The Yacht "Idalia" Caper

Yehuda Ben Tzur -2009

On 3rd August 1948 the procurement ship Kefalos, generally known in Israel as the Dromit[1], left the port of Tampico, Mexico and sailed directly to Tel Aviv. Its cargo included cannons that were nicknamed "cucarachas", and also about 500 American airplane machine guns. This is the story of how, where, and by whom these machine guns were obtained and delivered to the Dromit, in spite of an embargo on the sale of arms to both sides fighting in Palestine that the United States had placed one week after the UN Declaration of the 29th November 1947.

From Hawaii to the Continent

Nathan Liff was an American Jew who dealt in scrap metals, and in 1946 he received a permit to buy obsolete materiel at very reasonable prices from WW-II surpluses that were stored at Pearl Harbor. He set up the Universal Airplane Salvage Company for that purpose. The company located itself near the Naval Air force Base at Honolulu and went about dismantling planes that it had purchased. The parts were melted down and sold as aluminum bars.

<Nathan had been born in Russia during the period of pogroms, and he had lost many members of his family in the Holocaust. He was therefore well aware of the Jewish problems at the end of the war and of the political struggle that was ongoing, and which soon turned into an armed conflict, with the future of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel – the Hebrew name of Palestine - at stake. Personally he was not active in any of the Jewish organizations in the USA, but in one of his trips in late 1947 he participated in one of the weekly meetings of the "Sonnenborn Institute" [2] in New York, which he attended in order to keep himself abreast of what was occurring in the Jewish world. This was also an opportunity for him to "sell his merchandise" although he had no idea of the physical state of the plane engines and their value, in the immense area where they were stored. At the end of that meeting he turned to one of the activists in the "Institute" and told him that he had a great deal of "equipment" in his warehouse in Hawaii and that some of this stuff might interest him, as this included airplane engines and parts. This information was passed on to Al Schwimmer, one of the leading Jewish members in the airplane procurement team in the USA[3], who decided to send someone to check out Lifff's depot which covered an area of 2.5 km by 1.5 km. One of the pilots, Reynold Selk suggested that his cousin, Hank Greenspun be given that task.

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[1] In the beginning of 1949 this ship joined the Israeli commercial fleet and its name was changed, naturally, to Dromit.

[2] Leonard Slater, 'The Pledge', chapter 11, "The Institute".

[3] Slater, chapter 19. Schwimmer later set up the Airplane Industries in Israel.

<Hank was a tough fellow who had been a fighting officer in General Patton's Army and after the war he went to Las Vegas where he became a successful business man. Hank agreed to take a short vacation of several weeks and to fly out to Hawaii.[4] Around January 1st 1948 Hank arrived at Honolulu. In his first conversation with Nathan, who had been a soldier in the US Army in WW- I, Hank described to him his encounters with the remnants of the Holocaust in the concentration camps in Germany. Nathan, who had become convinced that he was speaking to a bona fide member of the Hagana, the Jewish underground in Palestine, cut him off and told him that he was aware of the problems of the Jewish people and gave him a free hand to pick out whatever he wanted. When Hank, who did not have a large budget at hand, asked him about costs, he was surprised to learn that Nathan intended to donate anything the Hagana wanted.

His first survey of the available equipment convinced Hank that there were numerous engines that would suit Al Shwimmer's purpose. That was what he reported to Al, who sent him an experienced mechanic, Willie Sosnow. With the help of local men supplied by Nathan, 42 crates of engines and engine parts were assembled and presented to customs as equipment for ordinary commercial purposes.

As he wandered about the huge depot, Hank came across a pile of new airplane machine guns complete with tripods and extra barrels. Having been a former fighting officer, he could appreciate the value of these guns in the field and he decided to add them to the shipment. When he raised the point with Nathan, he was told that this stuff belonged to "Uncle Sam" and that the pile was actually in an area that belonged to the Navy (there was no visible border between the navy area and Nathan's area) and was guarded by armed marines who patrolled the depot every few hours. Without reporting directly to Nathan - one could also believe that Nathan turned a blind eye - Hank decided to try his luck. He and Willie stayed in the depot after regular working hours and checked the way the marines guarded the area. Then, under cover of darkness they moved several hundreds of machine guns into Nathan's area of the depot and packed an additional 16 crates that looked identical to those of the airplane parts. They were marked in a manner which would allow only them to identify the crates, if need be

There are many versions of this episode relating to how many machine guns that were procured in this manner in Honolulu. Everyone who investigated and wrote about this has his own set of facts, but they all put the amount between 500 and 600. We give here the IDF-Tzahal version of the episode which appears in the "Table of Equipment Procured during the War of Independence". This covers the period from April 1st 1948 to March 31st 1949 [5]: Item no' 24: 457 Browning machine guns 300 from Honolulu. Item no' 25: 65 Vickers machine guns 300 from Mexico. Total of 522 machine guns. To my mind, all of these machine guns were from Honolulu. Now there only remained the problem of shipping these crates to the continent. Hank did not have the $ 6,700 necessary to pay for the shipment. He turned to Nathan who

[4] Slater, p.176.
[5] 5. Yad Tabenkin Archive: Bin 167, Folder #9, Article 24.

gave him some and raised the rest from the very small Jewish community of Hawaii. On January 24th 1948 Hank flew to Los Angeles, and from there, most probably, to his home in Las Vegas. Willie remained in Hawaii one more month, and on March 11th the 58 crates destined to be delivered to the "Air Service Company" (Al Schwimmer's Company) were loaded on board the deck of the "Lane Victory" bound for Wilmington, California [6].

To Tampico

Despite the embargo that was declared by the United States immediately following the 29th November vote, regarding the sale of arms to either side of the Palestine-Israel conflict, the procurement agents of Israel tried to obtain whatever material possible from within the borders of the USA. This was aimed at weapons that were obsolete following WW-II, but still in good condition. The "Sonnenborn Institute" that was set up by Ben Gurion in 1945 and run voluntary by American Jews with the aim of acquiring equipment which would be helpful in wartime but could be disguised as non-military equipment. From the end of 1947 direct efforts were made by Israelis to acquire military equipment. Moshe Sharet attempted to abet these efforts on the political front, but failed in that attempt.

Yehuda Arazi, one of the leading figures in the field of procurement was sent to the US & Canada towards the end of 1947. Soon as he came he was embroiled in the effort to buy a light aircraft carrier, the USS Attu. "According to his plan, the arms [light weapons, cannons, tanks and combat airplanes] will be loaded on the ship in time to arrive at Palestine in mid May 1948, after the British evacuation"[7]. To realize this plan, while circumventing the American embargo, a secret plan code-named 'Dromi' ["The Southerner"] was devised with the Mexicans. The idea was to present Mexico as the buyer of the weapons, and to send it on to Israel via Mexico.

Negotiations were conducted with the Mexicans who received at the outset $100 000.00 "under the table". These had their ups and downs, part of them because the Israeli partner changed some of his plans. Meanwhile, the FBI came onto the scene and prevented the procurement of the tanks. The Mexicans then cancelled their agreement to "buy" the planes, and finally the whole thing ended up with the purchase of 75 mm Mexican cannons "on the condition that a bona-fide company would appear as the legal purchaser of the merchandise"[8]. In order to facilitate carrying the whole affair to a successful conclusion, the ship, "Kefalos" was purchased in the USA and given the code name "Dromit" ("The Southerner"). The Hagana decided to add airplane high octain fuel and the machine guns, that had been "procured" in Hawaii, to this vessel's shipment.

As was mentioned, the machine guns had arrived in California about mid-March 1948. The job of storing / hiding these crates was given to the pilot Rey Selk, Hank's cousin. He put them into various warehouses in the Los Angeles area. Just about the same time, the FBI started to investigate Al Schwimmer's airplane company, and discovered that 12 crates were missing from the shipment that had been sent from

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[6] Slater, page 176.
[7] Shaul Avigur, "The Hagana Generation", p' 162. B G's "War Memoirs", p' 168 note 6.
[8] Pinchas Vase, "The Object – Procurement". Letter from Eliyahu Sacharov-11.6.48. Maarachot 1966, p' *234-7*.

Hawaii. The result of the FBI's activity was that Schwimmer transferred his company's headquarters to Panama, in order to remove himself from the USA arm of the law and now called the company Lineas Areas de Panama (LAPSA). Rey, who feared that the FBI would track the 16 missing crates[9], broke them up and distributed the guns into waterproof bags which he divided among friends in Los Angeles who were willing to endanger themselves vis-à-vis the FBI and keep the bags in their homes.

Although the deal with the Mexicans had not been finalized and the "Dromit" was still in a shipyard in New York, it was decided to get the machine guns away from the eyes of the FBI. Hank, who had set the whole project in motion, was called upon to finish it off. The first thing that he did was to find a vessel that would sail to Acapulco, Mexico. Bernard Fineman, a Hollywood producer who had helped Rey to find people to hide the bags, suggested hiring the services of Leland Robert Lewis, known as

Lee. A young American Jew from San Diego who had been an officer in the US Merchant Marine during WW-II and later served as navigator for the tuna fishing fleet. In Feb' 1946 he bought a yacht that had a glorious past, named **"Idalia"** that had excellent lines: it was 23 meters long and 5 meters wide. Its mast had a height of 30 meters and she weighed 30 tons. Lee worked on the vessel himself and participated successfully in several long distance contests. From time to time he also hired the vessel out for trips to elsewhere in California or to Acapulco. Hank and Lee met and talked business. Hank told Lee frankly what the whole deal was about and - according to Hank - Lee said that he was very interested. "This would be an adventurous trip and would also connect with helping Israel, and that interested me." In addition, he was also to receive a nice sum of money for this job[10] . The two decided to load the stuff from an abandoned pier in the port of San Pedro, south of Los Angeles.

One night towards the end of May 1948, Hank, Willy and Leo Gardiner, one of Al Schwimmer's pilots, gathered the sacks of guns from where they had been distributed, loaded them onto a truck and drove to the port. While loading, three more volunteers arrived. They were scheduled to sail with Hank to Mexico. These men were Nathaniel Ratner, Alvin Ellis (called Al[11]) and a cook called Jacob Fuchs. None of the four had any experience handling sails.

The loading of about 100 sacks weighing a total of 15 tons began at midnight, and these "amateur stevedores", as Slater called them, soon found that they were very tired and weak. Each sack, that contained 5 machine guns, had to be dragged and carried onto a small craft that went between the pier and the yacht's anchorage spot. The sack was then thrown onto the yacht and rolled down to the bottom of the

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[9] Slater, p' 177: "Customs inspectors confiscated the whole shipment… and noted that 16 crates were missing".

[10] Slater, p' 177-8; Edith Whitman, "Hank brought us weapons". "Globus", 23.4.93.

[11] His original name was Abraham Elazaroff.

vessel. While this work was being carried out some damage was done to the hand carved wooden railings. Lee, who had no idea what the size of the load was or how much it weighed, became quite angry, but could do nothing. Hank and his boys paid no attention and continued what they were doing. Towards the end of the loading, the yacht started to sink as the water seeped into the vessel proper.

At this point Lee broke up and declared that he was not ready to sail. He demanded that the load be removed. This led to a serious argument between him and Hank, the outcome of which was that they would sail as far as Catalina (about twenty miles south of San Pedro). Hank told Lee that another vessel was waiting there to take them to Acapulco. The Idalia set out for Catalina at 03:00 hours. As soon as the vessel left port Hank came over to Lee and told him that there was no vessel waiting at Catalina and that the Idalia would have to sail to Acapulco, and he was taking over the command of the yacht. To give further strength to his words he waved his Mauser revolver in Lee's face. Slater, who had interviewed both men, described Lee's feelings in these words: "I can still sense his anger; if you want to drive someone up a wall, take his yacht from him."

Nathaniel, who had been a chief engineer on an American destroyer and was scheduled to sail for Israel on a gunship that had been purchased from surplus US Navy supplies, was sent to the Idalia at the last moment without having a clue as to its mission. In his memoirs[12] he relates that as soon as they were out at sea Hank stuck a revolver in his hand and told him that "we have to take over command of the vessel". Nathaniel was taken by surprise because he knew that only Lee could handle the sails. He wrote that Hank told Lee that if he would cooperate he would receive full payment as he had been promised, and if not, he would be killed.

Lee, angry and insulted, controled himself and kept doing his job, but in the same time planed to abort the voyage by running the yacht onto the rocks in the vicinity of San Diego. At the last moment he changed his mind. His main reason for this was his inability to destroy his own yacht. Secondly, he wanted the machine guns to reach Israel[13]. Nathaniel concluded his memoirs: "Luckily, Lee agreed to continue on to Mexico." While loading the machine guns, the food products, that had been stacked at the pier, were forgotten and left behind. All that there was on the vessel to eat was cookies, canned sardines and some dry and moldy bread.

For obvious reasons, it was decided not to enter any American port. On the third day out the yacht pulled into the Mexican port of Ensenada, a city south of San Diego. By this time relations improved on the yacht and, as Slater remarked, "An understanding was reached between Greenspun, the crew and the "captive" captain". The yacht was refueled, took on food supplies, and Lee was allowed to make a hurried trip to San Diego in order to purchase a compass, as the one that they had on board had been damaged while loading the machine guns. According to Lee, he met there Larry Ives, a former Colonel in the Marines, and at that time a purveyor of arms who was used by Yehuda Arazi to buy tanks, purportedly for the Mexican Army, but actually they were meant to be transferred to the "Dromit"[14]. Lee

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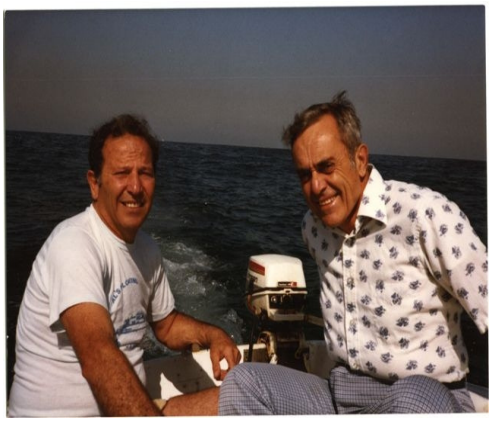
[12] . Nathaniel Ratner's account of the episode was made available to me via his daughter Nancy.
[13] . Slater, p' 179.
[14] . "The War Memoirs" D. B-G, p' 626.

"poured out his heart" to Larry but Larry convinced him to continue the voyage "and promised him that he would receive $6,500.00 for the trip" to Acapulco[15] . Lee returned to the yacht. On 15th June 1948, about two weeks after they had left the port of San Pedro, the vessel cast anchor in the marina of Acapulco.

Hank went ashore to arrange the storage of the guns in the warehouse of the Mexican Navy, where they would await the arrival of the "Dromit" (she had left New York on 13th June), about two weeks after they had left San Pedro. Lee also went ashore "He reported the whole incident to the American consul and afterwards to the FBI". He told them of the difficulties he had on this journey. Slater concludes this chapter with the remark that: "these two men were to meet two years later on the opposite sides of a Federal Courtroom." In his memoirs Nathaniel recounts that he and Al remained to guard the machine guns until they would be removed from the yacht, and it was only at this stage of the game that they found out how the guns had been obtained. The two were then sent to Mexico City to supervise the receiving of the field cannons that had been bought from the Mexicans, and to accompany them and the machine guns on their journey to Tampico, on the eastern coast of Mexico. The "Dromit" arrived there on the 24th June, but because of delays for all reasons imaginable, it only sailed for Israel on the 3rd August 1948.

Reading Slater's book 'The Pledge', Nathaniel wrote some remarks to the author (it's not clear if they were sent to him). Here is one which refers to the Idalia: "4) The diversity of accounts on the Idalia incident between Lewis and Greenspun reminds me of the Japanese story "Rashomon". Each sees an incident through his own eyes. Lewis's account has some basic flaws. His mention of the crew bickering should bring him no comfort. The "bickering" was over what should be done with Lewis. The only other discussion that took place was my prevailing upon Greenspun that it was not necessary nor should we risk landing the Idalia anywhere in the U.S. for the omitted food supplies, gasoline and compass. Lewis's story of almost jumping off the ship and grounding it was ridiculous.The coast from San Pedro to Tijuana was continuously brilliantly lit up, and it was no problem whatsoever to stay well outside of territorial waters and navigate by following the shore lights.



However, when Lewis decided to cooperate, it was most welcomed, as none of us were familiar with the sails (only needed until we got gasoline in Mexico, and it prevented making a decision that we have later regretted).I regret that you didn't mention Al Ellis in your accounts. He was aboard the Idalia with us. He and I later were at the arsenal outside of Mexico City checking out the arms that had been purchased".N.R (-)

[15] . Slater p' 179-80. Doron Rosen, "In Quest of the American Treasure", published by the Ministry of Defense, p' 249-50.

Al & Nat over 30 years later.

One would imagine that if all ended well, all was well; but that was not so with the FBI nosing about. This Department was still looking for the 16 missing crates that should have arrived from Hawaii. Lee's disclosure to the consul in Acapulco helped the FBI to tighten the noose around the necks of Hank and his companions. Seven men were involved according to the FBI, and they were indicted in September, 1949, among others, for plotting the violation of Neutrality Act. In July 1950 Hank decided to admit his guilt and to take all blame and responsibility upon himself. He declared in the courtroom: "I am not ashamed of my actions; I did nothing for the purpose of personal profit". As a result, he and two of his buddies were found guilty and fined. Hank was fined $10,000.00 (the maximum allowed by law) and the loss of his right to vote, and other citizenship rights. Nathaniel and Alvin were fined $5000.00 each. These two were later pardoned by President Truman and Hank was pardoned in 1961 by President Kennedy.

U. S. CHARGES 7 WITH SMUGGLING ARMS TO ISRAEL
Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1963); Oct 1, 1949; ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849 - 1986)
pg. 7

U. S. CHARGES 7 WITH SMUGGLING ARMS TO ISRAEL

Los Angeles, Sept. 30 (AP)—The United States attorney's office announced today that seven men have been indicted on charges of smuggling approximately 2 million dollars worth of military equipment to Israel during the war between the Jews and Arabs.

Herschel Champlin, assistant United States attorney, said a Wilmington, Cal., yacht owner, Leland Robert Lewis, 26, furnished some of the information on which the federal grand jury indictments were based. Champlin said Lewis told of being forced at gunpoint on May 30, 1948, to transport 15 tons of machine guns, machine gun mounts, ammunition and other equipment on his yacht, Idalia.

"They made me sail the cargo to Acapulco, Mexico, where it was unloaded and consigned to Palestine by ship and plane," Lewis was quoted.

Champlin said the defendants are charged with conspiring to export arms and ammunition without a state department permit. He said those indicted are Henry Bellows, 56, Santa Monica, Cal., writer who was arrested on his yacht last night; Lawrence C. Ives, president of the Western ordnance company, New York City; Lloyd Rosenblum, president of Hays Isham company, an export-import firm, New York City; Herman Greenspur, Las Vegas, Nev., publicity man; and three seamen, Al Elliott, Nat Ratner, and Jake Fuchs.

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Honoured by Israel

1956 – **Hank Greenspun** >

Israel Honors U.S. Editor
Special to The New York Times.
New York Times (1857-Current file); Aug 31, 1956; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2005)
pg. 4

Israel Honors U. S. Editor

Special to The New York Times.

TEL AVIV, Israel, Aug. 30—Premier David Ben-Gurion honored today an American who was convicted by a United States court for gun-running to Israel. The Premier received Hank Greenspun, editor of The Las Vegas (Nev.) Sun. In reporting the meeting, the Government press office referred to Mr. Greenspun's "gallant help to Israel during the difficult period of 1948."

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2009 – **Nat Ratner**: "The state of Israel owes you gratitude for your contribution to her Independence. The Ministry of Defence grant you the country's worriors decoration **ALEH** for your contribution".