zone. We had one more stop in the British zone and that was at the JDC center which was at the site of the former infamous Bergen Belsen camp. There we were welcomed by Jean Jaffe who was in charge of operations there for the JDC. I remember asking her to write my mother to let her know that I was safe. I still have that letter.

I remember driving through Nuremberg very early in the morning and thinking of the trials of the German war criminals taking place there. We weren't far from Munich when an unforgettable incident occurred. The truck stopped suddenly and in a moment the canvas cover that hid us from view was pulled back and an American soldier peered into the back of the vehicle and yelled, "Hey sarge, look what we got here". In a moment the sergeant came over and looked at us and said "OK Everybody out!" I saw as soon as we had gotten out that this was an American constabulary military police roadblock which consisted of a squad of soldiers, one on a jeep with a 50 caliber machine gun. The sergeant, who spoke a bit of broken German lined us up and began to ask questions. First he asked for our papers, which were phoney as hell. Of course we were very nervous and when he began to question me I began to shake. Quickly, the Bricha guy lit me a cigarette (butts were politically correct then). I calmed down and answered in my best Yiddish that I didn't know why my meal card had so many stamps. I shrugged my shoulders and said, "When they stamp they stamp". We were finally allowed to leave but not before the soldier on the jeep handling the machine gun shouted to the sergeant "Let them through Sarge and I'll cut them through like winter wheat". Needless to say, we were in shock but couldn't say a word that might blow our cover; we were not supposed to know English, We kept quiet and got back on the truck. I, who had been out of the

American Army and had worn the same uniform about a year before, had to bite my tongue.

We continued to the outskirts of Munich and were quickly taken to another safe house run by the Bricha. This was the cloister, Indersdorf, an UNRRA children's shelter in a Catholic monastery. We spent quite a while there living in a dormitory room heated by a large wood-fed porcelain stove. It was here that we had our first hot bath and clothes laundered. After a while we were told to prepare for our final leg of the escape from Germany. Again we were photographed and issued new false papers, this time we were being taken into France as immigrant workers with special skills. My new name was Albert Zaidner from a place called Planegg, just outside of Munich and I was now an electric technician. Again we were transferred by truck to Funk Kasserne, a former Nazi army barracks in Munich, to wait for transport to take us to France and to freedom.



The embarkment on the "Exodus" in "Sete" port,
France