



Cyprus

EVERYTHING POINTED TO IT—THE *Exodus* 1947 PEOPLE were to go to Cyprus; the baggage labels, the mimeographed notes the British sailors had passed around on the ship, Major Cardozo's reassurance that the families separated in the search tents would be reunited in the prison camp.

Everything pointed to it, but when the prison ships left Haifa, they disappeared. The British Army had prepared the dock in Famagusta for the ships and they did not come. Inside the camps in Cyprus, the prisoners cleared space on the floors of their tents to welcome the newcomers. Some hurried to the barbed-wire barricades and stood waiting in the heat to catch the first glimpse of the new arrivals. Maybe their relatives were among the *Exodus* people. But a day of waiting stretched to three and longer. And in London there was a total blackout of news.

I decided to fly to Cyprus. The British had consistently barred correspondents from entering the prison island. They made no difficulties for me, though I was the only correspondent attached to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine to whom they gave a visa. In two hours, I flew the two hundred miles from Lydda Airport to Cyprus. My headquarters were the Savoy Hotel in Famagusta, where Morris Laub and Joshua Leibner, the directors of the JDC, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, welcomed me.

With them, or with some British officers, I drove each day to the two camps in which the British detained the Jews, Caraolos on the edge of the tiny harbor of Famagusta and Xylotimbu, thirty miles away. The *Exodus* people were to be housed at a third campsite, just being cleared.

You had to smell Cyprus to believe it. You had to smell the latrines for twenty thousand people to believe it, and you didn't believe it. You had to smell the sweat of men and women as they cooked the food over open stoves and the sweat poured into their pots and pans; you had to smell the garbage which piled up waiting for the trucks which didn't come to believe it—and you didn't believe it. Each evening I left the prison camps and went back to the Savoy Hotel and showered for an hour, but I could never wash the smell away.

The American boys had described it well. Cyprus was a twentieth-century purgatory, a hot hell of desert sand

and wind blowing against tents and tin Nissen huts, a hell circumscribed by two walls of barbed wire whose architecture had come out of Dachau and Treblinka, a hell in which privacy was unknown.

There was no water in Cyprus. All day, some twenty thousand adults and two thousand orphaned children stood at the barbed wire and looked out at the Mediterranean which creamed their shore, but they had no water. Each day a few small boys stood in the midday heat, clutching the gate with their hands, their eyes fixed on the road outside the barbed-wire boundary of the camp. Behind them, down the long rows of silent nameless streets, the population retreated into the thin shadows of tents and Nissen huts, trying to escape the burning assault of the sun.

The boys' ears caught the sound of a motor. They waited until the squat British water truck materialized out of the dust. Then they flew down the camp street shouting "*Wasser! Wasser!*" Other small boys sprang out of the stillness and took up the cry. "*Vodal!*" "*L'eau!*" "*Agua!*" "*Veez!*" A man ran out of a tent carrying a five-gallon tin. A woman followed him with an evaporated-milk can. Everyone dropped the nothing he was doing, grabbed anything that would hold water, and rushed to the truck. The latecomers from the last illegal ships carried only cups. They hesitated on the fringe of the crowd. They would soon learn to scrounge or steal bigger tins, like the five-gallon one the first man had, and fight their way to the head of the queue without ceremony.

People pushed and shoved and clawed in a festering commotion to get to the spigots. A red-faced girl jostled a bearded old man and upset his basin. The old man watched the hot ground drink up his ration. A man slapped an urchin's wrists and the boy threw half a cupful of water extravagantly in his face. A youth shinnied up onto the tank and pounded it madly, as if he expected a spring to spurt from under his hand. The tank emptied quickly and the people moved carefully away with their treasure. The driver, a blond British corporal who had been standing silently by with his arms folded, climbed back into his cab and drove away, with the tank spilling silver droplets onto the burning gravel road.

Back in a hut, an old woman sipped a little water from a cup. Under a tent fly a young man named Moshe—it was he who had carried the five-gallon tin—began to shave, wetting his razor in a saucer. His wife, Toba, stretched a brassière and a faded pair of shorts on a board. She sprinkled water on them with a teaspoon and attacked them with a chunk of yellow soap. She worked slowly because of the heat and because she was heavily pregnant. With infinite pains she sprinkled the garments again with the spoon, rubbed another spot with soap, poured another teaspoon of water, and after an hour, she had a fresh brassière and clean shorts with which to face the desert community.

Moshe had used up all the water in the saucer; he wiped his razor and put it away. The old woman lay down

on a palm mat and fanned herself listlessly with a dirty handkerchief, pausing now and then to mop the sweat off her face. A humid, humming silence moved through the alleys and streets again as the Caraolos camp gave up to the heat and slipped back into the long coma of waiting.

This was the Crown Colony of Cyprus, in the eastern Mediterranean. The travel books called it "Romantic Cyprus." The Greeks called it "Love's Island," because Aphrodite was born of foam off its shores. Here Richard the Lionhearted was married and Othello wooed Desdemona. Here now the Jews, whose crime was that they wanted to go to Palestine, lived in confinement, without plumbing or electricity, blistering in the summer sun, shivering in winter's miserable wetness. Here now we waited for forty-five hundred more Jews from the *Exodus* to be imprisoned.

The British had established these internment camps in 1946 to stop the Jews fleeing from the DP camps of Germany on the underground route to Palestine. "Perhaps," a British officer had said, "if the illegal Jewish immigrants realize that they are going to wind up here, they may not be so anxious to crowd aboard their stinking hellships and try to get to Palestine."

Instead the traffic steadily increased. The *caïque Palmach*, named after the striking force of the Haganah, came from Italy and Greece with 630 people. The *Knesseth Israel* followed with thirty-nine hundred. In the spring of 1947 the *Theodor Herzl* brought 2640 more. The

weirdest collection of all came to Haifa a few days after the *Exodus 1947*; they were a shipload of 380 Spanish-speaking Jews from Algeria and Morocco, who printed an ironical THANKS across their tiny ship. The British banished them immediately to Cyprus. In twelve months some twenty-five thousand Jews on twenty-three ships were captured and diverted to Cyprus. Caraolos, the first camp, was bursting. Xylotimbu was opened before the barest necessities could be provided. Finally the British permitted 750 Jews from Cyprus each month, half the total legal monthly-immigration quota they still allowed, to transfer to Palestine.

So Cyprus became another station, a kind of suburb, for the strange modern exodus of the children of Israel out of the wilderness of postwar Europe to the so long Promised Land.

Each day we waited in this suburb of sorrow for news of the *Exodus*, but in place of news, rumors began to spiral through the camp. *They're not bringing the EXODUS people here! They're taking them to a camp in Eritrea. A new camp is being built for them in Tobruk. They're taking them to Germany. No, no, not Germany!*

Days went by. I found myself hoping that maybe the *Exodus* people wouldn't come here. For in the inescapable intimacy of the camp, human dignity had begun to decay. Maybe the British would relent and save them from Cyprus. It was a wild dream, but maybe the British Labor Government would turn them back to Palestine.

Moshe told me of the time he had intruded into a tent, looking for a friend. Four women were sitting on the floor, trying to sew. In a far corner, behind the stifling and impromptu privacy of an army blanket, a man and a wife were seeking love in the only way Cyprus afforded them. The women did not speak, but with their eyes they said: "We do not watch; but there is no place else for us to go." And in Xylotimbu one day a girl had asked Josh Leibner of the JDC if she could use his kitchen shack that night. "I am getting married this afternoon," she said, "and I'd like to use it for our honeymoon. It is the only place we can be alone."

Yet life went on. In the first year on Cyprus five hundred babies were born, and eight hundred weddings took place. I asked one of the pregnant women one day how she could bring a child into the degradation of this prison.

"Don't you know," she said to me, "don't you know that under Hitler, as soon as a Jewish woman was pregnant, she was burned? Women were the propagators of the race and they were the ones who had to be burned first. Today every woman who can have a child is determined to have one. This is our answer to Hitler. This is how we keep Israel alive. This is democracy, that you can have a child and live."

The children were born in the Jewish ward at the Greek Hospital in Nicosia, without sheets, on blankets that were rarely changed. After a day or two they came back to the prison, their bodies covered with rashes. But the babies

survived. And the tall, kind-faced pediatrician from the Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem, Dr. Walter Falk, told me: "Until I came here four weeks ago, I believed in science. Today I believe only in miracles."

Flies ate their bodies, but the babies survived. Their barefoot mothers, torn and ragged from the exodus and the pilgrimage, had little milk in their sagging, unwashed breasts, but the babies defied every law of bacteriology and survived.

The American JDC sent them milk and clothes and fruit and books, to supplement the army rations which the British gave them. "We're not starved here," an old man told me. "But we're prisoners behind barbed wire. We have no identity. Even the DP camps gave us a vestige of freedom and privacy and an UNRRA card with a name on it. Here even the streets are nameless, for nameless people." Yet they survived.

"Why do they keep coming then?" a bewildered British major asked me. "Why can't they be patient and wait in Germany?" He knew he might as well have asked why a salmon would dash itself to pieces in a river rapids trying to get upstream at spawning time.

"Are you British any better than our Nazi jailers?" a refugee had screamed at him hatefully one day. The next Sunday, his day off, the major spent the whole time driving up and down Cyprus searching for shoes to buy up for the children of his camp.

The grimmest joke in Cyprus was a high covered wooden

bridge which the British had built for the Jews over two barbed-wire barricades in XyloTimbu, so that they could pass from one section of the camp to the other. This quickly became the refugees' Forty-second Street and the pedestrian traffic was endless. As soon as a rumor spread that water was being brought to one part of the camp, or that newcomers had arrived, the people ran up and down the overpass to see if the rumor were true. The Jews ironically called the bridge "The Warsaw Ghetto Bridge." In Warsaw, the Nazis too had built a bridge, to prevent the Jews from walking on Aryan streets.

They were prisoners whose horizon was sliced on four sides by vertical poles strung with pointed wire, yet they made a life for themselves inside hell. They made a creative life for themselves. They painted and drew and sewed clothes out of tent cloth; they made chess sets out of stone; they set up little industries. They had lemonade shops, shoe-repair shops, tailor shops, carpentry shops. They even made toys for their children. They tried to heal their memories by reproducing the death camps on Cypriot stone. They held exhibitions of their paintings and their carvings and the work was good enough for an art gallery in New York. Their lives were circumscribed and their horizons were the tops of tents and concentration-camp poles, but they defied the camps and survived.

The children went to school from six in the morning until twelve, when it was almost too hot to survive, and you saw sixteen-year-old boys and girls sitting in a class-

room—a room built of the space between two Nissen huts with some potato sacking sewn together for a roof and some planks nailed together for a table and a bench—sixteen-year-old boys and girls going to school for the first time, learning that one plus one equals two.

They looked like no other school children in the world. There was a hunger for learning, and beneath the hunger a deep apathy and bitterness. One and one equals two. They were almost ripe for marriage and children of their own. One and one equals two.

They wore a kind of Cyprus prison uniform, a blouse and shorts, the girls almost all in faded blue, the boys in faded khaki. They didn't smile as you entered; they didn't greet you; they just sat staring. So another free person from earth had come down to hell to see what purgatory looked like. One and one equals two.

What could they make of their lives? Could they pick up skills and professions? Could they be reclaimed? Could a child who had never been inside a house, who had never seen a bathtub, or a flush toilet, who had long forgotten what his parents looked like before they were burned, ever be normal? One and one equals two.

You walked down the tent streets waiting for news of the *Exodus 1947*, throwing away the rumors, and someone who had learned patience told you: "In Palestine there are olive trees and even when there is nothing on them but old bark, they go on living. Remember that." You remembered. One and one equals two.

Each day in Cyprus, you asked one question: What did it mean to be a Jew living here in Cyprus?

It meant standing behind barbed wire for months, years perhaps. It meant that you had survived the death camps and the death marches, the DP camps, the tiny fishing boats, the illegal journey and the British destroyers. It meant that you had put one foot on Haifa and the other foot on a prison ship to come here—to Cyprus. These were pioneers, I thought, such as the world has never known. These were people who must have the most tremendous faith or the most abject despair to come, knowing every minute and every foot of the way that the road leads through Cyprus. These are either mad people or a people with a dream that cannot be killed.

History books, I thought, will someday write of these people as the greatest horde willingly to leave Europe knowing that some would die and some would be killed, knowing their ships might be crushed by the British Navy, knowing they would be imprisoned in this purgatory of Cyprus, yet pushing on.

One day the British made an announcement. Five hundred orphaned children were to go to Palestine at once. They would be taken off the monthly quota of 750 visas later. The children had asked that an old Hungarian violinist who had played them to sleep every night, by going from one orphan hut to another, be allowed to go with them. "He is our father," they said. The British had wisely said yes.

It was the major who had hunted the shoes who broke the news to the children. He called them all together and solemnly read them the wonderful announcement in a tense voice. Their faces were utterly blank. Suddenly he understood. They knew no English. He dropped the announcement on the sand. "Look." He waved his hands. "Ship!" He fashioned a ship in the air. "Go!" He pointed outside the fence to the sea. "Palestine!" The children shrieked with joy. They jumped over the major. A little girl shyly kissed him.

Parties of farewell and rejoicing were held. People gave the youngsters precious little gifts, a photograph, a small candlestick, a doily rescued from a death camp, so that they would have happy memories of Cyprus. In the excitement nobody slept. At last, at four o'clock one morning, the time came to leave. The children returned their army blankets, their tin cups and plates. They stood in a queue and clambered aboard trucks which carried them to Famagusta. There were three prison ships. The first one, the *Empire Lifeguard*, had already sailed. The children and other adults were taken aboard the remaining two transports, the *Empire Rest* and the *Empire Comfort*. The major was at the dock. "Good-by, Major," the children sang back at him in their few words of hastily coached English. "You are good, Major." He waved and looked away.

As the children climbed the gangway, they sang "Hatikvah," their song of hope. They were moving from the

last suburbs of the exodus into the heart of Palestine. The ships rang with shouts and singing. They remained at anchor long after sunrise, but nobody paid any attention. There were always delays. But noon came, and three o'clock, and still the vessels had not up-anchored. It was whispered they would sail at sunset. Darkness fell and they stayed there.

"What's wrong?" somebody shouted. "Why don't we go?" The guards said nothing. Two little boys sitting on a steel staircase began to whimper.

Late in the evening, an officer appeared. "The *Empire Lifeguard*," he said, "has been sabotaged in Haifa this morning. No more ships can enter this month."

The children were led down the gangway again. On the wharf, the soldiers went through their baggage, looking for bombs. They tore up some of the gifts the people had given them, so that they would have happy memories of Cyprus. There was a picture of her mother that a little girl had rescued from Auschwitz. One of the soldiers tore it into pieces. The little girl put the pieces in her palm and walked up and down the wharf, saying to everyone: "Can you help me put my mother together?"

A tired guard snatched the violin from the Hungarian violinist and broke it, looking for a bomb. The violinist knelt and gathered up the splinters of his violin and then climbed mechanically onto a truck with the rest.

It was nearly midnight now. At the camp gates there was food. Nobody touched it. The children walked silently

to the gates and sat down outside the camp, refusing to enter, exhausted by the heat, by waiting, by the confusion and the disillusionment.

They were like people who had been to the electric chair once and had escaped death and now were coming back to the chair again. A young girl inside the barbed-wire gates, watching them walk in silence, dragging their feet, observed: "That's the way they walked to the gas chambers. They never screamed. They just walked silently, like dead people."



*D*estination *P*alestine

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THE STORY OF THE  
HAGANAH SHIP EXODUS 1947  
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Ruth Gruber



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