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Maapilim from North Africa

by Israel Charkowsky

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THE VESSEL that was later given the name of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi and was to be used for transporting immigrants from North Africa to Palestine, was [redacted] interestingly enough, through a Greek intermediary. She was an old [redacted] with forty years at sea behind her, and she just managed to limp into Marseilles harbour after fighting her way through a severe storm. In France she was refitted as an immigrant [redacted] although not one of us knew as yet what route she would be on or who her passengers would be. For the time being we went on with the work of fitting her out [redacted] Utilizing the knowledge we had gained from our service with the immigrant fleet, we built several tiers of broad [redacted] as bunks, installed water [redacted] and made other [redacted] arrangements.

It was as the work was drawing to a close that we first heard that [redacted] A special [redacted] from there and came [redacted] (pseudonym of a member of the [redacted] of Rabbis Halevi, who was the Mossad Aliyah shaliach) with an [redacted] that the [redacted] in the North African [redacted] [redacted] we had so far had [redacted] [redacted] we did not know where the anchorages were, and we had not built up a team of local seamen and fishermen to help get the immigrants aboard, as we had elsewhere. A few days later, however, one [redacted] who [redacted] [redacted] ports, came to discuss the details of the [redacted]. From him we learned that the spot at which the embarkation was to take place was free from rocks and easy of access—in fact, an ideal spot. Furthermore, it was possible to set up a temporary camp there to accommodate the immigrants without arousing suspicion. I did not know what the name of the place was, but with the aid of its bearings I was easily able to identify it.

We got together the necessary [redacted]. The water tanks were filled, and [redacted] were added to the [redacted] there. Our [redacted] and we took on [redacted] enough to last us for a 25-day

Yov Vardi

voyage. But we fully realized what a decrepit old hulk she was—the most that could be squeezed out of her was a miserable four knots—and knew that it was only with the help of Providence that she could possibly get to her final destination under her own steam. We were also afraid—not without reason, as events were to show—that her supply of fuel would not suffice, but we persuaded ourselves that she would be able to replenish it at one of the coaling stations on the way.

It was at the port of the south of France that the final preparations were made. The vessel was loaded with food, and a cook and a steward were found at the very last minute, ~~was a cook and a steward~~ who had considerable experience of smuggling and gun-running. There were three of us in charge of the immigrants, two of us coming from Palestine.

We set off towards the coast of Africa. We were supposed to arrive at the specified place during the hours of darkness, and it had been arranged that our contact men would light a fire near the camp to enable us to reach the spot. That same night we were to take the immigrants on board, with the help of the fishermen, and set sail. We got there somewhat earlier than we expected. The people in the camp, who had been impatiently awaiting our arrival, had been anxiously watching the passing ships. They spotted us in the waning daylight and from afar we could descry the signs of jubilation in the camp.

When darkness fell, we approached to within some 300 yards of the shore. The water there was fairly deep, and we dropped anchor. We let down a lifeboat and sent it to reconnoitre and make sure that we were in touch with the right people and that the seamen who were to load the passengers' luggage had turned up. The boat soon returned, carrying a number of immigrants who had come without any belongings. They told us that the people were ready, but that there were no seamen, and that we would have to see to the luggage. The entire crew therefore set off for the shore, with the exception of the captain, who had to remain at his post, and myself, who stayed behind to direct our passengers to their quarters.

As soon as work started, trouble came thick and fast. The boats began to leak, and the water had to be bailed out incessantly. Contrary to the description we had been given, the shore was rocky and the sea rough. Two of the boats were badly damaged, and after one trip became unmanageable, and had to be tied up to the ship, where they bobbed up and down uselessly. The entire burden fell upon the remaining two boats, and they plied to and fro non-stop, bringing a varied

people of all ages, from infants in arms to the members of the movement, whom I was so anxiously looking for. I counted an infinitesimal proportion of the entire crowd. In the dark I could scarcely make out the expressions on the people's faces, but the way they carried themselves was eloquent chiefly of fear and deference to those in authority. In this manner 300 people came on board. While the work of embarkation was at its height, Y—a sho-ack from Israel who was in charge of the shore end of the operation, came on board to issue final instructions. I asked him where the blankets, utensils for eating and drinking, and other items of equipment were. He reassured me, everything was waiting in readiness on shore. First we would finish embarking the people, and then would come the turn of the luggage and utensils.

While he was still speaking, someone came along in a great hurry and announced: "The police are on shore!" We immediately sent Y-ack back, hoisted the boats on board, abandoned the anchor and set sail. As can well be imagined, our spirits were not exactly soaring at that moment. Indeed, we were not to be envied; still less was there reason to envy the poor souls left stranded on the beach.

On board there was regular pandemonium. The people had not yet had time to get sorted out: here was someone looking for his wife and daughter, there a baby that had become separated from its parents was crying; and no one could tell whether those concerned were on board, or whether they had been left behind on shore. There were no blankets, and the people were nervous and irritable. The prospect of spending the nights on bare boards was not inviting. There were no utensils for eating and drinking—not a spoon, not even a cup.

It was not long, however, before the members of the Dror youth movement (they later became the nucleus of the kibbutz of Regavim) began to introduce order, appointed stewards to see to the distribution of food, and arranged for a look-out to be kept. Meanwhile the ship was steaming slowly forward in the dark, hugging the coast for fear of mines further out to sea. Next morning the sea became rougher. The people got up clamouring for something to eat and drink, but we just stood there helplessly. However, necessity is the mother of invention. We began opening tins of food, and after consuming their contents we kept the containers and used them as both plates and cups. As soon as a tin became available, it was filled and passed round from person to person. In this way one tin served a score of people.

We looked for shelter from the storm in one of the harbours.

the coast. But a decrepit ship like ours packed full with human cargo was not likely to be allowed to stay long in any port without inviting inquiries. As soon as we put in, the police began nosing around, and wanted to know who and what we were. We made up a cock-and-bull story about having been chartered by an American company to take labourers to Egypt. They seemed to believe us as we told the story, but when we had finished they nevertheless demanded papers that would confirm it. Then they went ashore to summon their officer. But we did not wait to meet him. We slipped cable, abandoned our second anchor, and put out to sea again as fast as we could go, although the storm had not yet subsided. We pitched and tossed heavily on the stormy sea, but nevertheless continued slowly on our way. We were trying to make for Lampedusa, a tiny island on the way to Malta. When we were a short way off from the coast of Lampedusa, we took soundings in the hope of casting anchor—our third and only remaining one!—but the water was 600 metres deep, and we did not have a long enough chain. As we were determined not to let go of our last anchor, we had no alternative but to stand out to sea again. Our plan was to make our way to leeward of the island and wait and see.

Meanwhile an argument had been in progress between the captain and myself as to our future course. Indeed, it was questionable whether we would be able to continue our voyage altogether in a vessel whose speed was so slow as to prevent it from coping with such rough seas. Finally we decided to stay where we were and to move on again in the morning. As we had not cast anchor, we cruised to and fro. The passengers, however, soon realised what was happening, and began to get restless. As though the difficulties we had with the ship were not enough, the passengers were now beginning to complain: "How can we go on without blankets?" "What about the food?" "What's happening to the ship?" There was certainly reason enough for complaint. But there were also a few troublemakers who made things worse.

We sent a radio message to our people in France. We described the situation to them and told them what we needed,—coal above all, for it seemed most unlikely that our supply would hold out long enough to take us as far as Crete. They told us to get in touch with Ada S— in Rome. We made contact with Rome. In the meantime, however, I had been taken ill, and my fever was mounting. We therefore asked for a replacement for myself.

The captain was not over-worried by the situation. Indeed, he was quite indifferent to the fate of the ship: he didn't care whether we got

to our destination or not. I also had my suspicions concerning his knowledge of navigation.

A reassuring message came through from Rome. We were to proceed to Palermo, in Sicily, and there our agent would see to our requirements. We accordingly set our course for Sicily. Meanwhile, however, many of the passengers began to complain of various aches and pains. Fortunately for us we had a medical orderly on board, and he was able to handle the patients. His competence did not a little to calm the passengers.

Among the passengers I particularly recall one young lad. He had been in a school for juvenile delinquents, and had managed to be included in the contingent of immigrants. His face offered a fair clue to his character: one eye squinted horribly, while the other was screwed up and peeped out of its socket with a look of malignant cunning. He always went around carrying a knife, and he had a finger in every pie, stirring up trouble wherever he could. There were others like him. The members of Dror did their best to curb their activities, but that was by no means an easy task.

The youngster in question was bored by the quiet and the inactivity, and tried to liven things up by causing fights. Several brawls occurred in which the contestants drew their knives and, judging by the dangerous look in their eyes, had every intention of killing one another. If we had not intervened, the results might indeed have been fatal. When the situation looked like getting altogether out of hand, the two of us from Eretz Yisrael and the wireless operator discussed ways and means of overcoming the knife menace. We soon realised that there was no time to follow the more "educational" path of gentle persuasion: to get prompt results we had to be "tough." We ordered the members of the gang to give up their knives. They refused. We then took hold of the young ringleader and gave him such a beating that he soon yielded up his weapon. The others, realising what was in store for them if they persisted, followed suit.

We reached Palermo at dusk. The usual procedure for a ship on entering a port is for it to wait for a pilot, who takes it into the harbour and manoeuvres it alongside the proper quay; and while he is on board he is in command. We proposed to forgo this procedure and enter port by our own efforts. But our ruse did not avail us, for no sooner did we get in than we found the police there waiting to receive us. We told them the same story as on the previous occasion, namely, that we were transporting labourers to Egypt, and asked to be put in touch with our agent. We impatiently awaited his arrival, but he did not turn

up: evidently the authorities had refused him permission to come aboard. On the pretext of being ill and having to see a doctor, I was allowed ashore and succeeded in getting into touch with the agent, who was a non-Jew. We stood looking at one another helplessly, for we had no language in common. Nevertheless, we managed to understand one another on the main issues. From his mumblings and gesticulations I gathered that the British had taken a hand in things. They were on the look-out for illegal immigrant ships, and we had already aroused their suspicions. It was therefore almost a certainty that they would refuse to let us land. However, the agent promised to do all he could at least to let us have some coal. Next evening, consequently, the coal arrived—25 tons of it—and was loaded onto our deck. As our coal bunker did not have room for the entire quantity, we had to put part of it in a small hold. By then we were ready to set sail, but the authorities stopped us from leaving the port. Someone was evidently at work behind the scenes, and I had no doubt that it was the British.

Meanwhile hundreds of people were bustling about on deck. They were completely bored by the inactivity and could not be induced to sit still. Moreover, they had succeeded in opening up channels of communication with the sailors of the near-by ships and with people on shore. There was hardly one of the passengers who did not engage in some transaction, whether by way of trade or barter. Some of them sold cigarettes, and received in exchange fresh bread, for which they had an intense craving. Others acquired plates, spoons and forks. These transactions were carried on with so much noise as to attract the attention of the police, who tried to prevent all contact with the passengers, but to no avail. It was the members of the Dror group who again stepped into the breach. They posted sentries, closed all the portholes and other openings on the shore side—despite the unbearable stuffiness that resulted—and allowed people into the latrines on deck only one by one. In this manner they established order and put a stop to all unauthorised commerce. However, they themselves did some trading; but this time it was not for individual profit but for the benefit of the whole community.

For the time being we were stuck in port awaiting permission to leave. Meanwhile the old argument continued as to whether our coal would suffice to take us to our destination. We would have liked to sneak out under cover of darkness, the way we made off from the African coast; but the watch kept on us was too vigilant: we even had police on board.

Suddenly we were told that the coal which we had just taken on was to be unloaded. In giving this order the port authorities were obviously acting under pressure by the British, who sought to prevent our continuing our voyage. The stevedores accordingly came on board, and we stood by helplessly while they went to work. However, luck was on our side for once, and our auxiliary bunker, which contained the not inconsiderable amount of 14 tons, remained untouched. This oversight, needless to say, was achieved by bribing the stevedores. Thus we thwarted the designs of our enemies. Now we had a fair quantity of coal, enough to take us as far as the coast of Palestine; but that calculation was based on the assumption that we were not forced off our course and that the sea remained calm. The only provisions we were allowed to take on board were bread and brandy. But this had its advantages, for brandy is an excellent lubricant for "political" negotiations. Indeed, every policeman who came on board left us in a happier frame of mind than before; and the occasional drinks we had to take for the sake of good fellowship did us no harm either.

Eventually we were allowed to leave port, and we found ourselves on the high seas once again. But we knew perfectly well that the British had no intention of letting their quarry escape them, and we were very doubtful whether we would be able both to evade pursuit at sea and to elude the vigilance of the forces guarding the coast, if we ever got that far.

Our fears were soon realised. A few hours later we saw smoke on the horizon, and shortly after we made out the shape of a British destroyer. She headed straight for us, and from that moment on she was our constant companion right up the time we entered Haifa harbour. It was depressing to reflect that capture was inevitable. At the same time we were comforted by the thought that there was someone at hand to help us in case we were overtaken by disaster.

From now on we were no longer alone. But our escort scarcely acted in a friendly manner. Indeed, at times she was downright rude, and brazenly flouted the unwritten laws of the high seas. She expressed especial interest in the number of passengers we had on board, and wanted to know where they were bound for and what possessions they were taking with them. To most of their questions we vouchsafed no reply. On the other hand, we hailed them several times through our megaphone. We appealed to their conscience and reproached them for their action. Was this justice? Was this British fair play? Where was the comradeship of the sea? They, however, maintained that they were

indeed displaying comradeship, and that they were prompted by a desire to ensure the welfare of our ship. They knew her of old: she was of British manufacture, and even before her British owners had got rid of her she had been almost ready to fall apart. Now anything might happen to her.

We had a powerful radio set, and it interfered quite a lot with the destroyer's communications. When, however, we saw that they had found the wavelength and position of the station with which we were in contact, and could learn of our plans, we reduced our activity to a minimum. Incidentally, we misunderstood a number of the messages we received from our station in Palestine. Thus, for example, we did not know what the code word for Cyprus was, and when they told us that we were going to be taken there, we did not understand what they meant. In that particular message we were instructed to keep several people in hiding, to avoid capture, so that they could furnish a report of what had happened to those directing immigration operations. There were altogether three of us in charge, including the radio operator. Two of them must obviously remain with the immigrants and share their fate upon capture. That meant that only one could be spared, and we accordingly prepared a hiding place for him amongst the water tanks, and put in a store of food, blankets and other requirements for one person.

The state of feeling among the immigrants can easily be imagined. They already knew that they would not be allowed to land peacefully, and they were afraid that they would be taken back to their country of origin. Some of them openly said that in such case it would have been better if they had remained in North Africa in the first place. Meanwhile we made preparations to resist capture, and the idea of making a fight for freedom caught the people's imagination. Sticks were collected, and piles of tinned food assembled. We even had stores of potatoes in readiness for use as missiles, in case we got to really close quarters with the enemy.

While all this was going on we had been steaming steadily in the direction of Alexandria. And, indeed, we had informed our escort that we were headed for Egypt, although they realised perfectly well that we were trying to throw them off the scent. We had therefore got fairly close to Egypt before we changed course in the direction of the coast of Palestine. Our instructions were to proceed to Haifa. We, however, were still toying with the hope of making a landing by our own efforts, and decided to make for Tel Aviv. But at this point ano-

ther British destroyer joined us, so that we now had one on either side. Our escorts' nerves must have been well and truly harassed at having to keep pace with us as we limped along in the middle. Then, as we neared the coast, another two destroyers attached themselves to us. And so we made our entry into territorial waters crawling along at four knots and escorted by a whole flotilla of warships.

The position was now clear to all concerned. They knew for certain that our ship was carrying illegal immigrants, and we for our part could now abandon all pretence. The British could also see our preparations for self-defence. When they discerned our intention to run aground at Tel Aviv, they closed in on us on all sides and blocked our path, forcing us to continue along our previous course. We immediately realised that in any trial of strength at sea we would be at a great disadvantage.

As we drew close to Haifa, we received the following message from our British "friends": "Stop engines. A party of sailors will come aboard and direct the ship into port." This was very far from being to our liking, and we began to parley with our escorts through the megaphone. Meanwhile two of the destroyers sidled up to us, one on either side, and almost crushed us between them. Soldiers began swarming aboard, and though we tried to put up a resistance, it was hopeless from the start, and we were soon overwhelmed. The tear gas did its work effectively, and soon the captain and myself were isolated on the bridge, although there had been a large group prepared to defend us. The engineers and stokers were still down below; but we managed to send them the order to get out at once and mingle with the crowd to avoid capture. A squad of British soldiers took possession of the bridge and grounded arms there. Another squad took charge of the engine room. The radio operator sent out a continuous stream of messages, and at the very last moment, when the British were already in control of the ship, he managed to escape through a secret exit and mingle with the crowd.

Such was the manner in which our unfortunate ship arrived at the shores of the Promised Land. The two destroyers had hugged her so hard as to make several cracks in her plating, and the water was now coming in fast. We therefore had to abandon our project of hiding anyone among the tanks. A British naval officer came aboard. He looked around him in amazement: "Surely you did not travel the whole length of the Mediterranean in a ship like this!"

We were in pretty low spirits. The immigrants were divided into

two groups, one at either end of the ship, while the British directed proceedings from the bridge. In such circumstances it was not easy to take any concerted action. However, we did manage to hide the ship's papers in a plaster cast that one of the girls had on her arm, so as to prevent a trial. We distributed between \$600 and \$700 among some of the people, in the hope that they might be able to escape. (Eventually the ship's papers and part of the money were found.) I myself mingled with the crowd. It was agreed that no one was to admit that he knew any English, except the person designated by me. One of the immigrants was nominated spokesman, and he kept in touch with me and took his orders from me.

The ship drew near to the quayside. The immigrants, who were all on deck, were in a state of great excitement and sang "Hatikva" with intense feeling. The port was crowded with people, among them some of our comrades, who could see with their own eyes what was happening to the ship. This was not the first immigrant ship to be captured, and they were already accustomed to the spectacle. We were immediately transhipped to a more "respectable" vessel, the "Ocean Vigour."

The transshipment itself involved unspeakable humiliation. I really did not think that civilised people like the British were capable of it. They unceremoniously laid hold of each one, irrespective of whether it was an aged person or child, man or woman, and threw him, like a parcel, from hand-to-hand. The medical examination consisted of making everyone, regardless of sex, remove his or her nether garments so as to be disinfected with a liberal dose of D.D.T. Then the process of being thrown from hand to hand continued, until we found ourselves shut up in the waist of the ship, surrounded by netting like animals in a cage. There was no searching of clothes, no interrogation, no attempt at identification. (I was afraid that my distinctive fair hair would give me away, but no one paid any attention to me.) The lasting impression I have of that experience is a deep sense of humiliation.

We left Haifa for an unknown destination. We were shut up below decks, and as there was no porthole through which we could get a glimpse of the outside world, we had no way of telling where we were going. For four days we were made to suffer unnecessarily; for in fact we were cruising up and down off the coast of Palestine. But this, of course, we did not know, and we consequently began to fear that we were being taken back to where we had started out from. From what I was told about the position of the stars, I tried to guess where we

might be, but I did not have enough to go on. It was only on the fourth day, when we were off the coast of Cyprus, that the problem was finally solved.

It was here that I had a mishap. Everyone was told to destroy all documents or other evidence as to country of origin. The only one who failed to obey the order properly was myself. Hidden in my wallet was a sketch-map of our centres of operation in the Marseilles area which I had overlooked. When my wallet was taken away, I thought our radio station there might be interfered with as a result, and I was also afraid that things might be made most unpleasant for me. So, as soon as I reached the interment camp at Cyprus, I sent a message from our secret radio transmitter there and told our people to transfer the station to a different location. To this day I do not know whether it was through ignorance or sheer stupidity that the British failed to realise the significance of that sketch.

I spent three weeks in the Cyprus internment camp and was among the first contingent of immigrants to be transferred to Palestine. Eventually all the passengers of the "Yehuda Halevi" followed suit, including the members of Dror. One person only failed to complete the journey,—a baby that died on the way. It had taken sick on the boat, and its mother had given it an orange she had found lying about. The medical orderly knew nothing about it. Next morning the orderly rushed up to the bridge, where I was sleeping, and woke me up. "There's something wrong with my child," he said. "What's wrong?" "He's stopped breathing." We ran straight down to the hold, only to find that the child was no longer alive.

We tied the child's body to a board—we had nothing that could serve as a coffin—and weighted it down with a lump of coal. We stopped the ship. A member of a burial society who was among the passengers performed the purification rites in the prescribed manner. The *Kaddish* was recited, and the poor little victim of "illegal" immigration was lowered into the sea, watched in reverent silence by all the passengers, many of whom had tears in their eyes.

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