

## Mario Kenda – An Italian Ally In The Clandestine Immigration and Arms Procurement Enterprises

Written by: Tzvi Ben-tzur



As Chief Editor of the Palyam & Aliya Bet website ([www.palyam.org](http://www.palyam.org)), I kept encountering here and there the name of Mario Kenda – an Italian gentile who took part, in the years 1946-49, in Aliya Bet<sup>1</sup> and the arms procurement enterprises. Uri Goren, a senior operative in these enterprises, wrote in his autobiographical book "On Both Sides of the Crypto: "About an Italian Captain of an Aliya Bet vessel [*Anseldo, the captain of the ships 'Hannah Szenes' and 'Eliahu Golomb'*] Natan Alterman wrote his 'A Response [*Speech*] to an Italian Captain' poem. There is no doubt that Mario deserved that a poem would be written about him ... ". I say more than that: if one poem was written in honor of Anseldo, then more than one should have been written in honor Mario. And so I found myself sitting down one day in early 2018, not in order to write poems about Mario – I'm weak at this, but in order to summarize his contribution and make it public. Following is the result.

Mario was born in 1917 in Trieste, Italy. During WW-II he became a captain in the Italian navy. Mario was a skipper who owned a small 180 ton cargo ship named after his wife Norris. After the war, Mario was looking for an interesting source of income and employment. I found two versions of how he found his way to Ha'Mossad Le'Aliyah Bet (the organizing body of Aliya Bet; hereafter Ha'Mossad, in short) . Lova Eliav, on the basis of personal acquaintance with Mario, gives the following version: after Mario read in the newspaper about the arrest of Italian sailors in Palestine for the smuggling of illegal immigrants, he concluded that illegal and adventurous businesses of this kind can probably earn him quite well. He approached Jewish British soldiers who connected him with Ha'Mossad. He impressed Ha'Mossad with his maritime experience and convinced it that he was reliable and not a British agent. According to another version, Mario was referred to Enrico Levy, one of the most prominent operatives of Aliya Bet in Italy, by a mutual Jewish-Italian friend. David "Duda'le" Ben-Horin, who will be mentioned several times hereafter, testified that "Mario, who came to a central role in the Italian branch of Ha'Mossad, came to us from distress in search of employment for him and his ship. He showed loyalty and diligence in finding solutions during difficult times like one of his Eretz-Israeli peers. He was an excellent professional and identified totally with our goals". As part of joining Aliya Bet activities, Mario sold his ship to Ha'Mossad, which intended to use her as an Aliya Bet vessel.

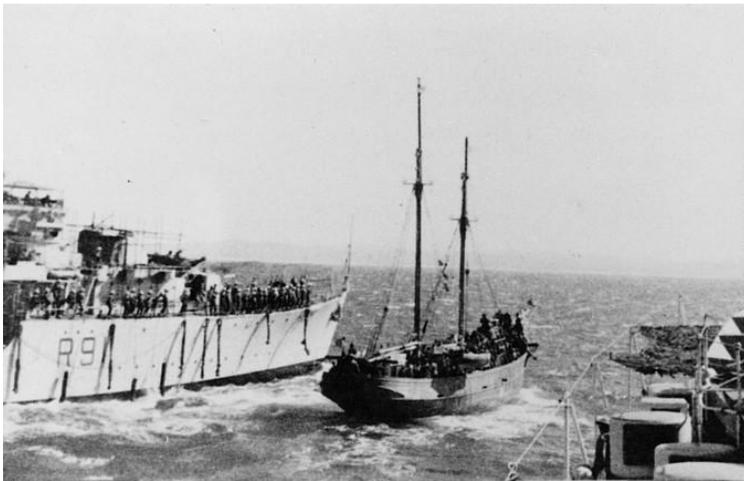


**Mario (right) and his wife Norris, with "Ike", the mythical captain of the "Exodus 1947" in the middle.**

---

<sup>1</sup> The clandestine/illegal immigration of Jews to Eretz-Israel during the British Mandate for Palestine.

The first significant activity he performed in the service of Ha'Mossad was to sail the Aliya Bet vessel 'Wingate' to Eretz-Israel in the role of the ship's captain. Mario knew the vessel very well - she was the 'Norris' that Ha'Mossad had purchased from him recently. On March 14, 1946, the ship departed from a small island in the Gulf of Venice called Palestrina, carrying 238 illegal immigrants on board. In addition to the Italian crew led by Mario, the ship was escorted by three Eretz-Israelis from Ha'Mossad, including the commander of the voyage David "Duda'le" Ben Horin, whose paths and those of Mario crossed more than once. The Haganah prepared a major operation called "Wingate Night" to disembark the immigrants on the beach of Tel Aviv during the night of March 25-26. Many Haganah members were recruited for it and brought to Tel Aviv. But the plan was thwarted by the British who seized the ship at sea. One Palmach fighter, a woman named Bracha Fuld, was killed in clashes in Tel Aviv.



*'Wingate' is being intercepted by British destroyers near the Israeli coast*

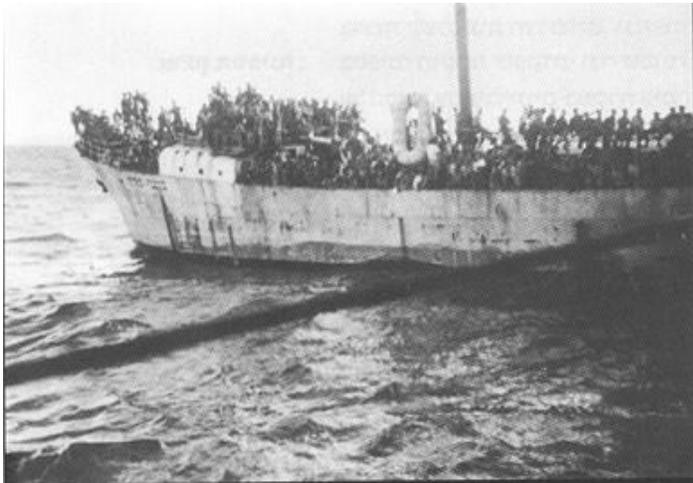
Wingate was forced to sail to Haifa and all those who were on it were detained and transferred to the Atlit detention camp (deportation to the detention camps in Cyprus started only in the summer of 1946` until then, all were sent to Atlit). Among the arrested were Mario and the six Italians of his crew. Ha'Mossad made sure that they were released from detention shortly thereafter, at the expense of the monthly release quota, and housed them temporarily in an immigrant home in Binyamina.

In addition to Mario and his crew, eight members of the Italian crew of the Aliya Bet vessel Enzo Sereni, arrested in January 1946, were also stuck in Eretz-Israel. Ha'Mossad decided to lease a ship named Ada – a tiny vessel of 50 tons, equipped with an engine and a sail, owned by the Jew of Palestine – to return the Italian crews back to Italy and also to transport there six Ha'Mossad operatives, among them Lova Eliav, who was appointed commander of the trip.

Mario was appointed by Lova to be in charge of all the Italians on the vessel. And so Lova describes Mario: "He was about thirty years old, average height, pony-haired and snub-nosed, with pink cheeks and a round face that made him look younger than his years. Mario talked a lot, but he was not a bore. And he knew his work very well". Those interested in the details of the journey can read about it in the book "SS Ulua – The Story of Underground Aliya" by Lova Eliav. I'll bring here just two episodes from this adventurous voyage. In the wake of a technical failure, the passengers of Ada were forced to abandon the vessel near the Turkish coast and move on to another small Turkish vessel. Love tried to persuade the Turkish captain to take them to Italy, but the Turkish captain refused to such unlicensed voyage and the boat sailed to her home port in Bodrum, Turkey. In Bodrum, all the passengers were placed under house arrest (on board the boat), interrogated, and only the bribing of the Turkish authorities, with a substantial payment to the owner of the ship, enabled the voyage to Italy to continue. Mario's advice was followed, and the boat arrived on May 19 in the small fishing port of the town of

Gallipoli. The reason that Mario specifically recommended Gallipoli was that he knew a brothel there that could serve as a hiding place... In Gallipoli, one of the more juicy anecdotes of Aliya Bet was originated – the story of the prostitute Lucia who hid the Eretz-Israeli at her home right after their illegal entry into Italy. Mario and his Italian comrades – most of whom lack identification papers – were arrested, interrogated, and eventually released.

The next time Mario's name is mentioned in connection with Aliya Bet was in October 1946, when he was appointed captain of the Aliya Bet vessel *Bracha Fuld*. The vessel – a small 500-ton freighter, originally named *Fenice*, purchased by the Ha'Mosad in Italy – was named after the late Palmach fighter *Bracha Fuld*, who was killed by the British in Tel Aviv during the "Wingate Night" operation mentioned above. Two of the vessel's escorts, the commander of the voyage Menachem "Churchill" Cohen and the 'Gideoni' (radio operator) Haim Goldis, were well known to Mario – they were among his companions on the arduous journey of the *Ada*. The vessel left Metaponto, southern Italy, on October 9, 1946, carrying 626 immigrants, and on her way additional 180 immigrants came onboard via an auxiliary vessel of Ha'Mossad. Extremely rough sea coupled with technical engine failure caused panic among many of the immigrants and the Italian crew members, but the resourcefulness of the Israeli escorts and Captain Mario saved the situation. The vessel was caught by the British on October 20 and was towed to the port of Haifa. The immigrants violently confronted the British and then they were deported to the detention camps Cyprus. Thus, at the end of October 1946, Mario found himself in British detention, for a second time in less than a year, this time in Cyprus.



***'Bracha Fuld' is being intercepted by the British near the Israeli coast***

Mario was not the only Italian detained in Cyprus. In fact, he was in company there with other members of foreign crews of eight captured Aliya Bet vessels, comprising of Italians, French and Spanish exiles. As far as Ha'Mossad was concerned, this detention also had unfavorable economic consequences, since it continued to pay the salaries of the detainees to their families on time. Ha'Mossad therefore concluded that it had to smuggle the foreign crews back to Europe, and decided to smuggle them directly there, instead of transferring them to Eretz Israel first (using the monthly quota of released detainees) and from there to their home countries. In early 1946, Yehuda Arazi, the head of the Italian branch of Ha'Mossad, decided to use a 24-ton fishing boat named *Dalin* – the very same boat that "made history" back in August 1945 when she was the first Aliya Bet vessel to arrive in Eretz Israel after World War II, marking the beginning of the golden age of Aliya Bet. The commander of the boat in the rescue operation was David "Duda'le" Ben Hurin whom Mario knew well – Duda'le was his commander on the Wingate voyage to Eretz Israel in March of that year. *Dalin's* voyage from Italy to Cyprus lasts nearly three months (!) – a real odyssey in harsh winter seas. At the beginning of February 1947, *Dalin* finally

arrived at its destination in Cyprus. Twenty-one foreign crew members, including Mario, were smuggled out of the camps and assisted by a small boat that was overturned because of the weight of one of the Italians. The voyage back to Italy was short and lasted just a week. The boat entered in the evening to the port of Otranto, without bothering to contact the port officer who, in any case, cooperated with Ha'Mossad. By five o'clock the next morning, all, including Mario, were on the train to Barry, and that was the end of the operation.

After Mario's return to Italy, he joined the Italian branch of Ha'Mossad in the senior role of the branch's Operations Manager. His responsibilities included purchasing vessels, preparing them to serve as Aliya Bet vessels, and recruiting local crew members to operate them. It should be understood that the preparation of a vessel for clandestine immigration was a complex logistical-professional operation that lasted several weeks (several months in the case of large ships such as the Exodus 1947): it was necessary to install bunks, toilets, kitchens, water tanks, etc., and to supply large quantities of food to hundreds of immigrants without endangering the safety of the ship.

Immediately after the historic decision of the United Nations on November 29, Mario joined the celebration of joy, as if he was an Eretz Israeli in every respect. Yehuda Ben-Tzur, a member of the Palyam (the maritime branch of the Palmach) who was involved in preparing an Aliya Bet vessel at the port of La Spezia, testified about the events that night: "One evening, after dark, I heard nervous horn's honks of a car. I hurried to the deck and who do I see? Senior Ha'Mossad officers in Italy, Moshe "Zaki" Zakimovich, Shalom Assaf and Captain Mario Kenda climb up the gangplank, with the first swinging with a half-empty bottle in his hand and shouting "Yesh, Yesh" (in Hebrew: "We have it, We have it"). With sips of wine from the bottle we celebrated the UN decision of November 29, 1947. On the spot, Zaki decided that we should also let Ben Yerushalmi have a sip, although he was preparing the vessel Christina Maria (later renamed "Lo Tafkhidunu" meaning: you won't make us afraid) at Porto Stefano, about 350 kilometers south of us. A report by Ben Yerushalmi came to me much later, in which he claims that by the time we reached him at 3am, the bottle was already empty..."

With the diminishing importance of clandestine immigration and the growing importance of arms procurement, after the outbreak of the War of Independence, Mario found himself also involved in the arms procurement enterprise. The main operation in which his name was explicitly mentioned was "The Pirate" operation in August 1948. The following is a background of the operation. At the end of March 1948, Shaul Avigur, head of Ha'Mossad and in charge of arms procurement in Europe, was informed of an Italian vessel called Lino, carrying a shipment of 8,000 rifles intended for the Palestinians, that left Yugoslavia on its way to the port of Beirut. Shaul ordered the vessel to be stopped, and if possible to take possession of its cargo. The vessel's entry for repair at a port near the port of Bari, Italy, provided an opportunity to drown it. The execution was carried out by a three-member Palyam squad that, on April 10, 1948, succeeded in drowning the vessel in the waters of the port, without leaving any traces. The Arabs did not despair and with assistance from the Italian Navy they retrieved the crates of rifles and their ammunition and prepared to re-dispatch them, this time to Alexandria, Egypt.

Here begins "The Pirate" operation whose objective were to thwart the transfer of arms to the Arabs and, if possible, divert the shipment to Israel. An operation's planning team was established in Bari, comprising of the two Israelis David "Duda'le" Ben Horin and Oved Sa'de, both were Palyam veterans, and the two Italians Mario and "Feinga" (nickname), a senior member of the Italian intelligence service who was loyal to Ha'Mossad. Mario bribed the Italian agent of the Arab representative in charge of the cargo who was a major in the Syrian army, and the agent undertook in return to follow Mario's instructions. According to the planning team's instructions, the agent advised the Syrian to lease a vessel called Arjiro, to which Mario succeeded in infiltrating two loyal officers under the guise of a shipman and a

mechanic. Right after Arjiro sailed, a small fishing boat approached her and her captain was asked to stop. Duda'le and Oved then jumped onboard from the fishing boat, and while brandishing pistols identified themselves as Italian officers whose job it is to escort the vessel on behalf of her owners until she would safely reach her destination. The captain did not doubt the story and thus control was effectively passed to the Israelis. On the way, ostensibly to Alexandria, they led the ship to a rendezvous with the Israeli Navy corvette Wedgwood and Haganah. On August 28, 1948, the shipment arrived at the port of Haifa and the rifles were subsequently transferred to the IDF.



*'Arjiro' is being intercepted by two Israel Navy corvettes*

I believe that Mario, as part of his position in Ha'Mossad, was also involved in the purchase/lease of vessels used in the arms procurement enterprise, but I have no references in support of this claim.

Re. SALE OF THE "NORAH"

As you will see from the enclosed Contract, this ship was sold to me on the 26th June 1949 and, since that day, I have been busy with reconditioning work to get the boat ship-shape. This work lasted for forty days and I first took the boat to sea on August 3rd 1949.

In accordance with my Contract I am due to pay an instalment of two and a half million Lire at the end of September, a further instalment of the same sum on November 30th and a final two and a half million Lire on January 31st next.

As my trip to this country on behalf of Shoham Limited wasted a month which could otherwise have been privately employed to further my business, I would be grateful if you could postpone the payment of the first instalment due for this ship until the 30th November when, in fact, the second payment is already due.

With many thanks for your interest, and kind regards,

Sincerely yours

(Cpt.) MARIO KENDA.

Unfortunately, I have very little information about Mario after the end of the War of Independence. It is known that as an acknowledgement for his contribution, the Israeli Defense Ministry sold him for a third of the price, in June 1949, the vessel Nora – the very vessel that "made history" when she brought the first Czechoslovakian shipment of arms to Tel Aviv port on April 1, 1948, just in time to turn Operation Nachshon into the turning point in the War of Independence. A letter written by Mario to Shaul Avigur in connection with the sale of the ship (here on the left) indicates that Mario was on a mission on behalf of Shoham – a subsidiary of Zim which was established for the purpose of bringing immigrants to Israel right after the State of Israel was established and a wave of mass immigration started – but I have no details about the nature and scope of this mission.

I am certain that Mario's contribution to the clandestine immigration and arms procurement enterprises includes many more activities that are not mentioned here in the article and we will probably never be known, lost in history. Unfortunately, I have no information about ties between Mario and Israel after 1949. I do not know what happened to him, except that he is no longer alive. May his memory be blessed!

I call on anyone in possession of additional information about Mario to pass it on to me and integrate it into the article (I can be contacted via the Palyam & Aliya Bet Website, using the link: [www.palyam.org/contact](http://www.palyam.org/contact)).