

David Gottlieb's Story

Machal - Crew member on board the 'Josiah Wedgwood'



For the record: I was born July 7, 1928 in Detroit Michigan; one of four sons of Moshe and Zippa Gottlieb, both immigrants from Russia. My journey on the 'Josiah Wedgwood' began on April 12th 1945, a date I will always remember as the day that President Franklin D. Roosevelt died, and the day that I arrived at the Habonim Training Farm in Creamridge, NJ. The 'Josiah Wedgwood' had been a Canadian corvette, named the SS Beauharnois but it was to sail later under a Panamanian flag.

My six months at the farm were great for my ego, my need to assume responsibility and learn the true meaning of Avodah (work). Regarding my ego, I was the youngest male in a female dominated society and this gave me the dubious advantage of having multiple Jewish mothers all of whom were dedicated to enhancing the quality of all aspects of my life as well as my future. For the months that I worked in the fields at various manual and mechanical jobs, or when I was responsible for milking, feeding and cleaning up the cows; or for egg candling and delivery of eggs to our customers – I had at least started to learn what responsibility meant. As demanding as all of this may have been, I was to learn later that it was like a summer camp when compared to the physical, emotional and every day obligations and challenges of life in a kibbutz.

Change came later that same year when I learned that the Jewish Agency was seeking volunteers to serve as crew members on ships which would seek to carry Jewish survivors of the Holocaust from ports in Europe to Palestine. I knew that there was some risk involved because the British Navy was determined to intercept these vessels and return them and their human cargo to their point of origin. There was a complication in obtaining my seaman's card as the minimum age by law was 18 and I was only 17 years old. Somehow, my card did come through but I altered my family name slightly to Gottlib, instead of Gottlieb.

Our ship was berthed in the Todd shipyards on Staten Island for three months while it underwent repairs and was readied for an Atlantic crossing and in that interim our crew was moved to a 'safe house' in the Seagate area of Coney Island. It was here that I was able to get to know the other members of the crew. In mid-March we were told that we would board and leave in early April and it was also at this point that I began to experience my first doubts and apprehension regarding the voyage. On the one hand, it was good that the waiting was over, but on the other hand I thought that perhaps I was in something that was over my head. I looked about me and wondered if some of the other fellows were also having their doubts?

The quarters for the crew were the warship standard for non-officers. There were 12 of us in a section of four tiers with three levels of bunks and the division was not by rank or lottery but simply, the older fellows took the lower and middle berths and the youngest took the upper level. When it came to assigning duties to the engine gang the same rule applied. Experienced and older men were given the more skilled and easier jobs and the youngest fellows were given the short end of the stick.

Later we were called together to meet the other members of the crew and it was obvious that we were all Jewish and a good number were army veterans and one or two were navy veterans. There were none or very few who had real naval experience. The Captain and First Mate were experienced merchant marine sailors from New York and both had sailed on ships that had been torpedoed in wartime. They were atheists and confirmed

'Wobblies', members of the I W W (International Workers of the World, an anarchist organization). The chief engineer was an American with a passionate hatred of the British but the most bizarre member of the crew was the boatswain. He was very fat and a self admitted 'Jewish hobo' who had formerly worked on a barge on the Hudson River. (I mention this fellow in particular because he later saved my life during a violent storm near the Azores). Our cook was a big Canadian with fiery-red hair and a matching beard (Yaakov Pleat, A.M.).

Clearly, we were an assembly of odd and diverse characters who would never have qualified for duty on any military or licensed commercial cargo or passenger ship. Yet, despite the many shortcomings and mechanical problems, as well as all the unexpected delays we did complete our assignment and our mission: our passengers and our ship arrived safely in the port of Haifa where we and our 1,250 passengers were transferred to buses and delivered to the Atlit Detention Camp. These survivors of the Holocaust had finally found freedom, dignity and security in a Jewish Homeland.

I was only 17 at that time and was accepted for duty only because of the shortage of applicants due to the World War. When this episode of my life was over I had experienced living on the training farm in Creamridge, NJ and living on a kibbutz in Palestine and serving on the crew of a vessel that had brought over a thousand survivors of the Holocaust to a land that offered them hope and a new life.