

Menachem Peretz (Moskowitz) Tells His Story **Machal - Crew member on board the 'Hagana'**



When the World War ended the Jewish Agency turned to us for volunteers to prepare boats that would take survivors of the Holocaust from Europe to Palestine. Since Aliya from America to Palestine was completely blocked, this looked like a good opportunity to get to Palestine for ourselves and even to help others get there in so doing. Five of us from our little commune in the Bronx NY volunteered; Blocky Blockman (Barkan), Ze'ev Rauff, Dov Seligman (Smilansky), Aryeh Malkin and I. Until then, the Ma'apilim had been brought to Palestine in comparatively small vessels but now the Jewish Agency wanted to increase the flow of survivors of the Holocaust greatly. The Agency bought these two ships that were to be the beginning of a long string of purchases of larger and larger vessels.

These first two were corvettes that had been Canadian naval vessels. Their weapons had been removed and they were moved to a shipyard in Staten Island where they were readied for their Atlantic crossing and where we went to work and familiarized ourselves with what would become our home for several months. The ships were stocked with cigarettes and other items that were worth their weight in gold in Europe to help cover expenses.

The evening before sailing there was a very impressive ceremony with General Dori who was in the States at the time. He was then the general-in-command of the Hagana and later on the first chief of staff of the I D F. It was very important to the Jews of Palestine to know that American Jewry was cooperating in the efforts of the Yishuv to bring the remnants of European Jewry to Palestine. Our ships captain and chief engineer were professionals but the lower ranks were mainly sailors from the Habonim and Hashomer training farms. As we set sail across the ocean it became obvious that we did not have enough ballast and we sat high in the water. This caused the boats to rock much more heavily than ordinary and very many of us were seasick, including the veteran Scandinavian officer.

We had set out in both vessels; the other one sailed for Italy and the one I was on made for Marseilles. We remained there for close to two months while the vessel was made ready to take on the greatest number of passengers possible. Although the British put pressure on the French to delay our progress or stop it completely, there was also a great deal of antipathy for the British on the part of the French and many were sympathetic to our cause. Our vessels were at that time just about the best that the Palyam had ever worked with so many of the people of the Mossad came to visit and to see these treasures; among these was also Gershon Etzion so imagine my surprise and excitement when I found out later that we were both members of the same kibbutz!

Finally, the day of departure arrived and we left the harbor. The plan was that the vessel would rendezvous with some other old tub to which our passengers were to be transferred so that our good ship would not be impounded by the British and we would be able to make at least one more trip. We planned therefore to meet a Turkish vessel about 50 miles from Palestine and transfer our Ma'apilim to her and she would continue for about one day and then reach Palestine. That is exactly what happened. We met the Turkish vessel and were supposed to tie up to her side by side but the sea was too stormy to do that safely and the Turkish captain refused to cooperate as well. In the end some of our Palyam boys went over to the Turkish vessel carrying small arms. They were able to convince him to honor his contract. We let down our small launches over the side and the Ma'apilim were transferred to

the Turkish vessel with their aid. This took much longer than originally planned and it wasn't simple to get all of the Ma'apilim to go down into the launches but in the end everything went without a hitch and our corvette was once again empty. We had an American journalist on our corvette who had been invited by the Hagana to make the trip with us; he also went over the side and down the ladder and across to the Turkish tub. Later on, this journalist, I F Stone wrote about his adventures with the Ma'apilim in a book named: "Underground to Palestine".

Our corvette was now able to proceed with the second half of its assignment so we left the scene of our encounter with the Turkish vessel and headed for Yugoslavia. Now that we were more experienced we took a larger number of Ma'apilim with us, 2500 of them. We were to go straight to Palestine this time so we wanted to make maximum use of the ship and it was really crowded this time. The voyage started smoothly enough at the beginning, but when we were just about halfway the engine broke down and we ran out of fuel. We had to take apart some of the construction to keep the vessel moving and we did manage to come in sight of the shore of Palestine. It was here that we encountered two British destroyers. We had orders not to resist so the soldiers came onto our ship and took her in tow to Haifa. We lay in the harbor for day and a night and we saw a small launch approach us. She had been sent, it seemed, to make some repairs. Two other sailors and I went down a ladder to this boat and lay down on the bottom. We then were brought back to the harbor, we jumped onto dry land and made for a waiting truck which drove out of the port area without being checked at all, so I assumed the watchman at the gate had been bribed. We were taken to the Immigrants' Center in Haifa and I received a false ID card there and then I was brought to kibbutz Ein Hashofet. The kibbutzniks there made a big party for me and I told them of our two voyages. The following day Aryeh Malkin came for me and took me to Mishmar HaEmek by way of the JNF forest. This is where our group of Shomrim were gathering prior to starting our own kibbutz. Aryeh had arrived earlier on our sister ship, the Beauharnois (Josiah Wedgwood).

At any rate, as I look back upon my life and sum it up, I can say that I had made a most significant decision as to what to do with myself and in a way that was most suitable for me; I would repeat that decision even today. I made Aliya and I realized my ideals of living in kibbutz. From the point of view of economic and social standards others certainly achieved more; but I have no doubt that in regard to satisfaction with my style of living and in knowing that I contributed as best as I could in creating the State of Israel, I am positive that I chose what was the best way for me.