

Immigration from North Africa

The contacts made by Jewish Palestinian soldiers serving in the British army in North Africa with the local Jewish populations did not lead immediately to immigration to Palestine. However, from reports on the Jewish communities in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, it became clear that there would have to be immigration from these countries too. It was soon realised that in these communities there were organised groups, inspired by a spirit of pioneering Zionism; these could be used as a base upon which to develop Zionist activity, the focus of which was to be immigration to Eretz Israel. In 1945 the Jewish community in Libya numbered 30,000, in Tunisia 70,000, in Algeria 120,000 and in French Morocco about 180,000.

While Jewish attention throughout the world was concentrated on Europe, where the situation during the days of the Holocaust was coming to light, North Africa was not forgotten. David Shaltiel set out on a mission on behalf of the Jewish Agency during the second half of 1944. A letter to him from the head of the Immigration Department of the Jewish Agency indicates that the main purpose of his mission was immigration.¹ He reported from Algeria to the Political Department of the Jewish Agency and the Rescue Committee in Istanbul.² In his reports he asked for emissaries to be sent at once to North Africa. A few months later, he returned to the subject and wrote:

"I want to remind you that without our intervention, the greater part of Moroccan Jewry will not only be lost to Eretz Israel, it will simply disappear. Here in London I have submitted a detailed report on the situation and requested action. But I am repeating my appeal to you to send emissaries to North Africa and establish an official office for the Jewish Agency which will not only encourage and promote Jewish and Zionist activities, but also look after the interests of North African Jewry in their dealings with French and international authorities."³

Copies of this correspondence went to Avigur, who, whenever possible, kept himself fully informed about all matters involving immigration.

While the appropriate bodies, including the Mossad Le'Aliyah Beth, were concentrating their efforts in Europe, it appeared that the Jews in the Moslem countries were enjoying peace and tranquillity. There did

not seem to be any willingness to migrate to Palestine, and especially not secretly. Those who understood the situation realised, however, that the deteriorating situation in Palestine would have repercussions on the Jewish communities in Arab countries, and that their tranquillity would prove short-lived.

North African Jewry underwent a profound change after the war. Its national consciousness was sharpened by the Holocaust, by the role of Vichy France and by the situation in Palestine, which soured relations between Arabs and Jews in North Africa. The end of the war saw an increase in the spirit of national awakening among the populations of these countries, which strengthened their struggle for political independence. Many Jews began to fear the departure of the French from their colonies in North Africa.⁴

There was a renewal of Zionist activity after the setting up of an administration by the Allies in 1943. Branches of the Zionist Federation were opened in the main towns.⁵ The pioneering movement, whose most active section was Dror in Tunis, began preparing young people for immigration. Members learnt Hebrew, self-defence and agricultural work.⁶ The Betar movement operated its own network. "The Federation renewed its activities in 1944, with an executive committee of 11 members . . . there quickly emerged bitter differences of opinion amongst the various streams, which prevented continuous and effective operation. The main problem was the allocation of certificates to the would-be immigrants."⁷

The presence of the American Army in Morocco was not enough to disperse the anti-semitism spread by Vichy officials and military. Up to 1945, there was an increase in attacks on Jews.⁸ The situation was no better in Algeria. The anti-semitic legislation from the Vichy period was not automatically abolished under the American occupation. The local Jewish community, including the re-established Zionist Federation, fought hard to regain its rights. By October 1945, it was successful and Jewish rights were restored; Algerian Jews were given full equality, in other words, they once again became French citizens. In this, they were different from the Jews of Morocco and Tunisia, which were French colonies.

As will be shown below, this complex Zionist activity did not guarantee that the Jewish communities could focus their attention on immigration to Palestine. Training and education, especially of the youth, was necessary for an additional reason. In one respect, the Jews of North Africa were in the same position as the Holocaust survivors in Europe - Palestine was closed to them too and the quota of Mandatory certificates that the Government's immigration department was able to

allocate was extremely small.

For the purposes of organising illegal Aliyah to Palestine, North Africa had geographical advantages; the coastline was within easy reach of the main base in Marseilles. However, the idea of including North African Jews in its activities came rather late to the Mossad. One of its motives for doing so was to disprove the British claim that immigration to Palestine was simply to alleviate the temporary plight of European Jewry. Thus, according to Yanni Avidov, the operation in North Africa was launched to prove that immigration was not merely a solution for the poor and the persecuted.⁹

In political terms, Algeria became a French protectorate, with what was in effect a French administration, headed by a commissioner with the title "General Secretary of the Algerian Government". From 1946 to 1947, the French representative was M. Pelabon, who had a Jewish wife. All the security services were linked to France. Béranger was head of the counter-intelligence service (DST), which worked closely with the Mossad. Pelabon often used to express his hostility towards both the British and the Arabs. When the DST were told that the Mossad wanted to take immigrant ships from Algerian ports, in order to diversify their activities and increase the number of ports they could use, the security service in Paris warned the representative of the Mossad in Algeria and asked him to refrain from such activities. There were two good reasons for this: they were familiar with the Arab population and feared their reaction; and, second, there were many British agents working among the Arabs.

However, the attitude of the French authorities in Tunisia and Algeria to the Mossad's work was on the whole favourable - "so long as it is done with discretion", the DST told the Mossad. On the other hand, the attitude of the authorities in Morocco was hostile.

When Yanni Avidov went to North Africa as the official emissary of the Mossad, he found that Efraim Friedman Ben-Haim was already working there as emissary of the Halutz movement. Since the joint had not yet begun to operate in this area, the first task facing these two was to gain access to the leaders of the community, in order to find the means to carry out their objectives. At the same time, they established close contact with the local youth, upon whom they based most of their work and in particular clandestine or illegal immigration.

Avidov describes how, at the end of the war, when he had finished with his other work - undercover missions in Arab countries - he begged Avigur and everyone else involved in this kind of decision to send him to North Africa. Initially, he wanted to investigate the situation of the Jews there and prepare a report.¹⁰ His requests were

approved and he set off for Paris, where he waited for a visa as an agronomist wishing to study agricultural methods in a climate similar to that of Palestine. According to his visiting card, he was agronomist Ostrowsky, specialist in tropical agriculture. He knew no French.

There were already a few emissaries operating in North Africa on behalf of the Jewish Agency, and Avidov thought that with their help he would be able to make the contacts he needed. He tells of his contact with Efraim Friedman Ben-Haim:

"At night I landed at the airfield in Algiers, alone and almost dumb in this strange country, under the magnificent starry sky. As usual, without my saying a word, the taxi took me to the most luxurious hotel in town, the St Georges. A member of Nahalal [a large Palestine farming community] and an 'expert in tropical agriculture', I found myself in huge glittering halls, where the floor was completely covered with thick layers of carpets and rugs. Padded armchairs and sofas and every comfort. I tried to appear as though I was at home in such luxury, but my lack of French made it difficult. I could not make even the least request to the waiters standing around me . . . But this did not worry me too much. I had come here to get to know the Jews of North Africa and I was sure to find a common language with them once I had found my way to them. Efraim Friedman had arrived a short time before me and had already started to train a few youngsters to help us. He had also set up a branch of the Dror youth movement in Algiers.

"The Jews in Algeria felt insecure and therefore tried to get close to the authorities and gain support and trust in return for their loyalty. We could not trust people like this in our work. Obviously, we had to find reliable people who would hide our activities from the authorities, even though there was no Zionist movement or group sympathetic to our aims . . . There were some extremely rich families in the community, devoted to making money, although most of the Jews lived in very difficult circumstances, in hardship, filth, grinding poverty and disease. The wealthy and assimilated group lived in a suburb of French villas, whilst the poor Jews lived in the Casbah. This was an area where even the police had no control. For example, if a murderer was to hide there, the police would wait for him to come out, as though the laws and customs of the outside world did not apply there.

"The streets are about a metre wide and the upper storeys of the old houses almost touch each other. As you walk along one of these alleys, you feel you are in a tunnel. Every vile activity is carried out there in the open; next to an area full of brothels, there is a large sign, with the Hebrew inscription, 'This is the gateway of the Lord . . .'. It is an

ancient synagogue from which a network of narrow lanes radiate to form the Jewish quarter. The rays of the sun scarcely penetrate this teeming mass of poverty and filth. Most of the Jews we met there were old, infirm and paupers who had simply given up any hope of improving their situation. Every Jew with means, however slender, or with initiative would do anything to get out of the Casbah. When I saw how they lived here and in the other towns and heard about their life in Morocco, I concluded that there was no more time to write out reports. These Jews had to be rescued without delay from their dreadful poverty and humiliation. I started making plans to get them out of this hell as soon as possible."

One of the emissaries from the Jewish Agency, who worked in coordination with the Mossad, was known as Ben Yehuda. After laying the groundwork, he was obliged to return home for personal reasons. But fearing that all the work he had achieved would be lost without emissaries on the spot, he sent a telegram to the Mossad centre in Palestine in which he urgently requested a replacement.¹¹

During the last months of the war, a small group of pioneers from North Africa went to Palestine. They did their training on settlements of the HaKibbutz HaMeuchad movement of which Efraim Friedman Ben-Haim was a member, and were later among the founders of Kibbutz Regavim. These young men and women became a source of information and a pool of potential emissaries for this operation. One of these immigrants, Avraham Zarfati, provided a report together with recommendations on the state of the youth movements with regard to immigration from North Africa. As for emissaries, he suggested either himself or Y. Avrahami and proposed that the operation in Tunis be handled by Nadia Cohen.¹²

When Efraim Friedman Ben-Haim returned home from his mission, his report stated:

"In 1946 I was recruited by the HaKibbutz HaMeuchad movement for a mission to France but I informed them that I would not go there, but to North Africa. After much discussion, I left for France, to get from there to Algeria. Fisher, from the Jewish Agency, and Blumel in Paris found me a visa and cover as an emissary for the Jewish National Fund. Before leaving Paris, I met with Shaul and we had a long conversation about the possibilities of clandestine Aliyah.

"My first step upon arrival was to re-organise the small group of activists: two from Morocco, two from Tunisia and one from Algeria. A total of five people, including one woman, Nadia. The movement acquired a training farm . . . I set up a Hagana camp and taught them what I had learnt in the Palmach - unarmed combat, revolver shooting

- and we went on long marches to accustom them to move quickly when boarding ships.

"When Yanni Avidov joined me, the work expanded. Our first problem was to obtain residence permits for both of us. I remembered hearing from David Hacohen, of Solel Boneh, about an Algerian Jew who had lived in his house in Haifa with a group of underground workers, who were running the Free French broadcasting service. He now had a large shoe shop in Algiers. I went to see him and gave him regards from David Hacohen, which pleased him. I said to him, 'I want something from you; I want you to help us get residence permits for one year.' He told me that Eretz Israel was a good thing but not for North African Jews, but got us what we wanted.

"One of our first activities was to establish an immigration camp under the cover of a Jewish rest home. For this purpose we appointed a committee from the leaders of the community, to enable us to operate under its protection. It was not easy to get five or six Jews to sit together, because of the suspicion, jealousy and hatred between them. However, after considerable persuasion, they responded favourably to our pleas and the committee was formed with a dramatic flourish. We told them what our objective was and swore them to secrecy. They were intelligent adults but unsophisticated. One of them took a mezuzah [a small case containing Biblical texts, usually attached to the doors of a Jewish house] from his pocket, put it on the table and placed his hand on it; the others placed their hands on his.

"One of the committee, Zaga, gave me money and a truck. We started to work. The first assignment was to find a suitable place to assemble the immigrants. We found a Jew with a farm in the hills by the coast and leased land from him for a few coppers. Young men from the movement were recruited to prepare the camp. I then set out with Nadia, who had come from Tunis, to look for Jews.

"At first no one believed we would succeed. Even Yanni did not believe it. But we maintained that there were Jews who would listen to us. The first place we visited was Biskra in the south. It was Sabbath. I knew one Jew there. In the morning I was called to read the Law in the synagogue. A meeting of the Jewish National Fund was called in the same place. Nadia spoke in French and made a great impression. These people were hearing a woman making a speech for the first time in their lives. We had started . . .

"I sent a letter in code to two friends in Morocco, at the Hagana camp, that we had begun our operations and they had to bring us immigrants. On Passover Eve, Nadia, Rafael Hamel, from Kibbutz Cabri, and I, together with eight local members of the movement, set

out to prepare the place. It was a very small town, 175 kilometres from Algiers, in a romantic spot, with a steep hill going down to the sea, covered with undergrowth. Nadia stayed with the men at the camp and I travelled from town to town seeking Jews who would like to go to Eretz Israel.

"Those who stayed behind did back-breaking work, putting up tents and doing everything possible to make life possible there. Members of the movement from Morocco and Tunisia started to operate according to the plan and people began to arrive. The members from the Hagana course in Morocco, in particular, were very active and they sent convoys of immigrants to the Morocco-Algeria border for us.

"We lived on loans received from individual Jews, including members of the committee. Occasionally we would get something from the Mossad centre in Paris. . . . Sometimes the people went hungry. Nadia and Rafael had to face serious problems. Fights broke out between people in the camp and we decided to set up a guard duty. We selected the strongest men and trained them to keep order. I must also add that there were cases of criminal and immoral behaviour around the camp, which did not make it easier to keep order.

"The team we had working with us had reached us at great personal risk. One of the two members of the Hagana course used to escort the convoys across the border, a very dangerous procedure. Even contact with the committee members was difficult - they were suspicious and terrified. The driver of our truck also worked very hard and made the 350 kilometre round trip through the mountains to Algiers every night."

At this time, the Joint and the Mossad did not see eye to eye about Aliyah from North Africa. In so far as the Joint was prepared to help, it was on the express condition that it would be in the area of "social assistance", with no allocation for the work of the Mossad - clandestine immigration to Palestine. The Joint representative in North Africa sent numerous complaints to his organisation's head office in Paris about the terrible conditions in the camps where the Jews were assembled.¹³

The Joint then sent another representative, Mrs Ben Nette, to try to stem the Aliyah movement.

"She asked me, as representative of the Mossad", wrote Avidov, "to make these Jews return to their homes. She said that she knew these people, and if we did not stop this traffic at once, rumours would reach Morocco and Tunisia and Jews would come in their thousands. The Joint was providing assistance in Europe and had no budget at all for North Africa. I tried to convince her that neither she nor the rich men of North Africa understood this migration of a whole people to the coast, with the ambition to go to their homeland. It was clear to me that

nothing would stop them. They would come in their thousands and all the organisations would have to take care of them; we, the Mossad, would no longer be working alone. I told her that she was free to try to move them from here but I was certain that her attempts would fail.

"My words, and the sight of the Jews who were lying in the streets, full of hope of redemption, made her change her dogmatic views and she became interested in our plans. . . . She was from Casablanca and knew North Africa well. She understood that by our work we were not only destroying the status of the Jews who would be leaving their businesses, homes and background, but also causing a disaster for the entire Jewish population. And yet she did not have the courage to tell the people coming to us to return home, and went back to Paris."¹⁴

The Mossad workers were kept busy finding resources and making contacts with the appropriate people in the administration. Efraim Friedman Ben-Haim tells of one unconventional way of establishing essential contacts:

"Since the wealthy Jews were not yet ready to assist us, we had to go to members of the underworld for help. In one case, we made contact with a Jew who was an international criminal. His nickname was Algiers, after his native city, and he used to go about with a gun in his pocket. The French police were looking for him. He was involved in many rackets including gambling houses and was, in short, a vicious criminal. On the other hand, he had a big heart when it concerned his people. Ironically, he was one of the very few who helped without expecting any profit from us, not even a penny. Perhaps by this he wanted to change his world. At that time he was about forty years old, tall and strong, with primitive ideas and good-hearted. Later on, he settled in Israel where he hoped to find a new life.

"He introduced us to non-Jews who were involved in smuggling and we began exhausting negotiations with them concerning the hire of boats. We needed the boats to transfer the people to the ship, which could not anchor close to the shore. After we had reached agreement, at a very high price, they went back on their word and demanded double. We had no choice - they squeezed us. It had been arranged for the ship to appear that evening, to choose the right spot to anchor, and then leave at once. She was to return later that night to the place that we had chosen. We were to light bonfires on shore to help the skipper find the right place. Despite all these arrangements, it did not work out. The boat lost its way and drifted about at sea. There was a small town 38 kilometres from our camp, called Tenès, which had a military port and we were afraid that our vessels would be discovered. The excitement in the camp was intense."¹⁵

The Immigrant Ship "Yehuda Halevi"

The Mossad Le'Aliyah Beth began to prepare ships which could be sent to one of the North African ports in order to pick up Jews. This is the story of one such ship.

In 1877, *The Earl of Zetland*, 250 tons was launched in one of the Scottish ports. She plied the North Sea for 61 years, until the outbreak of World War Two, when even this old lady was put to war work. In 1946, she was taken out of service and tied up on a pier in Aberdeen. One day, a Greek shipping merchant called Pandelis turned up, inspected this rust bucket and bought her. The ship was registered in Panama and renamed *Anna*.¹⁶ In December 1946, she sailed from Aberdeen for Marseilles and anchored in the Mossad naval base, where she was refitted for her new task of transporting immigrants. The crew consisted mainly of Spanish Republican sailors, under their skipper Willy Laguna. Israel Horev was the commander and the escorts were Eitan Shaposnikov and Ya'akov Netzer-Melnitzer, the radio operator.

Israel Horev, from Kibbutz Sedot Yam, was an experienced sailor, who had acquired his knowledge from the Palyam courses and from service on foreign ships. He was recruited to the Mossad when immigration activities were resumed after the war and served as commander of the first illegal boats, *Dalin* and *Nettuno*.¹⁷ On 10 May 1947, the former *Earl of Zetland*, now renamed Hagana ship *Yehuda Halevi*, arrived at the pre-arranged point off the coast.

"The sea was quiet and good", Horev relates, "and we could see the smoke of the bonfires. We dropped anchor and then Yanni Avidov appeared and said, 'No boats, no sailors, but we've got people and you have to take them' . . . I lowered our boats, two wooden boats and two rubber dinghies with two Spanish sailors in each. We began to take the people aboard - they were disorganised, without possessions, without food, about 400 of them. Suddenly Avidov shouted, 'The gendarmes are here. Clear off!' We loaded the people in the boats, raised anchor and escaped to sea."¹⁸

This is how Yanni described the incident:

"We had begun to move the people from the camp to the embarkation point. I set out on foot, followed by all the youngsters. Our only vehicle was to bring the women, children and elderly. It was a rough journey down a steep slope and it had to make the run several times. Yanni was on the beach with a couple of locals. We had begun to put the first 300 immigrants on board the ship when suddenly something went wrong. The French army had a base nearby and had

noticed some unusual activity. They sent out a patrol from Tenès which unfortunately reached our camp just when the truck was starting to move off. The French officer asked one of the escorts what was happening. Our man was sharp and quick-thinking and took his time answering in order to delay the patrol for as long as possible. The soldiers were insistent, repeated their questions and then climbed into the truck. The escort was able to make the passengers understand that they should get off and scatter, but since they were elderly people and children, they did not succeed.

"The vehicle and the French patrol inside it reached the embarkation point where they met me. They asked me what I was doing there, but I managed to evade them and ran towards the sea, hoping we still might be able to embark the people who were assembled on the beach. The soldiers must have seen us but apparently were frightened of following us because there were so few of them. They laid an ambush and sent to Tenès for reinforcements. This was our lucky break - we were able to load all 400 of the people on the ship.

"Although this was an achievement, we suffered a serious setback because of the ambush. In accordance with our plans, I had sent for Rafael Hamel to join the ship as an escort. On his way to us, he was caught by the escort and arrested. Yanni was also arrested as he made his way from the beach back to the main road, after the passengers had embarked. The army started to investigate and followed the tracks back to our camp. About 250 people were arrested and taken to Tenès, but the ship got away."¹⁹

On the next day, Algiers was seething with anticipation. Yanni, who had escaped over the sand dunes, met the members of the committee. Pressure was applied to release the people and after two days they were allowed to go home. The committee were both excited and angry. They were angry with the Mossad workers who themselves realised that the committee members' attitude to their enterprise could not be trusted, and that at the first setback they would want to cancel the whole agreement. They even wanted the emissaries to leave. The partnership between them and the Mossad was finished.

The Mossad emissaries continued to work, thanks to instructions sent to the Algerian authorities by the security services in Paris. However, the French Commissioner in North Africa did not always follow these instructions because of his fear of Arab reaction.

The news about the ship that had taken the Jews to Palestine had spread and other Jews began to show an interest. According to Yanni Avidov:

"We were confronted with a new problem; the French had begun to

follow us in earnest. We reported this to Paris, and Mossad headquarters sent a leading French Jew to smooth out matters between us and the local authorities. He had a good relationship with Pelabon, but we did not believe his intervention would be effective. We wanted direct contact, so one evening, Yanni and I went in secret to the Commissioner's residence. We were able to hold a serious conversation with him, in which he said that he thought the British were involved. They were making trouble in order to get the Arabs to rise up against the French. However, the whole matter was sensitive and complicated and France could not allow herself to seek difficulties with the Arabs. He therefore asked us not to continue with our work.

"We would not give way. We proved to him that there was a mass movement of Jews wanting to leave for Palestine and asked to be allowed to organise it and channel it into an acceptable framework. In this way it would not harm the Jews or damage French relations with the local population. Pelabon agreed with this approach, but asked for caution and restraint. With his help, we made contact with Béranger, head of the French security services in Algeria. It was decided that we would vacate the camp at the end of August 1947."²⁰

There are various accounts of the rest of the *Yehuda Halevi's* voyage. The following version is taken from the official history of the Hagana.

"According to the plan, the immigrants from the *Yehuda Halevi* were supposed to transfer to the lifeboat of the *Mordei HaGeta'ot* at sea, but this was not done; the escorts had only been appointed at the last moment and had not received precise instructions on which course to steer. According to their testimony, they had been told to take the shortest possible route to Eretz Israel. During the voyage, they decided on their own authority to stop off at Palermo for three days. Harbour authorities came aboard and saw what the cargo consisted of. The *Yehuda Halevi* was followed for the entire journey by a British destroyer. The commander had been given orders to organise resistance to British attempts to board the ship outside Palestinian territorial waters. However, the commander's report shows that the resistance ceased very quickly. The destroyer rammed the ship and the immigrants immediately threw away their sticks and ran. This reaction indicates the poor preparation that they had been given and the lack of understanding between them and the escorts."²¹

One of these immigrants, Shlomo Peretz, relates:

"I sailed on the first immigrant ship from North Africa, the *Yehuda Halevi*, which sailed from Algeria to Eretz Israel with 430 passengers, men, women and children, all from Morocco.

"The crew and the skipper were Spanish non-Jews. Two Hagana

members from Eretz Israel were responsible for the radio and everything that happened aboard the ship. The skipper had a bill of lading to transfer workers to Alexandria, in Egypt. The ship was small. There were wooden shelves fitted, 120cm. by 60cm., which were used as sleeping quarters for four people; these shelves were arranged on several levels. We slept just like sardines, the conditions were terrible. There were better conditions in the hold for families with small children.

"The ship sailed from Algeria to Italy, and stopped in Palermo for 24 hours to buy coal, food and water. But they did not let her go because the local authorities had been told that there were illegal immigrants aboard bound for Palestine. They interrogated and photographed the skipper, and two hours later allowed us to sail.

"When we left Palermo, we were followed by a warship from the British Navy at a distance of a few kilometres. Four days later we were spotted by two RAF planes, which photographed the ship several times. On the next day the British warship approached us and stopped at a distance of about 200 metres. The ship manoeuvred a few times, stopping no more than 20 metres away. A loudhailer asked where we were headed for in three languages, English, French and German. One of the Hagana men answered in German that we were going to Alexandria. The answer came back that we were 200 miles from Alexandria.

"The ship progressed slowly from then on and we passed Alexandria. On the next day the British warship told us that we had passed Alexandria, but we did not answer them and continued on our way. A few hours later, we could see another British warship that had come as a reinforcement. Once again we were asked if we were headed for Haifa. The escorts on our ship replied that we were only going to Tel Aviv. The British asked us to continue with them to Haifa and from there, so they said, we would be transferred for a few months to Cyprus. After that we would be released. We did not reply to them. In the evening two more warships joined the other two that were shadowing us. When it was dark, we threw into the sea several boxes of food, weapons, typewriters and secret material belonging to the two Hagana men, our escorts. . . .

"Preparations and plans were made for the battle. Mothers with small children went down into the hold. We, the young men, stood on the deck in small groups, armed with bottles and planks of wood. We were given strips of bandage and each group had a bucket of water to use in case the British fired tear gas.

"At seven o'clock in the morning, we were emotionally ready to fight

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the British. At that moment we were surrounded by five British warships, with their guns pointing at us. At eight o'clock, they closed in on us, to a distance of five metres. We could see the sailors lined up ready, with full battle kit and firearms.

"The moment was approaching. We were told to start singing 'Hatikva' and continued to sing other songs for a quarter of an hour. The British sailors remained stiff as logs, waiting for us to finish singing. Three of our boys stood next to the ship's engineer. Their job was to smash the engine, if told to do so by the Hagana men, and make it completely useless. When we had finished singing, the British ships were no more than half a metre from us on each side.

"We received the order to fight, to attack the sailors with bottles and planks. After a few moments, we were jolted and shaken by the British ships which had started to ram us from both sides. There was a very powerful blow, as though our ship was going to sink and then, at the same time, the sailors were upon us from every direction, spraying us with tear gas and spreading out all over the ship. The three boys on duty by the engine did their work and put the ship out of service. After they had overcome us, the British tried to start the engine, but without success. They had to tow us to Haifa.

"All this happened within Palestinian territorial waters.

"In Haifa port, we were met by a large number of armed British soldiers, who kept guard over us when we were taken off our ship and transferred to a prison ship. We reached Cyprus under heavy guard after an 18 hour voyage and had to undergo a thorough examination of both our bodies and possessions."²²

"Shivat Zion"

"Since we had promised Pelabon, the French Commissioner, to clear the Jews from the camps as quickly as possible," wrote Efraim Friedman Ben-Haim, "we asked the Mossad in Paris to send us another ship. While we were waiting for one, we carried on working. We were now receiving help from one of the leaders of the community, a very wealthy religious Jew with an extremely large and widespread family and excellent connections - he was in fact head of the Chouraqui clan. One of the members of his family had a non-Jewish friend who owned a brickworks situated in a small cove on the coast, about 19 kilometres from Algiers. Out of friendship, and without any expectation of financial gain, this man allowed us to use the cove and the road leading to the coast. We decided that this would be our embarkation point.

"After keeping us waiting in suspense, the Mossad told us that we would be getting the ship in July, two months after the voyage of the *Yehuda Halevi*. I went to Béranger, head of the DST, to tell him what was going to happen and to ask for his help. He took me to an inner room in his office and opening a large map, pointed out to me all the gendarmerie positions, including the secret ones. Together we worked out a route through these obstacles without getting caught. At the end of the conversation, he said to me, 'If anything happens, I'll do my best to help.'

"We were afraid that we would fail. We took a car and went over the route several times so that we would be completely familiar with it. We also sent a Jewish fisherman to Marseilles - one of the few Jews in that line of work - who said that he knew the coast like the back of his hand. He was supposed to sail on the ship and navigate her to the embarkation point. The night of the operation finally came. We set out at the head of the first convoy, which was also the largest. We had enlisted the entire Chouraqui clan, who came in their private cars, driven by professional and trustworthy chauffeurs. The first convoy reached the coast safely. The ship had also turned up on time.

"After about 450 people had gone aboard, I sent for the others but they were late. The night was passing quickly; it was already three o'clock and we were worried that we would be caught in the light of day. After consideration, we ordered the ship to sail. The latecomers had to go back with heavy heart."²³

Yanni Avidov completes the account:

"The first convoy of 300 people set off to the embarkation point, with Chouraqui and myself at the front. On the way we saw an unforgettable sight - all the police observation posts on the coast road from Barki to Algiers (40 kilometres) and from Algiers to the brickworks were empty. There was not one policeman to be seen along the whole road. It was as though the road had been given over to the Jews who were returning to their homeland that night. Small cars taking the passengers from Algiers to the embarkation point were travelling back and forth along the wide, empty road, as though in complete control.

"The ship arrived on time and, following the signals that we flashed from the works, she approached the pre-arranged spot with wonderful accuracy. The first boat slid cautiously up the beach and one of the escorts leapt out - he was one of the eight boys who had been imprisoned in Greece and whose release we had worked so hard to arrange. We embraced and he told me he was happy to be able to thank me in person for what we had done for him. He also brought greetings

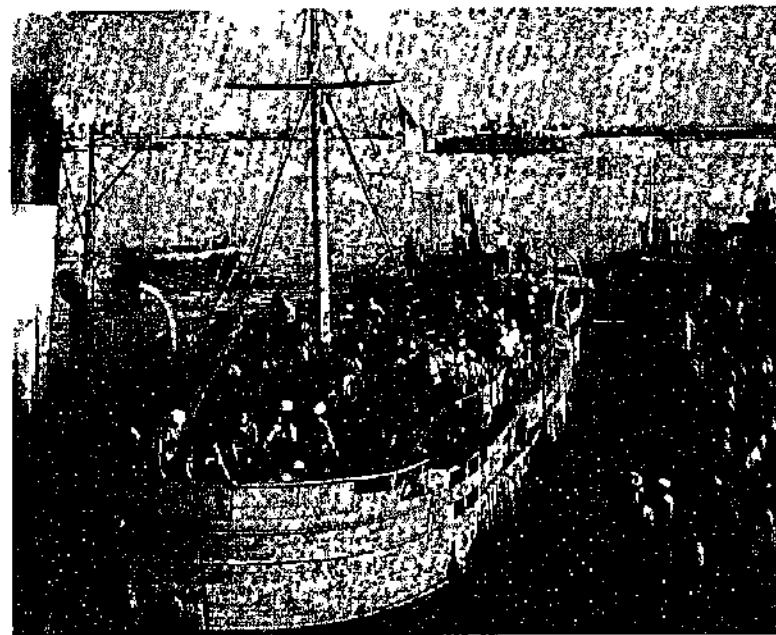
from home, which were so welcome in this foreign place.

"We started to work. Boat after boat rowed in silence back to the ship. The owner of the brickworks stood with us up to his neck in the water and helped to get people into the boats. By dawn we had finished with the embarkation and the ship sailed away. We concealed all traces of the night's activity and then watched the ship disappear in the first light of dawn. It was also time for us to leave this place. I went to say goodbye to the Frenchman; we embraced with great emotion. I offered him a good sum of money for his help and trouble, but he refused to accept it. He pushed me into Chouraqui's car and we were off."²⁴

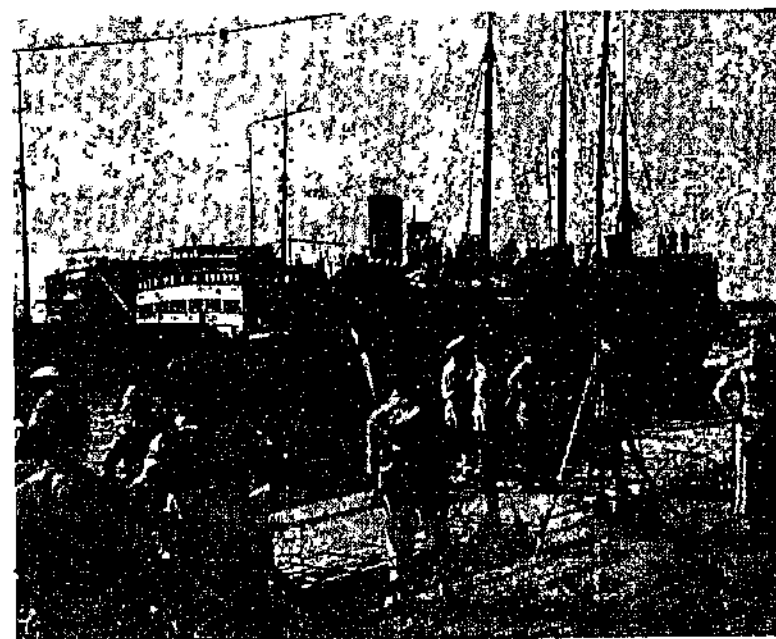
Shivat Zion sailed on 16 July 1947 from Algeria under the command of David Maimon (Snapir), with Michael Harari as radio operator. Formerly the *Ora*, the vessel weighed 250 tons and carried 411 passengers, including 120 babies and children. On the following day, the immigrant ship *Yod Dalet Halalei Geshet Haziw* set out from southern Italy. Her assignment was to rendezvous with the *Shivat Zion* in perfect sea conditions and to take on her passengers under the cover of one ship helping another. However this transfer did not take place. The commander of *Yod Dalet Halalei Geshet Haziw* claimed later that he had been given contradictory orders and that *Shivat Zion* had not arrived at the meeting point (Cape Sidheros to north east of Crete).²⁵ On the other hand, Ada Sereni, in her broadcast to Tel Aviv on 5 August, claimed that Lazer (Eliezer Klein-Tal) had not carried out orders and asked for him to be court-martialled.²⁶

The *Exodus* affair was taking place at the same time. Among the Jews of Palestine there was a fear that the British Government had decided upon a harsh policy and was determined to return all illegals to their port of embarkation, and not to Cyprus. While they were at sea, the escorts aboard *Shivat Zion* were informed by radio about the return of the *Exodus* to France and were given a double order: (1) there should be no forcible resistance to the seizure of the ship by the Royal Navy, in order to preserve strength and resources for determined resistance at the time of transfer to a deportation ship in Haifa; (2) the ship's engines should be sabotaged if it appeared that the enemy was not taking her directly to Palestine. The escort were also ordered to join the immigrants being taken to Cyprus, so that they would be with them if they were taken to an unknown destination.

The ship was detected by the Royal Navy at the start of her voyage and shadowed by a destroyer. At four o'clock in the morning on 28 July, she was seized by British troops without resistance. The authorities were reluctant to aggravate the problem, and thus the immigrants on board the *Shivat Zion* won. They were taken to Cyprus



20. Immigrant ship *Shivat Zion* which sailed from Algeria, July 1947



21. Immigrant ship *Yod Dalet Halalei Geshet Haziw* at Haifa, July 1947

on the same day, together with the passengers from *Yod Dalei Halalei Gesher Haziv*.²⁷

The official announcement said that although the authorities were not obliged to send illegal immigrant ships to Cyprus, they had decided to do so in this instance.²⁸

The immigrants from *Shivat Zion* were sent to camps 61 and 62. According to the report prepared by a British field security officer, which fell into the hands of the Hagana, the North Africans had not been well received by the other camp internees.²⁹

There was a shipping agent who had cooperated with the Mossad in 1941 in Istanbul, called Dandria, described elsewhere in this book as the "Fat Man". He bought a small vessel which was fitted out in Marseilles, renamed *Kaf Tet BeNovember*, and sent to North Africa to pick up immigrants. Everything went according to plan. The ship dropped anchor. The first 50 children had been taken aboard, and the hundreds of other people were waiting on the beach, when the Mossad workers and the sailors were surprised by the police. The ship got away but developed engine trouble and stopped at Sardinia, where the skipper was arrested. This ship sailed from France with 680 immigrants and eventually reached Corsica with great difficulty. The repairs took a long time.

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An Unsuccessful Attempt

On the evening of 6 November, a fishing boat off the coast of Algiers encountered an unidentified vessel and warned the local police of an apparent attempt to embark hundreds of passengers. By the time that the three policemen turned up, some 80 people had succeeded in boarding the ship, which had anchored some distance from the shore. They were transferred to the ship in four small fishing smacks, each of which made two journeys carrying ten immigrants at a time. A British report says that the local authorities picked up the people waiting on the beach and took them back to Algiers, where they were dispersed.³⁰

Out of the 596 would-be immigrants on this ship there were ten Jews from Algeria and 39 from Tunisia; the others had crossed the border from Morocco. A large part of this group were stateless and the British report suggests that they were originally from Eastern Europe, having reached Morocco through Spain. Some of the women and children were accommodated with local Jewish families, others in a Jewish school, with the assistance of a Zionist organisation. Many stayed in various camps, each holding 100-150 people, which were located outside the city. The Governor had intended to exercise his powers

against these illegals and send them back across the border, but some of the Jews threatened a hunger strike. One of their leaders was summoned for a talk and warned that the authorities "would not be able to help them if this behaviour did not stop at once, because it was stirring up strong feelings amongst the Moslems".

This operation went off without a hitch, according to the report, and although the police had been told about it on 4 November, they had not noticed anything. The women and children had been transported in trucks throughout the afternoon, as though they were going on an outing to the sea. The men had come in private cars and hidden in dry river beds or among the dunes. The ship itself arrived after dark and anchored at some distance from the shore, from where she was barely visible. The local patrol boat called out to intercept her was unable to locate her by radar.³¹

The Mossad name for this ship was *HaPortzim*.

Efraim remained as the senior Mossad representative in North Africa after Yanni Avidov was obliged to leave for pressing personal reasons.³²

After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Mossad emissaries returned to North Africa to continue the immigration to Israel.

With the beginning of waves of mass immigration, the number of training groups increased throughout the Maghreb. In addition to Dror, which operated within the framework of the Hagana, there were Hashomer Hatzair, Habonim, Bnei Akiva and Betar, all hoping to organise the Aliyah of the Jewish youth of North Africa. There was not always an atmosphere of cooperation between these movements, however, or between them and the Zionist Federation, which had gradually been turned by pressure of events into an immigration office, the main function of which was to carry out orders from Jerusalem.

This was the view of Michael Abitbul in his study of immigration from North Africa after the establishment of the State of Israel.

In the years 1948-49, eight per cent of all immigrants to Israel came from North Africa, and by 1952 the proportion had jumped to over 14 per cent. In the years 1952-56, at the beginning of the struggle for political independence in North Africa, immigration from that region took on the dimensions of a mass movement; in 1955, it constituted 87 per cent of all immigration to Israel. The overwhelming majority of these settlers came from Morocco. By

the end of the 1960s, it was possible to determine that two thirds of Moroccan Jewry had settled in Israel, as opposed to half the Tunisian Jews who had come and an even smaller proportion of Algerians.³³

By the same author
*Voyage to Freedom: An Episode in the
Illegal Immigration to Palestine*
(with Ze'ev Tsahor)

SECOND EXODUS

The Full Story of Jewish Illegal
Immigration to Palestine, 1945-1948

Ze'ev Venia Hadari

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev



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Glossary

Aliyat Noar - an organization dealing with the immigration of children to Israel

Betar - a right-wing youth movement, associated with Etzel (see below).

Dror - a left-wing Zionist youth movement.

Etzel - (acronym) the underground movement led by Menachem Begin, which fought against the British.

General Zionists - a right-wing political party.

Gideons - radio operators in the Mossad Le'Aliya Bet (see below).

Gordonia - a social-democratic youth movement.

Goyim - Jewish term for non-Jewish people.

Ha'aretz - a daily Hebrew newspaper

Hagana - the popular military organization of the Jewish population.

Hamashbir - the distribution and supply organization of the Histadrut (see below)

Hashomer Hatza'ir - kibbutz movement of a revolutionary nature.

Histadrut - the umbrella organization of the labour movement in Israel.

Irgun - shortened form of Irgun Zva'i Leumi (see below).

Irgun Zva'i Leumi - full name of Etzel (see above).

Jewish Agency Directorate - this body acted as the unofficial government of the Jewish settlement.

Joint - shortened form of American Jewish Joint Distribution Agency, a Jewish relief organization in Eastern Europe.

Kibbutz Hameuchad - kibbutz movement of an activist nature.

Lechi - an extremist underground organization which split from Etzel.

Mapai - moderate, social-democratic party.

Mizrachi - moderate religious party.

Moshav - cooperative form of settlement.

Mossad - shortened form of Mossad Le'Aliya Bet (see below)

Mossad Le'Aliya Bet - the organization which operated unauthorized immigration.

Palmach - the organized force of the Hagana (see above).

Palyam - the naval force of the Palmach (see above)

Poale Agudat Yisrael - an extremist religious party.

Poale Zion - an extremist left-wing party.

Revisionist movement - a right-wing party.

Yishuv - the Jews in Palestine up to 1948.

Zim - the national shipping company of Israel

Zionist Congress - conference of the Zionist movement.

Introduction

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The wonder that attended the birth of Israel in 1948 has not faded; on the contrary, an increasing number of people seek to understand the events that led to independent statehood. Research into this period has recently revealed the decisive role played by the "illegal" immigration of Jews to Palestine in 1945-48, when the country was under British Mandatory rule. Britain's subsequent withdrawal left the sparse Yishuv - the Jewish Community - to defend itself in its struggle for survival in the War of Independence.

Despite the central function of unauthorized immigration in this story, knowledge of its workings has been scant. The literature has not dealt with the more complex historical analysis of this subject, many of the details of which have still to be revealed when classified files are finally opened. The few studies of the history of unauthorized immigration according to accepted standards of research have been made by non-Israeli historians. Thus, the moving force behind this effort, the Mossad Le'Aliya Beth (organization for "Immigration B", or unauthorized immigration) has not yet been discussed exhaustively. How and why tens of thousands of homeless Jews were conveyed to Palestine, in the face of almost universal opposition, has not yet been clearly explained. How this enormous operation was funded and how it was run by people of no maritime experience remains to be revealed, as do the details of the secret negotiations with governments who permitted the "illegals" to pass through their territory, how the ships were purchased, and more.

Unauthorized immigration began with the end of the Second World War in 1945 and continued until Israel became a state in 1948. It passed through four main periods:

August - December 1945 The first eight boats arrived from Italy and Greece and nearly all their passengers (approximately 1,040) managed to enter Palestine without being caught by the British).

January - July 1946 Eleven boats brought 10,500 immigrants who were interned in the British detention camp at Athlit and released shortly afterwards.

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August 1946 - December 1947 The beginning of the expulsion of the immigrants to Cyprus, the U.N. decision and the all-out Arab offensive against Israel. During this time thirty-five ships brought 51,700 immigrants, the vast majority of whom were sent to detention camps in Cyprus. There were heroic episodes during this period, beginning with the *Exodus* affair in July 1947 and culminating in the voyage of the two *Pans*. These were the *Pan York* and the *Pan Crescent* renamed *Kibbutz Galuyot* (Ingathering of the Exiles) and *Atzma'ut* (Independence).

December 1947 - May 1948 Ten boats arrived during the War of Independence with 6,000 immigrants. On 17th May 1948, the two last ships, *Medinat Yisrael* (State of Israel) and *Nitzahon* (Victory) reached the coast of Tel-Aviv to be welcomed by an aerial bombardment.

This book does not try to deal with all the problems, but focuses on one operation out of many - the voyage of the *Pans*. These two boats sailed from Romania in December 1947 carrying 15,236 unauthorized immigrants. They were caught by the British and their passengers transferred to Cyprus.

On the surface, it is a routine story, another account of Jewish refugees making their difficult way home. However, in certain respects the affair of the *Pans* was the climax of unauthorized immigration. The head of the Mossad Le'Aliya Bet, Shaul Avigur, said that the number of immigrants on the ships was greater than the entire annual quota allowed by the British into Palestine. The organization required for the transportation of such a large number of people made it the biggest operation in the history of the Jewish community in Palestine. The drama of the *Pans* was acted out by world leaders at the highest level. In the U.S. President Harry S. Truman and Secretary of State George C. Marshall were involved; in Great Britain, Prime Minister Clement Attlee and Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin, and in the Zionist movement, Chaim Weizmann, David Ben-Gurion, Moshe Sharett (Shertok), Nahum Goldmann and Golda Meir (Meyerson). In addition, the heads of state in Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Italy, France and apparently the U.S.S.R. were involved in the affair.

Surprisingly, there was complete unanimity between Western leaders and some of the heads of the Zionist movement in their opposition to the departure of these ships. Nor were the Communist leaders in the U.S.S.R. and Romania happy about the operation; it was receiving too much publicity, influential people were against it and

only a small group of Israelis, unknown and without support, obstinately continued to work for this operation which had no political support.

The story took place during the critical time between the UN. decision in favour of the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine and the outbreak of the War of Independence. The obscure, fluid political situation produced second thoughts in some countries, including the U.S. and made the prospects for the state increasingly doubtful. Bringing the ships at this time, in the face of active opposition by the U.S., Great Britain and, of course, the Arabs, was a crucial decision. This book examines the forces at play in the departure of two refugee ships from Eastern Europe to Israel.

The idea of writing it came from the late Shaul Avigur, head of the Mossad Le'Aliya Bet. Shaul had been involved with the security of the Yishuv for over sixty years and in recognition of his important work, some of which is still classified, he was appointed head of the Mossad Le'Aliya Bet on its foundation in 1938. Even before his official appointment, from as early as 1934, he had been responsible for dozens of ships carrying tens of thousands of unauthorized immigrants from all over the world. After the establishment of the state, when he held a senior position in the Ministry of Defence, he was involved with immigration from enemy countries. And yet, of all the episodes he had participated in, he chose to write a book on the *Pans*.

Before his death, he told some of his close friends about the book and asked for their help. In a conversation with Ze'ev Hadari and others in 1977, he mooted the idea of writing the history of unauthorized immigration as a comprehensive and wide-ranging research project, and showed them the draft outline of a book on the *Pans*. He did not live to write his book and after his death he left a mass of documents, interviews and a draft outline, including twenty lines of notes which were to become the chapter headings for this book.

It is difficult to imagine what form the book would have taken had it been written by Shaul Avigur. It is important to emphasize that it would not have been a collection of memoirs like many books on unauthorized immigration written by immigrants, ship commanders or Mossad emissaries. Shaul was humble, almost ascetic, in his private life and always avoided publicity, and he would not have written a book in order to glorify himself and his exploits. The *Pans* affair was not Shaul Avigur's most important operation and it is hard to believe that he wanted to write an *apologia*. Part of his draft deals with

opposition to the voyage of the *Pans* by his beloved brother-in-law, Moshe Sharett, the second Prime Minister of Israel. The close relationship they enjoyed and his sensitivity towards Sharett's historical image and reputation would not have allowed him to do this. Shaul Avigur intended to write a monograph dealing openly and frankly with the *Pans* affair, using documentary sources, in order to explain, by means of one issue in the history of immigration which to a great extent was its climax, the importance of "illegal" immigration to Israel, and the ways in which it was brought about.

In writing this book, Ze'ev (Venia) Hadari, who was at that time Shaul Avigur's assistant and worked with him at Mossad HQ in Paris, has collaborated with Ze'ev Tsahor, a historian specializing in modern Jewish history. This is not a partnership in which the man who "made history" told his story and the historian turned it into a book, but a joint attempt to understand the affair objectively and to produce a complete, integrated picture.

To this end, there were many interviews with Mossad emissaries, ship commanders, immigrants and members of British Intelligence; research literature and memoirs were used as well as newspapers from that time in Israel, Great Britain and the U.S. This material was used mainly for the purposes of illustration, to understand the spirit of that age and to reinforce the story of the operation, but most of the research was based on documentary sources, such as original documents kept in Israel and Great Britain. In some sections of this book these documents are left to speak for themselves and are part of the story. Other important documents are appended in full.

Many people helped in the preparation of this book with encouragement, assistance and reference to documents and sources; evidence of this is the large amount of material on unauthorized immigration and especially on the *Pans* that was collected by the authors.

Thanks are due to the staff of the Hagana Archives, the Israel National Archives, I.D.F. Archives, the Ben-Gurion Institute Archives and the Public Records Office in London for their patience and help. Special thanks for their active cooperation are due to Chaim Sarid, Gershon Rivlin, Chaim Zamir, Dr. Gedalia Jung and Dr. Meir Avizohar.

CHAPTER ONE

In-between Days

A FLUID WORLD

The months leading up to the declaration of the State of Israel in May 1948 were the most decisive in the history of Zionism. It was impossible to predict at the outset what turn events would take. Everything was open. The range of possible solutions to the complex situation in Palestine could have included the whole spectrum of contradictory aims at play in the area, from an independent Arab state to the establishment of a Jewish state in all of Western Palestine.

The most fateful events took place as though in a fog. Everyone was aware that they were living in an interregnum. The Second World War had just ended, leaving mankind shattered and wounded – personally, culturally and economically. The Holocaust inflicted upon the Jewish people showed the depths to which humanity had sunk at a time when education and progress had been expected to bring prosperity to a world where the arts would flourish and human and social relations prosper. Enveloped in this fog were the political processes which everyone could sense but no one could apprehend. The countries of Eastern Europe were under the control of the Red Army, but the process that was to sweep them behind the Iron Curtain was still fluid and the Communist regimes had not yet closed their grip on them. The British were about to give up India, but the dissolution of the Empire was still not apparent. Disturbances and disorder in the Arab countries had not yet attained concrete political significance but contributed to the growing turbulence between two distinct ages.

So did the Holocaust leave turbulence in its wake. The six million – over a third of the Jewish people – who were destroyed in it took with them into the gas chambers the social and cultural traditions and the creativity of a people which had sustained its uniqueness for centuries, enriched the societies around it and contributed to the culture of Europe and America. The Jewish civilization that had been extinguished was also the wellspring of the Zionist movement. Despite

VOYAGE TO FREEDOM

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Immigration to Palestine

Ze'ev Venia Hadari
and
Ze'ev Tsahor

1985



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