

“Illegal Immigration” 1945 – 1948, Why and How

This is my story : For the benefit of our descendants, who should know.

By : Reuven Yatir – Hirsch

This is my story : a story of an Israeli youngster who volunteered during the WW II years to take part in firming the foothold of the Jewish community in Palestine, eventually to emerge as the State of Israel. Jews strove to fight Nazis by all available means. However, at the same time, Jews in Palestine faced the British anti-immigration policies, ergo denial a.o. rescue of Nazi-victims. The Jewish leadership in Palestine decreed that the Jews of Palestine will "Fight the Nazis as if there were no British restrictions of immigration and fight the "White Paper" (practically annulling the rights of Jewish Immigration in Palestine) as if there were no war against the Nazis.

My own choice was to do my part at sea, aspiring to join what became known as the "Mossad Le'Aliya 'B" whose mission was to organize and operate the "Illegal" Immigration. The Marine section of the Palmach set the stage and ran the operation. An outstanding chapter of this saga was the voyage of the clandestine refugee steamer S.S."Knesset Israel", organised by the Zionist - Political backstage, that aimed to provide strategic solutions to the then acute Jewish-Palestinian/ refugees confrontation with the British Mandate following Britain's turning, during 1945-48, against the policy of the mandate that it initiated 23 years earlier. The British lost that confrontation, laying thereby the foundation of the independent State of Israel as it emerged in 1948. I won't detail all the functions of the Palmach – Marine unit, to which I had volunteered. Numerous Stories, articles, books, research have been published on this rather heroic period.

Historic highlights that preceeded the Jewish post WW II desperate efforts years were war, destruction and suffering of millions in devastated Europe. Survivors returned to their countries, cities, to their old homes. Jewish survivors returned to a void ! Anti-Semitism and physical rejection did not fade with the downfall of Nazism. Jews had practically nowhere to return. Or turn to. The Western world did open their gates rather sparely and reluctantly to surviving Jews, who sought a new beginning. In the meantime they stayed in "Displaced Persons" camps under the auspices of post war Refugee organization, e.g. UNRRA, The American Joint Distribution Committee ("Joint"), etc.

The "Yishuv", under Ben Gurion's leadership, attempted to create a "Haven of refuge" in Palestine for those survivors. Britain opposed the idea and mobilized ME Arab states to its support, establishing the Arab-League on March, 22, 1945, after WWII had been definitely decided.

A conflict ensued with the local population, the Arabs, and the British Governors. This conflict developed into open hostilities fought by the Hagana against Arab, local and neighbouring irregulars under an "umbrella" of biased British "neutrality". The Hagana was the Palestinian Jewish democratically elected leadership military arm. Its mobilized force was the Palmach which bore the brunt of the fighting until Zahal, the Israeli Army was created. The dissident "Etzel" and "Lechi", much smaller in size but acted vehemently against the British, as well as against the Arabs. As the war went on, they were eventually integrated into the formal armed forces whose nucleus was the Hagana.

Ben Gurion's "illegal" immigration plan was implemented by means of :
 "Bricha" – Escape organization (mainly from Soviet dominated East and Central Europe to Western Europe and Mediterranean ports – First initiated by surviving Zionist and Partisan movements, then by The Hagana in Europe, and soldiers of the "Jewish Brigade" and other Palestinian (i.e. Jewish) units, in the British Army. As from end 1944 and more so after Germany's surrender they swept liberated Europe, organized flight and transport of Jewish refugees into the German / occupied Zones, and from there to camps, on the Mediterranean coast in anticipation of vessels, which would in time transport them to Palestine.

The leadership/BenGurion lead the struggle for the admission of survivors, who wished to immigrate, against the opposing Mandatory policy. The main achievements of the struggle were the transportation of about 78000 Illegal Immigrants, in 66 ships, from Europe to Palestine – and another 12000 who were brought overland – Severe opposition, backed by the Royal Navy and security systems plus diplomatic pressure at highest levels, aimed to undermine our efforts and the sympathy of those countries / governments (!) who provided refuge and sailing facilities to the manifold refugee ships. Their success was meager. The ships kept coming, in spite of arrests in Cyprus, British military revenge and punishment against the Yishuv.

The Hagana headquarters, staff, command and logistics functions in charge of the whole aliya operation were carried out by the " Mossad Le'Aliya Beth", the organization of the Clandestine Immigration. Those were politically motivated leaders of the Yishuv, who formulated and pursued B.G's vision and directives: Rescue of Holocaust Survivors and the creation of the infrastructure of the forthcoming Jewish state.

The "Bridge" between the Bricha, the ever swelling population in European D.P. camps, and the Yishuv in Palestine were the Marine section of the Palmach directed by the "Mossad". We boarded the vessels together with the refugees, commanded and organized them.

This above concise preamble has set the stage for my story.

It begun in Breslau when Grandma walked her little darling in the Sued park. There was a lake and rowboats for rent. Sweetheart yelled: "Grandma, let's sail!! I shall be "Ein Kapitaen!!" Between being a Master Mariner in the Israeli Merchant Marine and this sweet prediction, a few hurdles had to be overcome. The most important was of course our emigration, September 1938. The war broke out in September 1939. In 1942 we learned details about the Jewish catastrophe in Nazi – Europe. We expected to sail survivors from the Mediterranean countries to Palestine after the WW-II victory . We were called in by the Palmach, learned and practiced seamanship so as to be able to supervise the function and ability of the foreign Officers and crew on our refugee ships and / or to take over command should adverse circumstances dictate such action. We perused reports and experience of pre WW-II illegal immigration during 1934 to 1940. We trained in the spirit and Zionist fervor of the Palmach. My mission begun in September 1946 in Greece. In October we sailed to Yugoslavia.

In November 1946, I reported at the little port city "Bakar" in Yugoslavia. An ugly black steamer that was tied to the wharf spoiled the pastoral view of the Dalmatian surroundings. She was to be named "Knesset Israel". She was a 4000 Ton Cargo ship. Nearly ready to receive 3500 Refugees (!), our "passengers" were to be accommodated in her four cargo holds. Scaffoldings and bunks had been built. They were about to be allocated something like 6 x 3 x 2.5 feet per person. In view of the high cost of those projects, amongst other and human considerations we felt obliged to pen up maximal plus number of persons for the voyage. There was a corner for medical needs. There were toilets on deck (!), wooden stairs to the (10) levels. She was driven by an old "Up and Down" coal fired steam engine which produced 5 knots = 120 Sea miles per day, weather permitting. I found on board a Greek Captain and a full complement of regulation crew. German prisoners of war worked, and cleaned, run by the Yugoslavs. She had arrived in Bakar from Piraeus, Greece, She had departed without the usual formal clearance, deceived the British and Greek Naval Authorities, simply stole out of the port. By the time the British(!) Authorities got their act together, the vessel had already been out of their reach.

On this sunny November morning a long passenger train approached the port, still far on the mountains, disappeared in some tunnels, slowed down near the

wharf and came to a halt. They disembarked from the train by the hundreds, excited youngsters, grave families, Red Army Veterans and religious, all crowded on the wharf and started soon to embark on board, guided by well trained ushers. One of them, a particularly good looking girl, yet different from the crowd, giggled with a friend, pointing at my tired, rather unimposing shape, - I had just arrived after an eventful sea voyage. I returned her look ! We married some months later in Haifa.

These were my first encounter with the survivors. For some moments I got lost in thoughts and memories. This was the fulfillment of our preparedness and hope. On the whole, we, the Palmach – emissaries materialized our function with regard to optimal disposition of the terribly crowded passengers. I personally found myself on the navigation bridge, because this was to be my duty at sea.

The embarkation lasted 2 days, i.e. climbing aboard, being received by the Israely commanders and Mossad emisaries, to be led to their preplanned accomodation. By evening of the first day the ship was quasi “fully” occupied. On the pier waited another 2000! Next morning these were "gently but determinedly “persuaded” to board and occupy their bunks.

Another "Mossad" vessel, MS "Anastasia" was moored next to ours, embarked \pm 500 at the same time, mostly younger immigrants, under similar condition of over-crowding. Our two vessels were about to sail in tandem. A day prior to arrival Palestine her 500 passengers were supposed to join our 3500, and simultaneously receive our Greek crew for repatriation and return to Europe. They were to avoid certain arrest by the Royal Navy. MS “Anastasia” was intended to remain available for another round trip, at no extra cost. I was to sail “Knesset Israel” that last day on my own, assisted by a few preparedly trained youngsters, with \pm 4000 illegal Immigrants on board.

But "The good Lord" put his own mind in motion: On 4th of November 1946 the two vessels departed from Bakar. Joy and excitement, flags and jubilation, on board and by our hosts, the town mayor and his marvelous staff waved us Bon Voyage on the pier. With a view to postwar hazards to navigation we sailed close to the Dalmatian coast and islands. A sudden "Bora" storm forced us into shelter. The following day, our two ships resumed the voyage. And than, late afternoon, we received an emergency call from "Anastasia": "Engine broke down. We are drifting towards islands and rocks. – Please help!!" We, on "Knesset Israel" attempted to send a tow-line, but could not reach them without endangering our own under same circumstances of wind and current as "Anastasia". A little later she hit an unpopulated island, she sunk, her passengers climbed ashore under the skilled guidance and assistance by our Palmach commrade in commend.

Local fisher boats rescued them, accommodated them in their nearby village for the night. We had meanwhile anchored close by the village and prepared for the acceptance of these ± 500 extras into a nearly impossible overcrowding. As before, re: "persuasion", we did it. But we had lost time. We needed extra coal, and extra food, mainly for the ± 500 , who had lost all except their bare selves. We did get the coal, The Yugoslav Government ordered the population of the coastal town: "Split": to bake thousands of loaves of bread – They themselves suffered still from postwar wants. After 2 days waiting, bags of bread were brought alongside. By now we had been 10 days underway.

We departed from Split, commenced the deep-sea voyage. Not before I observed a lighthouse on our right side. It should have been on the left. I yelled at the helmsman to steer hard right. The Greek Captain was confused, or else ?? This precisely was meant to be the function of the Palmach commanding emissaries. I had previously experienced a faulty reading by a Greek Captain of the navigation chart and subsequent grounding. Now on the bridge of "Knesset Israel " it came back to my mind. Except that now there were ± 4000 Passengers to be guarded.

Life on board adapted to some kind of routine. Hygienic facilities, e.g. WCs, showers, taps were dispersed on deck, along the ship's rail. Women were shielded by their friends with blankets, and the goodwill of potential, but inevitable onlookers. WCs led straight overboard. Water was extremely scarce, meant for personal consumption in strictly measured portions. Food consisted mainly of USA field rations, which contained all ingredients of subsistence, including 4 Camel cigarettes and sweets.

The ± 4000 were grouped according their origin, political current, Kibbutz movement, religious circles. A group was run by a leading person. They reported to a secretary, in our case, the person who had organized the Romanian part of the whole transport and had led them to a Government transit camp near Zagreb. There were also the Hungarians, well organized in respective units. All had awaited eagerly the ship's estimated time of departure, used their time of waiting in the camp to prepare for the expected hardships of the voyage, children had been given schooling by volunteers . Youngsters and Kibbutz'niks had been trained in the use of weapons and close combat.

This whole complex was headed and directed by four Israeli Palmach men. The ship commander, Yossi Har'el, the "Gid'oni" (Wireless operator) Yoash Tsiddon – Chatto, and myself, the marine supervisor and the Captain at a later stage. Ben Yerushalmi had been in charge of the vessel from her Piraeus scrapheap till refurbishing, construction of the bunks etc. in the cargo holds, and the voyage from Piraeus to Bakar. The various group leaders met daily with Yossi Har'el for

reports, request, duties etc. We Israelis met in Yoash's Wireless room or on the bridge for consultations.

Everything running well, we faced 2 challenges: The Greek crew feared internment in Cyprus and punishment. – It had been obviously clear from the beginning, that we shall be intercepted by the Royal Navy and interned in Cyprus. They demanded to be discharged in a Greek port, they would refuse to continue the voyage to Palestine, or else be paid a very, very handsome bonus.

We had prepared for such eventuality: I had trained a group of Kibbutz'niks in the "art" of seamanship, viz: work on deck, order and cleanliness, steering the ship, A Rumanian Railway engineer got to know the Engine room and organized a coal- shipping crew to feed three boilers. We had organized a technical crew to be on hand 24 hours daily. Physicians had their infirmary, they performed a.o. 12 births! They helped and were around at the best of their tradition and limited facilities. It worked..... even during the tough November storm around and South of the strait of Otranto.

Whilst on passage, north of Crete next to a small Island, "Camilo Nisi" a fish-cutter came alongside. We called the Greek Captain, and told him, that he and his crew were dismissed as of now. The Captain and I parted in a moment of privacy. He had tears in his eyes! He thought of the fate of 4000 overcrowded passengers in an unseaworthy ship under the command of a 21 year (!) old youngster. He was a professional seaman, foreign. I was a mere coastal fisher, but Israeli Palmach'nik.....

The next challenge was the subject of resistance to the expected deportation on arrival Haifa. But first I suggested that we deviate from a straight course, with the slim outlook to deceive the Royal Navy. They would search the Crete - Haifa route, whilst we shaped course to the North of Cyprus and the bay of Alexandretta. Hide there till midnight, extinguish all lights, steal out under cover of darkness and nearby coastal vicinity of Syria, proceed south towards North Palestine, praying that we may arrive undetected and beach the steamer on the rocks of Naharia. The rest would take its course, whatever. If this won't work, and deportation became imminent, the survivors from the Nazi era are set to resist another Internment, this time by the "liberating" British Army.

Immediately after the Greeks had left, we started to clean the deck, to give the vessel an apparent look of a regular cargo ship. Our passengers were trained to crowd under deck when called upon or warned by approaching "enemy" The various groups were introduced to the intended strategy: How to resist a fully equipped army with a bunch of 2700 young but highly motivated would-be immigrants among the nearly 4000.

North of Cyprus, a RAF aircraft detected us, circled around the ship, signaled request for identification, the immigrants had vanished under deck. We replied of course: "S.S. Anna, Algiers to Alexandretta (Iskanderun)" He acknowledged, we pursued our course, arrived as planned, extinguished all lights, waited in the bay till midnight and commenced our Southbound voyage along the Syrian coast. Nevertheless, some time after midnight, a Royal Navy vessel closed in, signaled, "politely" whether assistance could be offered, since they were aware of the conditions of this overcrowded transport, and suggested that we sail straight to Cyprus. An exchange of messages ensued, which boiled down to our resolve to reach Eretz Israel, We have had our fill of camps etc, and shall resist any attempt of deportation. At dawn, the Navy had us surrounded. By that time the Mossad, our principals, ordered us to approach Haifa, stop 3 miles off shore and permit a small unit of British Marines to board the ship. In the event of forced deportation on their prison ships, resistance will be authorized.

That was the sequence of events. After 5 days attempt to evade the Naval flotilla as planned - stopped the ship in sight of Mount Carmel, The Refugees crowded on deck, were fascinated by the view of Haifa Bay, felt that their wandering had reached their goal. The Marines boarded, took control of the ship. Our Engineers managed to sabotage the Main Engine, I left the bridge, duly disguised, left one girl at the helm. Shari, expected me on deck and declared, "I am your wife" The story behind this joyous happy end was the decision by us three Israelis, to pass the British controls, at Cyprus in the disguise of "Decent Family". Three girls volunteered. Shari, whom we had known all along, was to be mine. And ...remained so till this very day.

I spotted the three British deportation (prison) ships, tugboats towed us to their quay, and we made ready for a hot welcome to the troops who would enforce transfer to their own ships. It took three hours and two victims for the British units to storm, and finally teargas bombs to overcome the desperate fight. At the end our passengers and we three Israelis transferred to their ships.

We landed in Famagusta, and were interned in the nearby camp. We met Israeli Palmach colleagues who had commanded previous refugee ships, had assumed organization and routine of the by now thousands of inhabitants in the camp. Our three "wives" returned to their groups. I stole my way out of the camp, returned to Israel, and reported for further duties to Palmach H.Q.

My service came to an end in December 1948. On January 1949 I signed on as third officer on a "legal" emigrant ship, and later in the year on a "Israel – American" Cargo ship, again as third and later second officer. In 1955 I became

an officially, certificated Master Mariner – "Ein Kapitaen" The circle was closed. It was part of the story.

The above is meant to portray a chapter in the annals of the struggle for the founding of the State of Israel, and why this took place. Less so to emphasize the particularity – Unseaworthiness by any and all standards - of this maritime venture, or my own function nearly 60 years ago.