

## Lenny Sklar

### The Story of a volunteer aboard the Exodus 1947

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To English: Aryeh Malkin & Nava Goren



Lenny was born in Lithuania and was the youngest of three brothers. He came by himself to the United States through the aid of his uncle, who resided there. Between 1940 – 1945 he served in the US Army and was sent to England. From England he went with the army to France, Czechoslovakia and Germany (the “European Theater”). Regarding his draft to the work in Aliya Bet he writes: “In 1946 a member of the Hagana came and spoke to us about drafting volunteers for work in Aliya Bet – bringing survivors of the Holocaust from Europe to Palestine. I volunteered because I wanted to help the survivors to leave the displaced persons camps.”

When World War II was over he learned that all his family in Lithuania had been wiped out. As a survivor himself he felt he must do whatever he could to help other Jews, so he volunteered to serve on the “Exodus ‘47”. He later joined the Israeli army that was being formed during that period. He served as an artillery officer in the IDF (Tzahal) during the War of Independence. In 1950 he returned to study in the USA and completed a course in social work. He worked in that capacity in Boston and was active in the ‘Poalei Tzion’ movement. He returned to Israel in 1960 and settled in Jerusalem. In 1961 he married Masha (RIP). Lenny passed away in August 2009, leaving a married daughter and two grandchildren, all residing in Jerusalem. We are very proud of him and of what he did and cherish his memory, and willingly offer this record of his actions which is inextricably entwined in the epic of the creation of the State of Israel. Lenny wrote his story in Yiddish; His story and this introduction were given by his daughter, Hayli Alon.

#### **“Exodus ‘47”**

**July 9<sup>th</sup> Port of Sete** – We worked all night to fix the pipes so that the shelves on which the Ma’apilim were to sleep would be ready. We were not finished yet and the people were set to arrive very soon. I laid down to rest for a few minutes and was then informed that the trucks had arrived. For the past few hours we have been wining and dining the French authorities who were to check the papers of those boarding our vessel. I went to my station on the ship where I was supposed to meet those boarding. I saw them approaching the vessel from three directions. Each one was carrying a big backpack as they came. This was a very tense and exciting moment for them, for which they had waited a long, long time. More and more trucks arrived bringing the Ma’apilim and I continued to urge those boarding to move forward and make room for the new arrivals. We had to leave the port very soon, in

the hope that the English would not notice us. I directed the people to their hold and it was sad to see this poor wandering mass of people; there were many mothers with little children and I thought they looked in much better condition than when they had come out of the camps.

Many of the Ma'apilim came up to the deck that was meant for the crew. We were waiting to leave port but nothing happened. I went out and looked about and as nothing was happening I decided to catch some sleep; it had been a tough day. Early in the morning we heard yelling outside; Dave Lowenthal, who had been on watch turned it over to someone else. I guessed that trouble was brewing. We almost lost our anchor and we were circling inside the port without a pilot. Actually, we had run into a sandbar and after a few desperate attempts to struggle free we managed to leave port and hit the open sea. I fell back to sleep.

**July 12<sup>th</sup>** – Little by little we turned the work in the galley over to the Ma'apilim and they fell into the routine with a little direction from our men. This past evening I went down into the hold and gave a little concert which the Ma'apilim appreciated. At work I also had contact with some Ma'apilim who were assigned to my detail and I got along with them okay, but I had not met with the difficult ones. There was an increasing number of British destroyers sailing around us and they didn't leave us for a moment. The seas were a bit rough but the vessel was holding up well. Several days before we were to arrive in Palestine, we practiced with the Ma'apilim how to oppose an attack by the British. We put the Star of David flag up on the mast and we trained groups of Ma'apilim in protecting it and other important spots on the vessel. We were positive that we would be able to break the British blockade and bring many hundreds of Ma'apilim ashore. We also prepared several hideouts where the crew could disappear, if and when our resistance was broken. We stacked some food in there as well.

#### **The Battle of the 'Exodus 47'**

**July 17<sup>th</sup>** – At night the destroyers went by our ship, using their searchlights to see what was happening on board. There was one scene which left a very strong impression on me. When one destroyer came close to us, all the Ma'apilim gathered on deck opposite it and sang Ha'Tikvah and other songs. This was an expression of a nation oppressed. I prepared to go to sleep in a nearby room, because the one that I usually occupied had become the first-aid station. I gathered all of my stuff and washed myself and then lay down on the floor. I was awakened at 3 in the morning when the British ships came close to us. I dressed quickly and ran outside; all the searchlights were directed at the ship and all our people were on deck. We were prepared with potatoes, bottles, sticks and whatever we could find, and we had some hot water hoses readied as well. When the destroyers came alongside we threw the potatoes at them and whatever else we had on hand. The ships answered with cans of tear gas and the crowd dispersed. I continued to give directions to the Ma'apilim and to organize them. Something banged my head and it bled. I went to the first-aid station and they bandaged my head. Two destroyers came at both sides of our ship and gave it a shove. They kept throwing tear gas canisters at us. People kept running inside for cover and I called them out. At times I thought I would choke from the gas. I kept yelling at the Ma'apilim to come out and fight. We threw whatever we could find at the English but they kept coming and they kept shoving us.

Then we heard that the English had reached the bridge and the fighting intensified. By then the English shot three people and another was badly wounded. The English moved about the deck and we attacked them from all sides. I attacked several with buckets of water and threw a hatchet at one soldier. He hit me in the head and arm with a club and I became dizzy but kept fighting. When I noticed that I was bleeding I went to the first-aid station and they bandaged me. I met Bill Millman there who had been shot in his mouth and was lying next to a wounded English soldier. Bill tried to make conversation with him. I threw several British soldiers into the water and engaged a few more, but by now they were all over the bridge, the galley and the decks. Our injured were lying on the deck and I dragged several to the first-aid station. I lay down because I felt as if my head was bursting. Having laid there for a time, Eli and Stanley took me to the hospital room below. So many of our people were injured and the English were roaming all over the place. The doctor said that I could expect my head to hurt for some time. The nurses were very friendly and when our mates came to visit I started crying. I was thinking of going into a hospital in Haifa but I would have preferred to go with all the Ma'apilim to Cyprus and see how they were doing there.

I thought it was too late for me to decide what I wanted to do, as time had run out. I was sorry about going to Haifa. I ate nothing the whole day and didn't even feel like eating anything. The ship was damaged somewhat but continued to sail. Someone lying by my side was breathing with great difficulty and sighed audibly. Opposite me the child who was shot had died; there was an air of mourning in the room. We were waiting to arrive at the port of Haifa and after a long wait we arrived there. There were last handshakes with friends of the crew and Ely promised to look after my things, and I went up to have a look at what was going on. There were many soldiers all around and the wounded and the dead were being removed from the ship.

Dr. Josey came along and pointed at me and soldiers grabbed me and took me off the ship. All I could see about me were soldiers and men with cameras. I was taken to a tent and an English doctor looked at my wound and called it an upper cranial wound. I was taken back to the ship and saw Ely and Ike Aran (the captain) standing there. I was being moved along and a soldier helped me do so and my luggage was examined. After a pocket search I was moved on and put aboard one of the deportation ships where I met several other wounded. I guessed that meant we were all going to Cyprus. Murray Aronoff and Ephraim were also there. A doctor took a look at me again in the first-aid station and after a time I left and joined the others on deck.

**July 18<sup>th</sup>** - On deck I met a bunch of the other fellows: Samuel Beery, Reuben Margolis, Wawa, Myron Goldstein, Abbot Lutz and Starick. They made room for me in the open air and people were especially kind to me. It was difficult to lie down but not so bad. Somebody started singing and I sat up and told the others to pay attention; that was how the concerts started. The following day I was allowed on deck and I looked for talents and organized the first concert, which went over very well. The audience wanted more. My wound was improving but I still got dizzy spells. I spent some time enjoying the company of a few of the girls and joked around with a few others. I became known as a pleasant young guy. The food was mostly cakes of all sorts, spaghetti and meat soup. After three days of 'just hanging around' the rumors started flying around that we were being sent back to France. I was quite a sturdy guy but I couldn't believe that England would do something like that to us now.

Time went by and we traveled further and further west and the mood of the people sank the farther we went. After ten days we arrived at Port de Bouc and dropped anchor. We organized a hunger strike and I forced some people to join. The crew got together to decide what to do and we decided to wait and see what developed.

**July 28<sup>th</sup>** – We were told that representatives of the French Government were to come on board so we prepared everyone for a demonstration. They came aboard and told us of their intention to allow us to enter France. The doctor (or a lawyer?) replied to them and they went away while we all sang Ha'tikvah and the Marseillaise. That made such a strong impression that the French cried, and I cried too. The people shouted; "To the Land of Israel or Death." Hershel Neksher, the interpreter, who was a Hagana man, received a great deal of information. We then got to work and prepared posters with groups of people that were to be read once we got to the port. There was a plan to prevent people from leaving the ship, but some of them had already left. Hershel said he was going to leave as did Avi, Murray, Samuel Schulman and Sol Lester<sup>1</sup>. Hershel passed his duties over to me, but I was not sure I could do the job. Little by little I became used to it and managed quite well. At first I was responsible only for the people in one hold, but later I also took over the hold on the other side, where there was a big mess. There were fewer concerts now and there were more people who wanted to leave but we did not let them. A fight broke out and we started to sing so that the English would not hear the racket.

An emissary came from the shore. We did not like him at first, but soon we became accustomed to him and we even got to like him. Perhaps we were like that because we did not have any responsibilities. I soon decided that I had to do something and instead of dealing with people I became more involved in politics and cultural work. The girls took pity on me and brought me in to their collective kitchen. It was only then that I started to enjoy my food. Then the hunger strike began and we were all hungry. We did not get much sleep either. I slept under the water tank and had to be awake every morning at five o'clock. Soon after that I received a bed from Hershel. However, it was very stuffy sleeping inside. I started to learn about electro-mechanics in Hebrew. I had studied this by myself in English. I can honestly say that I am a pretty good learner. I went outside several times and saw Dave Leventhal, Hershel, Avi Lipshitz (Livni) and Teddy Rosenfeld and had a little talk with them. They were having a lot of trouble with people who were stealing. Sometimes there were scandals and sometimes we had concerts once or twice a week. We also heard some rumors about Abba (?) who was with the English and did little for us. We made a larger hole in the door so that it would be easier to go through and talk to the people. I got to know many people and was known as a 'live-wire'.

There were rumors that we would sail to Kenya, Tubruk, Cyprus or Hamburg and we didn't know which to believe. The Hagana didn't want it to be Hamburg. We didn't get many newspapers. Yisrulik from Hashomer Hatzair was the person closest to me; he was also close to his group of friends. I sometimes wondered if all this was worth the while when I saw people out to make money on the 'black market' and other unsavory characters. When I looked at the children, especially the Hungarian children, I had no doubt at all. The animosity between the Polish and Hungarian people was strong. The strong personality among the

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the MACHAL volunteers left the ship before it sailed to Hamburg by order of the Mosad for Aliya Bet.

Hungarians was Ezra; he took care of the children and kept them controlled. He also contributed their choir for our concerts. There was also Bulman who was an actor and a director. Jacques and David were French and Moroccan and Jacques was in charge of the policing squad. Charles was quiet but a very good organizer. Harold Leidner worked on guard duty 24 hours but was also in charge of keeping the ship clean and had his hand in everything.

**Life on board the deportation ship:** In our hold there were 200 beds and six hundred people. Several tens of them slept on the deck. It was dark there except in the middle, where there was a roof and two steps and an exit which was closed. My bed was below in a corner. There were four rows of beds. The medicines and the blankets of three people were lying next to me. I got up about eight in the morning and drew some water from the tank to wash with. Water was given out to everybody from 6-8 in the morning. I just wandered around until breakfast which was at 10 o'clock; that was when we were given cereal and sometimes raisins, too. We had our Supper at seven o'clock; usually - a stew. If it rained then mud piled up in the middle and that made things tough for those who slept there. Those were usually the kids that Ezra looked after.

One day, a few of us who were the leaders were called and we were told that we would be sailing to Hamburg the following night, if we did not get off in France. We thought this was being said just to provoke us. I met Tzvi (Katznelson, a palyamnik who accompanied the ma'apilim) and Meir. I couldn't believe we would really be going there. The British Major (the commander of the ship) saw me for the first time. He seemed to have quite a personality. The English threw Player cigarettes at us. The following day representatives of the French government came to us and told us the same thing. We never imagined such a thing but it was possible; yesterday a consul visited us and told confirmed that. We started a demonstration and declared a hunger strike. We put up placards and the newspapers were full of them. At six some of the boys came with the last of the products and told us they were going to Italy. We sailed to Hamburg after having been laid up at Port de Bouc for three weeks. I just recalled that Moshe Sneh (an officer in the Mosad for Aliya Bet) visited us in a small boat and shouted to us that we would meet again in Palestine.

**August 30<sup>th</sup>** – We sailed from Port de Bouc and saw the other ships following us. We were now given warmed over cakes to eat with coffee or tea; a starvation diet. We were lucky that we still had some of the food the launches that had visited us brought with them. We noted that we were headed for Gibraltar and we arrived there after four days sailing. We moved along the coast of France and Spain and took pills against vomiting as soon as we were in motion. The soldiers who had guarded us at first were given leave and we now had Scottish soldiers guarding us. We were actually friendly with most of the soldiers and that was especially true of the Hungarian kids. At Gibraltar we were watched very carefully. Depth charges were exploding around the ship at night to ward off swimmers or launches. I stood and gazed at the shore of the continent and some of the Jews there brought us cigarettes and chocolate and some other things. They said there were many rich Jews there. Our soldiers came back from their leave and we took off again. It was hard to believe we were going to Hamburg.

We expected a big storm and difficult sailing and we counted each day that went by. The weather was terrible and the time passed quickly. The morale of the passengers was better than we expected, as people were getting used to the idea of returning to Hamburg. We were considering what we would do when we got there. I, for one, would be glad to see the Exodus chapter behind me, however it would end. When I was tired of standing on our side of the ship I went over to the other side to meet friends. I met Chaim and Tzvi most of the time. We were thinking of fighting when we had to leave the ship.

I was not in favor of violence because I didn't want more people to get hurt. Only after a long argument and pressure from Hashomer Hatzair and other groups were we allowed to exercise passive resistance. New organization units were formed, with leaders assigned to them, and arrangements were made for descending from the deportation ship. Prior to that we declared a 24 hour hunger strike and we sent a declaration to the British major and to the newspapers. At the last moment I transferred the material that I had in my backpack. This was done quietly and without drawing attention. When our status became known to the leaders of the various groups they were shocked, but Yisruelik helped us out. At night we gathered everyone around us and Yisruelik told them our plans in a dramatic manner. His words were interrupted by the women. That night everyone slept below, in the hold. I was very hungry because I ran out of food. On the whole voyage we had been eating eggs, cakes and stew; mornings we also had coffee or tea.

**September 8<sup>th</sup>** – we were supposed to get to Hamburg by 6 o'clock. We awoke at 8 and nothing happened as yet. We looked out of the window for some sign and saw roads and forests; everybody was standing and searching. Soon we saw some houses; people were angry at the Germans because some were standing and laughing, and perhaps thinking vengeful thoughts. That made everyone angry. The Germans were having an ordinary stable day and the wandering was still left to us. We were traveling for a long time on the Elbe River and soon we reached a port. I told everyone to come down and go to the other side of the vessel. When we got there I could see a large terminal and very many soldiers. After a short wait we were told that we would leave the ship the following day. All had dressed themselves to leave the ship and the beds had been torn apart. This was an unpleasant situation. Later I looked at the terminal again and saw trains waiting there and there was not a civilian in sight. It looked like there was a reinforced guard on duty that night. People were angry because of the food but I just lay on my bed. Since I was very weak I get extra food but I was also very hungry. There were rumors that food would be given out when the hunger strike was over at 6 in the evening. I fell asleep but was awakened and given some soup with tiny pieces of meat in it. I ate and went back to sleep.

**September 9<sup>th</sup>** – I was awakened at 5AM and was told to get ready to leave the ship. At 5:30 I woke everybody else and at 6 the hatch was opened to let everyone out. At 7AM everyone was sitting and waiting. There was tension in the air and the guards were all around. We became aware that on the other side of the ship many, except the kibbutzim had already left. Soldiers came in and took the baggage and the people followed them down. The prognosis did not look good but we all waited. About 9 o'clock the soldiers came in and we started to sing. They listened for a while and some even joined in. An American journalist came around and looked about him and left. The soldiers just stood around and nothing happened. Then they congregated by the hatch. They were getting on our nerves. A British officer appeared and several others accompanied by some military police. The soldiers

started hitting us with clubs and we tried to push them away. I went and stood by my belongings and the others stood quietly in line.

Outside, the soldiers stood on both sides of the pier and there were many civilians and journalists in the crowd. We were led into the terminal and our belongings were searched. We were then left on the platform to wait for the trains. People were nervous and tense. The crowd watching seemed to enjoy the spectacle. Only one person was seriously hurt. The newspapermen were encouraged to talk to us and we were photographed. We boarded the trains and received some food to eat while traveling. I was very tired and sat and observed the scenery from my window. After an hour ride we arrived and disembarked the train with many soldiers guarding us. Then we boarded trucks and rode for some time until we arrived at the camp.

There were a bunch of newspapermen and photographers all over the place. We were all duly identified and arranged and I was put in the same block with Katya, Ava, David and Ephraim; Yuzhik was already there with his group. I was still working with Chaim in the secretariat and continued with that until the second group from the other deportation ship arrived. There were agents and questionable characters of various and dubious nature trying to tempt people with their stories. The food was terrible and I was very weak. However, I didn't feel so bad because we were not sleeping on the floor.

When the people in the second deportation ship arrived, we heard stories of how the life of the Ma'apilim was organized under the leadership of Mordechai Rozman. They had many of their people sick or injured. They were disgusted with the leadership on our ship. People on my ship wanted me to come with them but I went with those from Gordonia and Hashomer Hatzair. They wanted me to arrange more concerts but there was no place to stage a concert on the deportation ship. There was also difficulty in arranging for people to appear but there were some small gatherings in odd places. It was difficult trying to sleep and the food was terrible and we were left hungry. The English were playing politics with us and sent us people from UNRRA and other organizations but we didn't get very much help from them. The JDC came for the first time during some holiday. I went to the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah but felt rather strange there and in the course of time I grew farther and farther away from orthodoxy. It has been a long time since I prayed. Even on Yom Kippur I did not pray as fervently as I had in the past. Our food was bread and marmalade or butter, and soup. Sometimes the JDC added something more. We were very restless and waiting to leave. (The Hagana had promised that the Ma'apilim of the Exodus would get preferred treatment, [Aliya Dalet, Aliya with the aid of false papers]). So much time passes by with nothing happening. We were waiting for the gates to open and for us to be led out. I started to teach myself English but gave up on that pretty quickly. I did manage to learn a bit of French.

Some newspapers and magazines arrived and that made life a bit more pleasant. I did not know how time managed to go by every day. The gates were opened and we caused a rumpus in front of anyone of importance in order to be able to leave. Finally we found the right person (this was probably Shaul Avigur, the head of the Mosad for Aliya Bet). He promised that we would leave soon. The food improved a great deal after the JDC added much more than before. I went out now in the evenings to give a concert or just to start a

Hora (an Israeli circle dance). On the Saturday after Yom Kippur I marked the day as the Yohrtzeit (anniversary of a death) for my family and I said Caddish (prayer for the dead). I did not have a candle to light for them nor did I say El Maleh Rachamim (a song of prayer for the dead).

After a long wait there was finally news that we should prepare to leave the camp. That date was also marked by the marriage of Ben and Pnina. The news came at an unexpected moment and I went to pack my files. I ran to the wedding and that area was full of people. Everyone drank "Lechaim" and then ran for the trucks. The parting of so many people from so many others was very stirring. We stood on the outside now and were free for the first time in four months. We were led to the Balinbeck house and we sat there like cultured people at a real table with real plates, to the accompaniment of music. The atmosphere was great and I felt that this was what had been lacking for me during the recent past. We arrived at Bergen Belsen late at night and once again received some food to eat. We left again shortly after. It was very cold and I slept little. We all had false papers. We stopped to rest a number of times at a number of camps. When we left Lipheim we were accosted by an MP. We were all asked a bunch of questions and we thought that the jig was up, but all was well that ended well. At Munich we were taken to a children's house and we were put up there to rest.

**October 18<sup>th</sup>** – During the first days after our arrival we were not allowed very much freedom of movement. There were few places that we were allowed to visit but we did receive a sum of money and some other things. We talked and argued about every single thing. More than once I had to act as the mediator. The children in the house were full of life and energy. Because of them I thought to continue my activity in Aliya Bet. I went to the movies for the first time and started to go to the city to see how I could enjoy myself there. Some of us were taken for a tour of the region and for the first time I saw the Alps. It seemed to me to be the most beautiful sight in the world and I could not get my fill of the view.

I went with a Lithuanian fellow from Holland to a memorial service for the Jews of Lithuania. Rubinstein, the former editor of the "Yiddisher Shtimmer" (the "Jewish Voice") was the chairman. They spoke of the Holocaust and of the details of the terrible destruction and shambles of the Jewish villages and towns. I was deeply moved by all I heard. I met some Lithuanian who gave me some details about some people there, especially Simoniski Itka. I tried to meet Slotski and after a long search I did manage to find her at her address. She recognized me but I did not recognize her. We immediately started to tell each other storof what had happened to the town. I did not recall anyone and I did find out that some of my friends were still alive. A fairly large group had been saved from Hell. At the same time I felt awful because of what had befallen my brother and my brother-in-law. They could have gotten out if they had tried a bit harder; but they didn't. On the other hand I was happy that so many others had managed to stay alive. I came to town often and the time passed quickly, but I am not happy about not doing anything. That old and well-known feeling of just waiting and biding time.

