

Immigration from Italy

The first post-war attempts to renew *Aliyah* from Europe were made by Mossad workers in Italy, mainly because of the presence of Jewish soldiers from Palestine. Groups of Jewish soldiers had been taking care of refugees since the end of hostilities; they provided assistance, taught them Hebrew and prepared them for the journey to Palestine.

The chief difficulty facing the Mossad in Italy was the presence of the British army, and the fact that the Royal Navy was in charge of the Italian fleet. This forced the Mossad to buy small ships, which were outside British control. In 1945, six immigrant boats sailed from Italy, in addition to two others from Greece. All eight vessels reached Palestine and landed their passengers without being detected.

A few weeks after the end of the war, the veteran Hagana activist Yehuda Arazi, code-named Alon, arrived in Italy after being on the run from the British police who wanted to question him about an unsuccessful arms deal. This forceful character immediately became the leading figure in the group working for illegal immigration to Palestine.

Eliahu Golomb had decided that Arazi should be smuggled into Italy to take charge of both arms purchasing and illegal immigration. Avigur was not very happy with Golomb's choice, believing that Arazi would be more interested in guns than immigrants. He later admitted that his fears were groundless and Yehuda did an outstanding job.¹

Yehuda Arazi was born in Lodz, Poland, and grew up in a strongly Zionist home. His parents went to live in Palestine in 1924, followed later by other members of the family. In 1925 he and a group of school friends went to work as roadbuilders in Galilee and in the following year he joined the Palestine Police. From 1936 until the outbreak of the war he coordinated the Hagana's arms-buying in Poland. Eventually, his name became known to the British authorities and a warrant was issued for his arrest.

The reasons he gave for involvement in immigration are revealing:

"Immigration was more than simply saving lives. I reached this conclusion when I despaired of any chance of an agreement with the British . . . immigration to Palestine was not an end in itself, but a change to another form of warfare. Terrorism against the British would



8. Palestine Jewish soldiers at Florence, Italy, April 1944. Members of 462 general transport company, Royal Army Service Corps, whose vehicles were extensively used for the unofficial ferrying of Holocaust survivors to illegal immigrant embarkation ports.



9. Ada Sereni

not get us far. We saw how far they would go in their search for arms at Kibbutz Yagur . . . in July 1946 they arrested the whole leadership. I wondered whether we could find a way to give them a hard time and realised that the way to do it was through the nuisance value of illegal immigration. Naturally, there would also be the advantage of the actual immigration of Jews to the country. This was the line I worked out together with Eliahu Golomb in 1944, when we decided that I was to go to work in immigration."²

At the beginning of July 1945, Ada Sereni went to Italy. She was the widow of Enzo Sereni, from Italy, one of the founders of Kibbutz Givat Brenner, who parachuted behind the enemy lines during the war and died in Dachau. Ada rapidly fitted in and worked closely and harmoniously with Arazi for two years, up to the end of 1947.

Upon his arrival in Italy, Arazi found a select group of emissaries working for the Mossad. Their activities focused on the ports in the south of the country but Arazi decided to transfer the headquarters to Milan in the north. Milan was the crossroads for the movement of refugees streaming towards the coasts and was also where the main Jewish organisations were located. He left a small team of experienced workers, including Moshe Nutkin, Israel Sapir and Shmaria Zameret, in the southern port of Bari, where they remained very active.

The meeting place for the Milan branch was the Jewish soldiers' club, located in a small street off the cathedral square. The club was run by Ada Sereni and served as a meeting point for refugees from the camps and Mossad workers. A villa was purchased outside the city and used as a radio station to enable the group in Italy to keep in touch with Artzi, the code-name for the Mossad centre in Palestine, and the immigrant ships at sea. This radio network was installed by four soldiers who had served in REME 544 in Naples. They had been given a transmitter by soldiers in the Jewish Brigade and, using it as a model, built others to the same design. These were later sent to Mossad branches in France, Belgium, Romania and Greece and thus the different centres in Europe were able to contact Italy and, via the Italian station, Tel Aviv. Moshe Yerushalmi was in charge of the workshop where the equipment was built.

The first vessel sent by the Italian station under the control of Yehuda Arazi was a 25-ton fishing boat named *Dalin*, one of Golomb's code-names. This boat was captained by Enrico Levi, the Jewish naval officer who was to become totally involved in Israeli shipping as a result of this voyage. There was room aboard for just 40 people: the crew, consisting of the captain, three foreign seamen and two seamen

from the Palmach, and 35 immigrants from the pioneering movements in Italy.

Whilst preparing the *Dalin* for the voyage, the organisers ran into difficulties over supplies and equipment because of the shortage of materials in post-war Italy. This problem was eased when a Palestinian army unit, stationed in Bari, provided the food; fuel was found elsewhere. The radio technicians installed a two-way radio in the boat and land-based radio a few miles outside Bari, so that there was direct contact between the boat and Tel Aviv.

Ada Sereni describes how the first 35 emigrants were selected.

"When the boat was ready, the Diaspora Centre in Bari called a meeting of the parties; this is when the arguments began. The first idea was to divide the 35 places according to the numerical strength of each party. This immediately led to the question of whether this should be based on its electoral strength in Palestine or the number of its members in Italy, or even in Europe. Anyhow, who could say how many members the different parties had in the turmoil of post-war Europe?"³

Eventually, the 35 lucky candidates were elected. This issue of allocating places was to occur in future voyages until Yehuda Arazi put a stop to it by deciding that it would no longer be a party matter. Ada Sereni explained: "At later meetings between Alon [Arazi] and the party emissaries the latter were in disagreement. The better ones understood the reasons for Alon's decision and accepted it. The others tried to make a fuss but soon realised that such an attitude would hurt only them and so, feeling themselves isolated, they too accepted but with bad grace. From that time the policy was that there would be no party favouritism and this enabled us to obtain the trust of the refugees."⁴

Arazi knew how to operate. He was 39 at this time, and very experienced; the younger emissaries called him "the old man". On 21 August 1945, the *Dalin* slipped away in the middle of the night. A week later she landed at Caesarea and the passengers were brought ashore without the British authorities knowing anything about it.

After the success of the *Dalin*, two more ships were purchased in the south of Italy - *Nettuno*, renamed *Natan*, and *Pietro*, both 50 tons. Each made two round trips in September and October 1945 and landed a total of 500 immigrants on the coast at Caesarea and Shefayim. Difficulties with equipment were overcome with the help of Jewish soldiers serving in British units.

At the beginning of October 1945, an additional ship, the *Albertina*,

sailed from an improvised jetty on a deserted stretch of coast between Taranto and Metaponto. The only witness was the keeper of the level-crossing on the nearby railway.

The growing number of sailings and the increasing complexity of operations made it necessary to find more seamen and radio operators with experience. *Dalin*, *Nettuno* and *Albertina* made the return journey to Italy with men from the Palmach's naval section, called Palyam. The ships also brought emissaries from the Jewish Agency and the Histadrut, who set up training, welfare and cultural programmes for the refugees to prepare them for Palestine.

Just as the Mossad's activities were getting under way, Jewish units of the British army were withdrawn from Italy and the Jewish Brigade was disbanded. This added greatly to the logistical problems and made it necessary to find new sources of food, fuel and other important items.

The Mossad was also involved in arms acquisition. An abandoned farm was rented in the village of Magenta, outside Milan, and used to store weapons that had been "found" by soldiers in the Palestinian units. Suitable young refugees were chosen for guard duties at the farm, which, very soon, also became the clandestine storehouse for equipment needed for illegal immigration. The head of this key installation was Avraham Zakai, a member of the Palmach.

The Voyage of the "Hannah Senesh"

The operations of Yehuda Arazi and his men in Italy are described in Ada Sereni's book. This is what she writes about the adventures of the *Andaria*, renamed *Hannah Senesh*.

"On 2 December 1945, a shipping agent telephoned Alon [Yehuda Arazi] and told him to go to Genoa to look at a 250-ton cargo boat, which had a capacious, square hold in which it would be possible to install a large number of wooden bunks for passengers. Alon was pleased with the proposal and on the spot he paid a deposit on account of the purchase price. On signing the contract, he had a brainwave - the ship should reach Palestine on 24 December, since it was very unlikely that there would be any British patrols on Christmas Eve and the immigrants would have a better chance of landing without problems. He made sure that the necessary preparations were carried out urgently . . .⁵

"*Hannah Senesh* duly set out and details of her voyage can be followed through the signals between Alon signifying the Italian station, and the ship.

"*Hannah Senesh* to Alon:

'The canned meat is too salty, increases thirst, not enough water, ration of one litre per person per day is below basic minimum. We have to try to give passengers bread and fruit, at least for the first two days. Difficult to swallow biscuits without water. Passengers suffering greatly.'

"*Hannah Senesh* to Alon:

'Ship very crowded, air in hold not good for breathing, arrangements for living almost impossible. Sea becoming rough.'

"*Hannah Senesh* to Alon:

'We are in a storm, What should we do? Please send instructions.'

"Alon to *Hannah Senesh*:

'No port open to you. You have to carry on. Good luck. We'll keep in touch throughout the night.'

'For eight days the wireless operators in the Milan base kept a round-the-clock watch on the voyage. *Hannah Senesh* made slow progress in the storm, while the passengers, crowded into the cramped hold with its foul air, were completely exhausted. The Italian skipper, a brave and quiet man, never left the bridge and his example gave confidence to the crew. The 20-year-old Jewish escort who had been put in charge of this voyage, with the help of a few volunteers, made superhuman efforts to share out the food to the passengers, prevent breakdowns, take care of the sick and raise people's spirits.

'The days passed and hope returned. Finally on 23 December, the ship sent its last message before making contact with the shore.

"*Hannah Senesh* to Alon:

'In touch with home. Arriving tomorrow.'

'From then on, the ship was to receive orders from the headquarters in Eretz Israel and we waited for information from Tel Aviv.

'There still remained the last, but hardest, task - the disembarkation. On shore, Palmach groups were hidden in prearranged positions under the command of Grisha Shenkman. On the evening when the ship was due to land, Grisha notified her commander: Landing point Nahariya, 1800 hours . . .

'It was Christmas Eve and the British patrols were not out, but the weather was bad. The sea was very rough and huge waves were breaking against the shore; there were thick clouds and poor visibility - the worst conditions to anchor a few dozen yards offshore. On the bridge, the skipper and the commander peered towards the coast and tried to estimate the distance by the faint lights that appeared and disappeared as the ship rode the waves. At 18.30 the ship radioed: We are five miles from shore and coming in.

"This was an unfortunate error of judgment, since they were only a few hundred yards out. The ship approached at full speed, propelled by her engine and the strength of the waves, and a few minutes after sending the message, she was struck by a powerful blow which floored the passengers and crew and turned her on her starboard side. The commander, dazed after eight exhausting days at sea, realised at once that he had misjudged the distance. He was almost overcome by his concern for the people in his charge and the immediate danger to their lives; he passed out a few times and then recovered. The Italian skipper remained in control of himself and tried to save as much as possible. Two small lifeboats that he tried to lower into the water overturned as soon as they touched the waves. The passengers thought that the end had come and there were some cases of panic but on the whole they kept their sense of discipline . . ."⁶

Once ashore, the Italian crew of the *Hannah Senesh* were hidden for a few days and returned to Italy without their ship. Since the ship was registered in Italy, the Mossad faced the problem of removing her name from the Italian maritime registry, in order to avoid difficulties. Once again Arazi came up with a solution. He arranged for the purchase of a rowing boat in Sicily and ordered the Italian crew not to shave for eight days. On the ninth day, at night, the dirty, dishevelled and bearded sailors turned up at the office of the harbourmaster in a village in the south of Sicily and announced that their ship had struck a loose mine and had sunk. In the months following the end of the war, unswept mines were a constant danger to shipping. The skipper's account was recorded. The person in whose name the ship was registered had to take care of all the other matters. On Arazi's advice he did not claim insurance, so there was no inquiry. The ship was removed from the register.

Hannah Senesh in fact marked the end of the series of small boats that sailed from Italy. Apart from the *Wingate*, which sailed from Italy in March 1946, the Mossad changed to the system of big ships. *Hannah Senesh* was also the last that landed illegals without being intercepted by British forces. From this time onwards, the immigration movement had to face a new situation - the risk of interception by units of the Royal Navy.

By now, the middle of 1946, the Mossad found it difficult to bring in more than 1,500 Jews each month. This was the size of the monthly quota of certificates, from which the British used to deduct every illegal immigrant. This, too, was when the Joint announced that it was stopping its support for illegal immigration.

The "Enzo Sereni"

The Mossad was firm in its view that the immigration movement had to be stepped up. The first big ship to sail after the Mossad decision to switch to a series of large vessels was the *Rondina*, 500 tons, later renamed *Enzo Sereni*. Ada Sereni described her as modern, strong, pleasant and spacious. Fuel was obtained through an "oil for whisky" deal and food was smuggled from various army bases. Forty army trucks transported the 900 immigrants, hidden under tarpaulin. Shalhevet Freier drove in front of the convoy in a jeep, dressed in a lieutenant's uniform. The embarkation point was two miles north of Savona. Departure was scheduled for 9 January 1946 at 22.00 hours. It was a clear, starry night and the moon had not yet risen; the only sound was the slapping of the water against the side of the pier. In pitch darkness the ship was confidently manoeuvred alongside by the Italian skipper. The crew consisted of eight Italian sailors and an escort and wireless operator from the Palmach.

The trucks bringing the immigrants arrived at a pre-arranged time and the boarding, in conditions of secrecy, lasted several hours. The *Enzo Sereni* then cast off and in a few minutes the dark shape had disappeared into the night. The first messages started to arrive a few hours after she had sailed.

"The compass is not working too well. Old Man Alon probably thinks we can find our way without instruments."

"12 January, *Enzo Sereni* to Alon:
Difficult to describe the crowding aboard. Many seriously ill. Not enough medicines. Water rations limited and enough for eight days more only. Sea rough."

"15 January, *Enzo Sereni* to Alon:
Food also rationed minimal amounts. People very weak. Weather improved. Condition of patients improved."

After passing Crete, the ship got in touch with Tel Aviv.

"17 January, *Enzo Sereni* to Artzi:
Situation aboard difficult. Organisation almost impossible due to overcrowding. Must give passengers more food, otherwise will be too weak on night of landing."

This was immediately followed by a further message from the *Enzo Sereni*:

"Six British warships have just passed us. Don't know if identified us."

"HQ to *Enzo Sereni*:

Reduce rations to last until 22 January. Will try to land passengers on 20 January. Reserve for two days essential, in case of difficulties. Landing point to south of Tel Aviv."

"*Enzo Sereni* to Artzi:

Plane flew over us, almost 100 people on deck."

Mossad headquarters in Tel Aviv learned that British intelligence in Palestine had received a telegram advising them that a ship suspected of carrying illegals had been spotted 75 miles out at sea. The RAF was keeping her under observation. The Royal Navy had been notified. The Mossad immediately warned the ship and Arazi, who radioed to *Enzo Sereni* that, if caught, they should hide, but not destroy the ship's papers.

"17 January, *Enzo Sereni* to HQ:

British warship approaching. Captain ordered us to stop. We refused."

That was the last message from the *Enzo Sereni*; the freighter was no match for the warship. Before the British troops boarded her, the Italian crew mingled with the passengers and the radio equipment and codes were thrown overboard. In their haste, they also threw out the ship's papers and logbook, which Arazi had urged them to keep. The warship ordered the *Enzo Sereni* to proceed towards Haifa. The passengers were transferred to a detention camp at Atlit and released a few weeks later. The *Enzo Sereni* remained in Haifa and was confiscated.

In Milan, Mr Pinter, a loyal Jew and fervent Zionist, in whose name the ship was registered, sued the Royal Navy. It could not be denied that the ship had been seized outside Palestinian territorial waters; in other words, the British had carried out an act of piracy. The Royal Navy could not prove to the judges, imbued with the spirit of justice and decency, that the passengers aboard the *Enzo Sereni* were not peaceful tourists taking a Mediterranean cruise. The immigrants testified that they had been taken to Haifa under duress and the Royal Navy lost the case. However, the British authorities found various reasons to hold the ship for a further year and a half.⁸

The "Josiah Wedgwood"

In the middle of 1946, the two 800-ton naval corvettes that had been purchased by the Mossad in Canada reached Italy. One of them,

Balboa, became the immigrant ship *Hagana*, which was taken to Yugoslavia. The second vessel, *Beauharnois*, was renamed *Josiah Wedgwood*, after the English M.P. renowned for his support of Zionism. This ship remained in Italy and was refitted for her new duties. A welcome innovation in these corvettes was that they came with a Jewish crew. These were men who had served in the US Navy as well as members of Zionist pioneering youth movements in the USA. As one journalist pointed out, there had never been such a strange company of men aboard a ship.⁹ This was the largest ship to sail from Italy.

The *Josiah Wedgwood* was boarded by 1,257 immigrants at a deserted jetty near Savona, Vado Ligure. They had come there in two long convoys of Italian cars, the first time non-military vehicles had been used in this way. They boarded ship in the middle of the night. Due to the skipper getting drunk, the departure of the ship was delayed and news about it reached the police at Savona, who were under strict British supervision and who tried to arrest the passengers together with the ship. This time Yehuda Arazi and Ada Sereni resorted to diversionary tactics, pretending to be guides and interpreters for an American journalist. While they kept the authorities occupied, the workers shepherded the women and children back on board with the excuse that there was food on the ship.¹⁰ The men boarded later and the ship cast off and made for the open sea.

The vessel was under the command of Dov Lifschitz-Magen (Berchik), from Ramat Hashofet, and there were four Palmach escorts. One of them, Israel Auerbach, wrote in his report that they were kept busy during the voyage on a whole range of tasks; he, for example, dealt with food and a colleague looked after the people, and even the wireless operator did his best to help.¹¹

Since the British knew that the *Josiah Wedgwood* had sailed, it was obvious that she would not be able to evade her pursuers. She was tracked from the air and sea; four destroyers surrounded her and escorted her on the voyage but the British refrained from seizing her outside the territorial waters of Palestine. The ship sailed towards the coast but cruised outside the territorial limits to avoid seizure until she ran out of fuel. She was then towed into Haifa and the passengers taken off.¹²

After a year of immigration from Italy, the British and Italian authorities were well aware of the Mossad's activities. The British pressed the Italians to help them in locating Mossad bases and workers but without success. All the shipyards to which the Mossad turned agreed to fit out ships. In fact, the Italians scorned those who refused

to help people who had already suffered so much. Many thousands of Jewish refugees had made their way to Italy and their camps were scattered throughout the country. The authorities did not want these foreigners to remain and realised that it would be impossible for life to return to normal if they did not help the refugees to leave.

Ada Sereni wrote in her book:

I was certain that our situation was good in political terms. The Italians still remembered the suffering during the German occupation and many felt that the race laws that had been declared in Italy during the war were a mark of shame for their people. The Italians, humane and cultured by nature and by their history, had not participated in the antisemitic outrages of the Nazis. It was the Germans who were scorned and hated by the people but the British were not popular either. Their demand that the Italians should hand over to them the remaining ships in their fleet made them many enemies in political circles and particularly in the Navy. The neutral and even friendly attitude of the USA towards immigration to Palestine made a better impression on them than the negative British position.¹³

Ada tried to make contacts in Government circles. One of the officials she reached was an admiral who was causing great problems for the Mossad, but her meeting with him was fruitful and the problems ceased.

Raffaello Cantoni, chairman of the Jewish community in Italy, gave the Mossad public support. He himself had been arrested by the Nazis during the war and put on a train taking prisoners to Germany; during the night he opened the door of his compartment, jumped off the moving train and, to his good fortune, landed in a pile of straw and managed to escape almost unharmed. After the war he did his utmost to help the Mossad in every way.

At a certain stage, Cantoni decided to introduce Ada Sereni to Luigi Ferrari, a supreme court judge who was serving as Chief-Inspector of the Italian police. "I entered his office", wrote Ada, "feeling very nervous but his courteous behaviour made me relax. He told me openly that he was prepared to help us, that he believed that Jews had a right to their own country, that the nations of Europe had to compensate them for the suffering and persecution they had undergone and that Italy did not want tens of thousands of refugees who would one day want work and rights."¹⁴

From that day, the work of the Mossad entered a new and fruitful phase, as can be seen by the list of ships that sailed from Italy in the

following months: *Katriel Yaffe*,¹⁵ *Shabtai Lozinsky*,¹⁶ *Kaf Gimel Yordei Hasira*.¹⁷

In April 1947, Yehuda Arazi left Italy to return to Palestine. According to Ada, he was unhappy about friction with some of the Mossad workers in France and tired of the tension in his relations with the Palmach members who accused him of dictatorial behaviour. They complained that he did not discuss matters with them but merely gave them orders.¹⁸ Avigur appointed Ada Sereni as coordinator of Mossad activities in Italy. In May 1947, circumstances necessitated a temporary change of methods, which had a very positive effect on the operation of the Mossad in general, but caused complications in Italy for several months.

After Arazi's departure, a meeting of organisers from France and Switzerland was held in Milan. The agenda included the future organisation of work. Ships with a displacement of several thousand tons had been purchased in the USA and were on their way to the Mediterranean. The Mossad workers were sure that these big ships, of which the British were already aware, would create problems in Italy or France. It was agreed at this meeting that the *Tradewinds*, renamed *Hatikva*, 1,500 tons, the *President Warfield*, renamed *Exodus*, 4,000 tons, and the *Pan Crescent*, later called *Kibbutz Galuyiot*, 6,500 tons, should go to Italy, whilst the *Pan York*, later renamed *Atzmaut*, the twin of the *Pan Crescent*, should be diverted to France. Each of these vessels was capable of carrying a large number of immigrants.

Exodus was a few hours' sailing away from the Ligurian coast of Italy when she received the order to sail for Portovenere where she arrived before the meeting had ended. Avraham Zakai was put in charge of the refitting. *Hatikva*, which had been prepared in Portugal to carry 1,500 passengers, was also diverted to Portovenere.

Whilst the meeting was going on, there was a telephone call from La Spezia; the local chief of police had told the Mossad workers that it was out of the question for two big ships to berth at Portovenere. Consequently, *Hatikva* was redirected to another port and on 17 May 1947 she sailed to Palestine with 1,414 immigrants. Seven days later, the *Mordei HaGeta'ot*, formerly *Orietta*, sailed with 1,457 passengers.

The Mossad in Italy was given the task of preparing the *Exodus* to carry 4,500 people. The British detected her at Portovenere, since the Italian harbourmasters were obliged to report the movement of all ships to the British authorities. As a result of strong British pressure, two Italian naval ships were sent to the *Exodus* and prevented her from sailing by obstructing her anchor with theirs.

Exodus was surrounded by a bitter controversy. Even though the Allied occupation of Italy had finished, the British diplomatic representatives continued to put heavy pressure on Italy to stop Mossad ships, as Ada Sereni vividly recalls:

In the large, magnificent hall of a sixteenth century Roman palace, with silk tapestries and paintings on the walls, I stood before the most senior official in the Foreign Ministry. His attitude was first obsequious and then threatening, which made me more angry than afraid. "Do not take people aboard that ship, or you will see what will happen", he said.¹⁹

Exodus was not yet ready to sail; there was no fuel and the Italian naval ships were still obstructing her. The Mossad was advised to wait until the situation became calmer. After six weeks of delay, the Italian ships weighed their anchors and *Exodus* left the port and sailed for France with no immigrants aboard. The *Pan Crescent* was also unable to get a refit in Venice and went on to Romania in July 1947.²⁰

Ada remained in charge of the Mossad station in Italy until the departure of the last boat, *Krav Emek Ayalon*. This was on 29 May 1948, and the people who had sailed in her as illegal immigrants were welcomed ashore as citizens of the new State of Israel. Altogether, 35 ships sailed from Italy during this period – more than from any other country.

THE LA SPEZIA INCIDENT

In the spring of 1946, the port of La Spezia in the north-west of Italy was still largely in ruins, especially around the harbour. Most of the seamen, fishermen and shipyard workers had been without employment for a long time and the few boats calling at the port were in the service of the British army. Signs of occupation were evident throughout the area, even though the British were steadily withdrawing their troops from Italy.

It was soon to gain world-wide attention as the departure point of two illegal immigrant ships. The La Spezia incident was one of the stormiest in the whole history of illegal immigration to Palestine and represented the peak of the Mossad's efforts to despatch ships from Italy.

At the beginning of 1946, when Yehuda Arazi was head of operations in Italy, the Mossad had bought two small vessels, *Fede*, later named *Eliahu Golomb*, and *Fenice*, renamed *Dov Hos*. After repairs and refurbishment, it was planned to use them for a major operation, in

which *Fede* would sail for Palestine with more than 1,000 people. The operation was to be a secret, to ensure that the British did not stop it. Three groups of Jewish refugees were assembled from various places in Italy and the ship loaded with abundant supplies, particularly food and provisions taken from British army stores.

The next stage was to bring the people to the port of La Spezia. Thirty-eight British army trucks set out from three assembly points hundreds of miles away. Some had been permanently commandeered from the army but were still painted with camouflage, others were borrowed from army units. All were driven by Jewish soldiers. The long journey took place as planned but near La Spezia there was an unexpected difficulty.

Rumours had spread in the district about the secret preparation of the *Fede*, the enormous amount of food on a small vessel and the hiring of a local crew who were given no details of the destination. The most logical interpretation was that it was part of an organised escape by Fascists and Nazis fleeing punishment for their war crimes. This particular rumour reached the regional leaders, who had been partisan fighters during the war, and who were keen to catch the fugitives.

As the convoy of army trucks approached La Spezia, it was discovered that units of the Italian police had mounted guard on the ship. Then the convoy was also stopped. Its commander, Israel Libertovsky, who was disguised as a major in the British army, claimed that they were involved in a secret Allied operation, but this only strengthened the Italians' suspicions. When they telephoned the local British intelligence officer, Libertovsky and his interpreter, Shalhevet Freier, tried to escape but the area was completely surrounded. The Italians still believed that they had caught a large group of Fascists, but the British understood at once what had happened. Major Hills of British intelligence sent an urgent report to the War Office, to the effect that he had prevented a large-scale immigration operation and had been able to catch the ringleaders with their supplies, ship and communications. He declared that illegal immigration to Palestine had been dealt a grave blow.

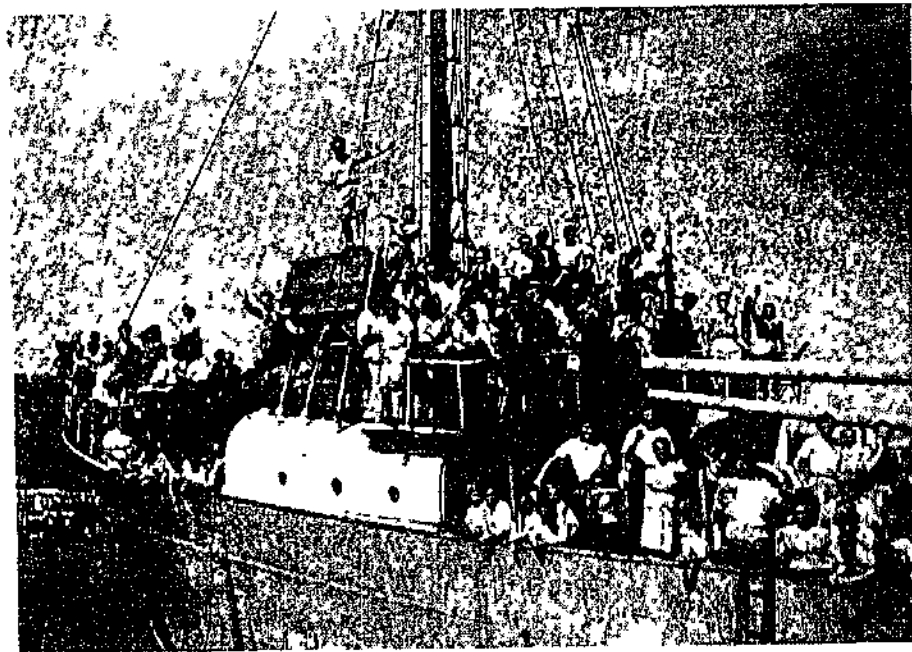
Yehuda Arazi also understood the gravity of the blow. Immediately after the seizure of the *Fede*, her sister ship the *Fenice* was also taken, a thorough search of the Mossad offices was carried out and the shipping agents and Italian crew members in the service of the Mossad were arrested. All Palestinian soldiers remaining in Italy had their leave cancelled. Army stores were inspected and supervision tightened. It was obvious that the failure of this operation and the loss of such a large part of the Mossad's property was going to damage its ability to



10. Immigrant ship *Medinat HaYehudim*, October 1947



11. La Spezia port, immigrants going aboard, May 1946



12 & 13 Immigrants during the hunger strike at La Spezia, May 1946

function. The principal result would be that the agencies bearing the financial burden, and in particular the Joint, would withdraw their support.

There was real fear that the refugees themselves would abandon their painful and hopeless attempts to reach Palestine and decide to settle in the countries where they were currently living. In view of these gloomy prospects, Yehuda Arazi decided on an audacious course of action. The convoy of trucks which was parked near the port moved down to the ship and the immigrants who had been waiting tired and hungry were allowed to board with the Italians' tacit consent. The trucks turned round and drove back to their units.

The British were still in control of the ship but the advantage had shifted to the refugees. They were together, they had plenty of food and it would be difficult to remove them. Arazi disguised himself as a refugee, stole aboard and took charge of the ship. The first confrontation occurred when a detachment of British soldiers came aboard and in the course of a search discovered that the provisions in the galley were stolen army property. The officer in charge tried to close the galley and confiscate the cans of food. Yehuda went up to him at the head of a group of refugees. Stony-faced, he uncovered the tattooed numbers on the arms of the people around him and told the commander of the detachment that they were desperate and unpredictable.

The British wanted to be rid of the problem but also maintain their tough attitude. They announced that the British food would be removed from the ship and replaced with other food. At the same time they began hastily to set up a special camp in the adjacent town to house the refugees. When reinforcements for the army arrived to implement this, Yehuda Arazi told them that the ship was booby-trapped and if one refugee was taken off, the ship and all the people aboard would be blown up.

There can be no doubt that Arazi's role was vital in making the La Spezia incident a focal event in the immigration struggle. However, the refugees themselves deserve credit for their part in the affair. Many of the passengers were former members of the Zionist youth movements or had been partisans and ghetto fighters. Now, after years of terrible suffering, during which they had shown magnificent endurance and steadfastness, they were ready for any sacrifice to reach the Land of Israel and this was the decisive factor in the struggle. The British authorities could not risk provoking these desperate people into "tragic acts", in full view of the world press, because they were not allowed to go to their own homeland.

In Palestine where the *Fede* drama was followed closely, 15 Jewish leaders declared a hunger strike in solidarity with the striking refugees. Protests were voiced in many parts of the world including Great Britain itself. Ernest Bevin, outwardly still obstinate and firm, secretly sought a way out and a solution was offered to him by Harold Laski, a prominent Jewish member of the ruling Labour Party, who happened to be in Italy at that time. He went to the ship on the fourth day of the strike, together with Raffaello Cantoni, president of the Jewish community in Italy.

The main protagonists crowded into the small captain's cabin - Harold Laski, Raffaele Cantoni, Yehuda Arazi and representatives of the Italians, the refugees and the British army. After the meeting, Laski wrote a report which he sent to his Government, in which he described the difficult negotiations. Arazi, whose total authority on the ship was immediately visible, told Laski that there were weapons hidden on the ship which he would show him, and every day a group of refugees would commit suicide in protest against British obduracy. Laski, for his part, wanted a solution that would preserve his country's prestige. He had already agreed to permit the passengers free access to the pier and town and had promised to arrange the release of the Italian shipping agents who had helped the refugees. He also promised to obtain the release of the commanders of the convoy, who were due to be court martialled (this promise was not kept, however, and Israel Libertovsky and Shalhevet Freier were sentenced to three months in prison).

The main problem was how to react to Arazi's demand of "Palestine or death". Laski tried to find out if this was only a dramatic bluff, but after speaking with others aboard the ship, he came to the conclusion that this was how most of the people felt. He decided that he had no alternative but to advise the Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, to send the refugees to Palestine.

Harold Laski had not been appointed an official arbitrator and he was not empowered to conclude any agreements. In such circumstances, the other participants were worried about the results of the meeting. The hunger strike had reached breaking point and people were beginning to collapse from weakness. There were also the first signs of a disagreement about the ethics of starving children and old people for political purposes. The Mossad needed an achievement of some kind and consequently a paper was prepared, in which Laski undertook to persuade his Government to permit the refugees to go to Palestine and in return Yehuda Arazi promised to have the hunger strike called off at once.

In the 75th hour of the hunger strike, the refugees were summoned to a parade. In the presence of Harold Laski, representatives from the media and important visitors, Yehuda Arazi announced the terms of the agreement and the cessation of the strike. Despite their tiredness and hunger, the refugees found enough strength to sing "Hatikva", the Jewish national anthem.

The actual document was vague, because Laski could not guarantee that the Government would accept his recommendations, and if not, Arazi might continue the struggle. The refugees remained at La Spezia for another month, during which time the focus of the dispute had shifted to Arazi and the leadership of the community in Palestine.

The British Government agreed to Laski's proposal to end the affair while simultaneously playing down its significance. Negotiations on the actual document were carried out with representatives of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem, where it was agreed to permit two-thirds of the passengers to immigrate to Palestine at once, under the official quota for 1946. The others would be allowed in during the course of the year. The British calculation was clear; the Government allocated 1,500 immigration certificates each month in any case, so the La Spezia people were merely being allowed in at the expense of others. They would arrive in stages and there would be no question of a victory because the overall number of immigrants would not exceed the permitted quota. The Jewish Agency would lose face by having to ignore the list of waiting refugees and to give preference to the group recommended by the Mandatory authorities.

Moshe Sharett and Golda Meir accepted the proposal. Laski sent off a telegram to Yehuda Arazi, informing him that he had fulfilled his part of the bargain and hoping that the whole affair could now be concluded. British embassy staff went from Rome to La Spezia to prepare certificates for 600 refugees. Arazi, caught up in the drama of the situation, believed that he still possessed bargaining powers and sent the officials away. In a telegram to Palestine he rejected the agreement and asked, "Who gave you the authority to negotiate in our name? . . . The people will not crack. The struggle will go on till victory."

Arazi attempted to regain control of the situation. With his brilliant organising ability, he put on a Passover dinner - Seder - for all the refugees, in which the emphasis was on the exodus from slavery to freedom. He turned the First of May into a "demonstration of independence and resolution". The name of the ship was changed to *Eliahu Golomb*, after the commander of the Hagana, who had recently died. The second ship, *Fenice*, which had also been brought into the

harbour in accordance with the agreement with Laski, was renamed *Dov Hos*. The entrance to the port was called the Zion Gate.

But the hoped-for impetus was not found; the refugees were afraid to lose what they had already achieved and longed for an end to the affair.

Avigur, head of the Mossad, arrived and continued the negotiations with the British from aboard the ship. It was eventually agreed that all the refugees should go to Palestine in the two ships, on the basis of the quota for the next two months. The ships sailed for Haifa in the middle of May 1946. Yehuda Arazi, who was thought to be a refugee, disembarked in secret. As far as he was concerned, an unpleasant episode was over. Much later, in retrospect, he found cause for satisfaction. By his actions, he turned La Spezia from an operational failure into a political success. The Mossad, through the immigration of 1,014 refugees, proved that it could stand up to Great Britain.²¹

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



VALLENTINE MITCHELL

1991