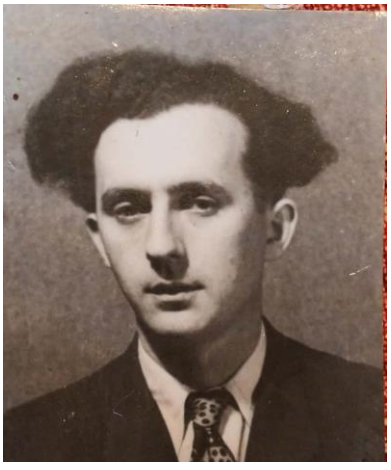
משפחת פלאט

אריאל פלאט מספר את סיפורו.

שמות הורי דינה ומנדל. אני נולדתי 22.5.1945 ברוסיה, כשהייתי בגיל שנתיים נדדתי עם הוריי בשבילי הבריחה דרך פולין, גרמניה ושוויץ עד שהגיענו לצרפת ושם למרסיי וסט. בסט עלינו על האקסודוס. כתינוק אין לאריאל הרבה זיכרונות מהדרך. כל שנשאר בזיכרונו כתינוק שבמעבר בשוויץ הביע משאלה "לגור במקום הנפלא הזה". בבית הוריו נושאי השואה ,הבריחה והעפלה היו בגדר טאבו שאין מדברים עליו. כך גם כשאריאל בגר הוא נמנע מלשאול ומלדבר על הנושאים האלה.

בתאריך 15-14 מאי 1948 עלתה המשפחה ארצה דרך מרסיי על האנייה פרובידנס. תוך כדי ההפלגה על סיפון הפרובינס אביו גוייס לצהל. זיכרון ילדות נוסף שיש לאריאל מאותם ימים בצרפת בטרם העלייה היו זוג דובדבנים ואגס טעימים ביותר, עליהם התענג שעות רבות. בהגיע המשפחה ארצה היא התמקמה בחיפה. שם אריאל למד, השלים תואר שני בטכניון ואת הדוקטורט עשה בארה"ב ב- Carnegie Mellon College . בתום לימודי הדוקטורט אריאל נשאר בארה"ב, עבד ב- Hewlett-Packard והקים משפחה עם אשתו דורית, ביחד גידלו 5 בנים ו- 12 נכדים.

תמונות משפחה



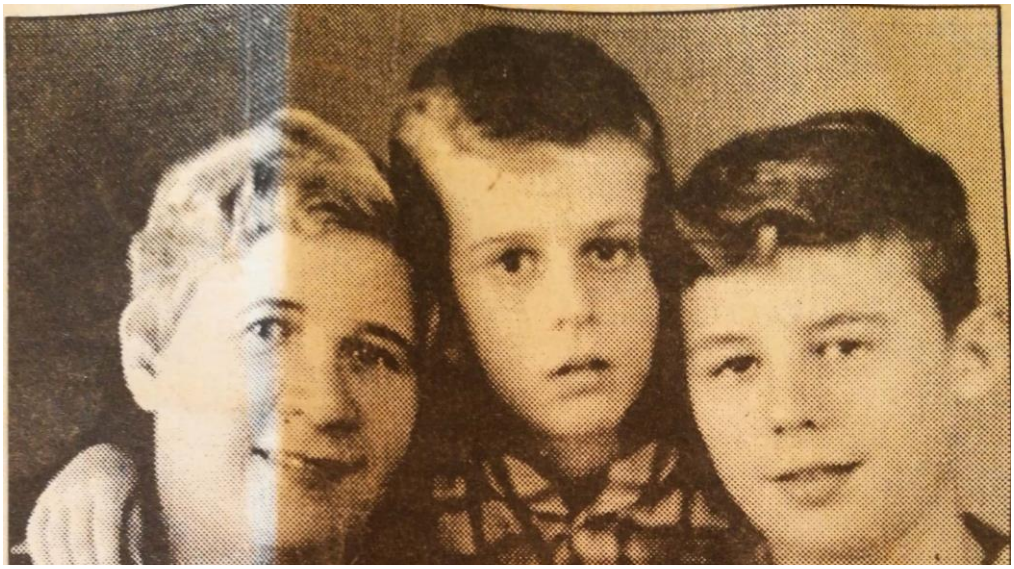
מנדל



דינה



אריאל



<u>אריאל, האח הצעיר מיכאל ואמא דינה</u>



<u>על אניית הגרוש</u>





במחנה אמסטאו





אמא וחברים במחנה אמסטאו



אבא וחברים במחנה סנגוורדן



Two Exodus refugees meet for first time, share their sagas



After finally arriving in Palestine after being turned away on the historic ship Exodus (center), Ariel Flat (right, in top photo) poses with mother and younger brother Michael in Haifa in 1947. In bottom photo, Exodus veteran Marie Brandstetter (second from left) speaks with other Holocaust survivors following Temple Beth Jacob service.

JOSHUA MECKLER
Bulletin Staff

Ariel Flat attended a Yom HaShoah service last week because a friend suggested that he and his wife ought to go.

Marie Brandstetter attended the same service to speak about her experiences on the Exodus 1947 ship.

Little did they know that the evening would prove to be a reunion.

It turned out that Flat, too, sailed on the famous vessel with his parents. He was only 1-1/2 years old at the time, however, and personally remembers nothing of the voyage. So after the service at Temple Beth Jacob in Redwood City, it was time to ask questions.

Brandstetter — who was 14 when the Exodus made its historic voyage from Marseilles to Palestine — was more than happy to answer.

She told him she was forced to wear the same clothes for more than two months.

She told him about the songs that the refugees sang on the boat — a form of enjoyment they badly needed to maintain their sanity on the crowded and filthy vessel.

She also related how the Jews had a special name for the British naval officers who pursued the boat and eventually rammed and boarded it. The refugees called them "The Gestapo with red caps," after the red hats that the sailors wore.

"My parents hadn't talked about it much before," said Flat, 52, now a Palo Alto resident. But talking to Brandstetter brought the event alive for him at an especially poignant time — the 50th anniversary of Israel's birth.

Meeting Brandstetter "was exciting," he said. "It was wonderful."

Storytelling was the theme of the evening. Before an audience that extended into the overflow area, eight survivors began the service by walking to the bimah, accompanied by the sound of their tape-recorded voices encapsulating their stories.

The focal point of the service came when Brandstetter, 65, and Ruth Gruber, 86, each gave speeches. Gruber, the only American correspondent to cover the voyage and author of a book on the topic, set the stage with her historical recollections. Brandstetter, who lives in Burlingame, followed by fleshing out the details with her personal account.

Having spoken at schools but never at a service, Brandstetter was nervous — sometimes backing up to repeat passages. But what stood out was her intensity. At all times, she was passionate and strong-voiced, keeping the audience — young and old alike — hanging on her every word.

She climaxed her speech with an affirmation of Israel.

"Now, 50 years later, there is a free Jewish state to be proud of, one that stands tall among all nations of the world," she said.

"This is a small part of my story on the Exodus, and I can tell you tonight that it was all worth it."

The circumstances that brought Brandstetter and Flat to the fabled ship were actually quite different.



For Brandstetter, joining the passengers on Exodus was a matter of defiance. She had spent much of the war on the run through the former Soviet Union and Central Asia with her mother and brother, after her father had left to join the Polish army.

After the war ended, the family discovered that the father had died in a concentration camp, and Brandstetter's mother remarried.

This greatly angered Brandstetter, and as teenagers are wont to do, she made an impulsive decision: She and a girlfriend planned to try to illegally enter Palestine with the Youth Aliyah group.

"I was a little rebel, and I wanted to go to Palestine so badly," Brandstetter recalled.

Flat's family, meanwhile, was motivated to board the Exodus by a different event — but one equally traumatic. He and his parents had spent the war in Russia and returned to Poland afterward because Flat's father wanted to find his family.

What Flat's father was told, however, was that the family, including five children, had been ordered by the Nazis to dig a hole in front of their house and climb in. Then, they were buried alive.

"We didn't stay in Poland for long," Flat said.

Instead, the family decided to try to reach Palestine.

Nearly 4,500 refugees — including 1,000 orphans — boarded the boat at Marseilles, France, even though the vessel had been built for a crew of just 600. From the start of the voyage, many of the passengers sensed an impending disaster.

"It's a miracle the ship didn't tip over and drown us all," Brandstetter said in her speech.

Besides being crowded, conditions on board were, Brandstetter said, "pathetic." The swaying motion made nearly everyone sick.

Flat's mother staked out a place on deck so the baby could breathe fresh air and hopefully escape the diseases that ran rampant on the vessel. Nevertheless, he suffered from sores that had to be scraped off his scalp.

Still, Brandstetter told the audience, "We were Jewish people. We were conditioned in the concentration camps before, so we could endure more of the same.

"All we could hope for was to be free of persecution and of this disgusting ship called the Exodus."

As the vessel approached Palestine, 11 British navy boats began stalking it. The situation exploded when the boats surrounded the Exodus and soldiers began to board.

"They attacked us with tear gas and water hoses," Brandstetter said. "We fought back with tin cans."

In her biography, "Mania's Angel," Brandstetter wrote, "This was real life and real fighting, and we took a good beating. But, I must say, there were many split heads among the soldiers, too."

During the melee, three people were killed — two 16-year-old orphans and first mate Bill Bernstein, a San Franciscan. The Exodus lost its starboard wall when it was rammed.

Brandstetter sustained a flesh wound in her leg after being hit by a ricocheting bullet. No one could treat her immediately and she still has a scar.

But that's not the only mark the incident left on her. "There was so much screaming and crying going on," she told the audience. "I still can hear it today in my mind."

As has been well documented, the Exodus' passengers were denied admission to Palestine. The Exodus docked in Haifa, but the British forced the refugees to board prison ships and returned them to France. Finally, the British took the passengers to displaced persons camps in Germany — a key event that galvanized world opinion in favor of the creation of a Jewish state.

Brandstetter wrote in her autobiography, "As we began to disembark the 'hell ship,' as most of us called it, we held our heads up high and began to sing the Israeli national anthem, and did not stop singing until the last one of us was off the last of the three ships.

"We knew as soon as the Jews received a country they could call home, we, the refugees of the Exodus, would be the first to enter legally."

Soon after Israel's Declaration of Independence, Flat's family boarded a vessel called the Providence, the first ship to sail to the state of Israel. On board the ship, Flat's father was drafted into the Israeli army.

Brandstetter, however, traveled a different road to Israel. After the Exodus experience, she was reunited with her family. She wound up immigrating with her brother, Sam, to San Francisco in 1950 and didn't reach Israel until she visited the country in 1966.

She took that trip to see the remains of the Exodus, to meet with the friend who accompanied her on the boat and to see the Jewish state. "It was a very special experience for me," she recalled. "I finally got to see what I had wanted to see in the first place."

Living in San Francisco, Brandstetter went on to marry, working with her husband for many years in his shoe store. She has four children and 11 grandchildren.

Today she does speaking engagements and enjoys spending time with her family. She's also working on printing an additional 2,500 copies of her self-published autobiography to donate to Holocaust museums worldwide.

Flat came to the United States for doctoral studies at Carnegie-Mellon College in 1974 and never moved back to Israel. He now works at Hewlett-Packard and is married with five children.

Still, despite living so close to each other and having ties to the Jewish community, Brandstetter and Flat never knowingly crossed paths here — until last week.

Brandstetter later said, "After I got home that night, I couldn't believe that I had met someone there who was [a baby] when he was on the Exodus.

"His mother had told him the same stories but he hadn't put it together."

As Flat took his leave of her after the service, Brandstetter said to him, "We have to meet [again], to talk about the Exodus.

"I have to teach you now."



Photo — Bram Goodwin

More Yom HaShoah sto
Pages 14

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