

## Our “Exodus 1947” Story

As remembered by Yochanan and Rivka Levy and additional sources<sup>1</sup>:

### ‘Illegal Immigration’ - Aliya B’<sup>2</sup>.

The offices of the Federation of Jewish Societies in France<sup>3</sup> (FSJF) and ‘Hehalutz’ worked from the same building in Marseilles where I lived with my parents in 1940-1941. The Hehalutz Group organized for the incoming holocaust refugees eleven reception camps<sup>4</sup> from **Bandol**, East of Marseilles, to **Salon** on the river Rhone. The total capacity of these camps was about 1,650 persons. At the disposal of the Hehalutz Group were also two large former French army camps at **Grand Arenas** with a capacity of 10,000 persons. All these camps were equipped by the American Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC - ‘**Joint**’).

### Preparations for the ‘Exodus 1947’ sailing

#### Arrival of Holocaust survivors scheduled to sail.

On June 30, 1947 the first group of holocaust survivors arrived by rail at **Le Canet** freight depot near Marseilles harbor. A total of 6,000 refugees arrived by five trains. Forty ‘Overland’ trucks, each to transport 30 refugees, brought the refugees from the trains to different camps in the Marseilles region. These refugees, from the camps in Germany, were clad in a kind of yellow-brown ‘uniform’. The origin of these hand sewn uniforms was US Army blankets, handed out in the camps. 5,000 refugees, scheduled to board the next boat were in the camps by July 7, 1947.

#### The organization of transportation.

172 trucks were hired for bringing people from the camps to the harbor; of them 20 on standby, in case of hitches on the 200 km trip. A reconnaissance fleet of 20 taxicabs was also recruited, for the use of

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<sup>1</sup> Halamish: ‘**Exodus – The Real Story**’,

(Hebrew edition) Tel Aviv University; Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1990

Jacques Derogy: ‘**La Loi du Retour**’, (French edition) Fayard, 1969.

Anita Shapira, editor: ‘**Haapala**’, (Hebrew) Studies in the History of Illegal Immigration into Palestine 1934-1948; Aviva Halamish: ‘The Exodus sea battle on the shores of Israel’, pp. 302-333. Tel Aviv University; Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> The Institute for Illegal Immigration – in Hebrew: Hamossad le-Alyia B’.

<sup>3</sup> Organizations who acted in direct concert with ‘Hehalutz’ (Pioneers) and the ‘Aliya B’ Institution, 24, Rue des Convalescents, Marseille

<sup>4</sup> La Madrague de Montredon in Marseille, La Ciotat, Le Bec d’Aigle, Bandol, Billa Barry; the logistic centers were in Saint Jérôme, Villa les Tilleuls.

personnel from Alyia B' to cruise along the convoys for control and emergency repairs in case of need.

In these very days French Trade Unions declared a transportation strike. Hehalutz made the Drivers Union a gift of one million francs, ostensibly a 'cash contribution'. In exchange the Trade Unions bestowed upon Hehalutz transit passes to allow moving through strikers' roadblocks.

### Moving the crowd

On Wednesday night, between July 9 and 10, 1947, the starting signal was given. Refugees and local Jews - among them Rivka and I - were to board the trucks between 22:00 and 03:00 hours. A total of 12 convoys, of 12 to 13 trucks each, started from the camps at intervals of 50 km between them, and by different roads.

The first trucks were programmed to reach **Sete** harbor, at a distance of approximately 200 km from the different camps, at about 03:00 hours. Control and regulation points were established in **Arles** and **Salon**. Five hours on the road necessitated, of course, to take into consideration rest stops for the comfort of the travelers. The consequence was that here and there a vehicle left the convoy, and it was necessary for all the trucks in the convoy to wait for it to resume its place in the convoy. The last point of rendezvous was at about ten km from Sete harbor.

### Escorting the convoys

Rivka and I were ordered to join the convoy trucks at **Caillol-A'** camp.. Our function, as French speakers, was to represent the immigrants at road blocks with the police and strikers. Our duty was also to make the drivers respect the time tables for arrival at check points on the road. The escort sat beside the driver; he or she was given sealed envelopes with directions for the roads to be taken and the time table for the arrival at check points.

An additional problem in these days was to find supply points of wood for the gasogene<sup>5</sup> burners that had to be replenished every ten to fifteen km. The time taken to replenish the burners was taken into consideration in the marching orders.

The initial time table became distorted when stretches of the road were closed and opened alternately, because of the 1947 **Tour de France** race between Montpellier and Carcassonne. Newspaper photographers and cameramen from MGM and other services - CNN did not exist then -

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<sup>5</sup> A partial oxidation of coal or wood producing fuel gas in huge burners mounted on vehicles; there was a shortage of liquid fuel after the war.

were stationed all along the road and also ‘perpetuated’ by the same token the passage of some of our convoys. These photographs represented excellent evidence for British Intelligence. As a consequence of all these delays, our convoy reached Sete only at 05:00 hours.

### **‘SS President Warfield’**

Our truck entered Sete harbor in the early hours of the morning. There were lines upon lines of trucks with refugees on board that came in before us. We, the escorts, had to wait for a long time before we reached our objective: the gangway of the American river boat, lying low in the water, SS President Warfield<sup>6</sup>.

Aliya-B’ representatives bought the President, scheduled to be scrapped, in the USA. She was brought to the Mediterranean to be prepared in Italy for carrying about 4,500 persons. There were many logistical needs: wooden four-story bunks with 2,000 places on the lower D’ deck, 2,000 on C’ deck and 1,000 on B’ deck. The upper deck was reserved for the crew and sickrooms. Food, water and fuel for a ten day cruise in the Mediterranean had to be purchased, prepared and stored. All this in days of strict rationing in after-war Europe.

### **Boarding**

The ‘President’s square silhouette and high black stack protruded in Sete harbor, that berthed generally wine-tanker from North Africa. The boat was tied by her stern to St.-Louis Mole, Quai-de-la-Consigne (Custom pier); her bow pointing seawards.

Boarding the boat proceeded through four openings. Every 30 minutes 300 persons boarded the boat and were led by ushers to different decks. The boarding was completed by 11:30 hours.

French authorities were told that on board were 4,052 immigrants going to Columbia. Actually 4,554 persons boarded the boat: 1,282 women, 700 of them pregnant, 1,672 children; all the others were men and youth.

It was very crowded; one nearly had to crawl through the passageways. The passengers came from different continents: Europe, Africa, Asia and America and spoke 23 different languages. All were idealistic Zionists from all parts of the political spectrum.

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<sup>6</sup> The ‘President’ was originally a river boat of 1,814 tons with an engine of 3,600 hp. The boat used to carry up to 700 passengers on the Potomac River between Washington and Baltimore.

The French authorities refused to give permission for the sailing. They claimed the captain<sup>7</sup> had no proper ticket and that neither the construction of the boat nor the load of passengers bore appropriate certification. In order to stop the sailing to bring illegal immigrants to Palestine, Britain put heavy pressure on the French government.

For three months British destroyers were already tracking the preparations of the 'President' and her movements in Italy and France. Even so Alyia B' and Hehalutz Headquarters as well as the command of the boat decided the sailing was to be going on anyway.

### **Captain Ike's gamble**

It was nearly impossible to bring a boat out of Sete harbor without the help of a pilot. Money and presents were showered upon the pilot who was supposed to steer the boat out of the shallow harbor, but in the end he did not show up.

The engine was started and in spite of the authorities' refusal, captain Ike took a risk. The police guard on the quay 'was taken care of' with a number of bottles of whiskey. The crew succeeded to untie the boat while the policemen were blissfully asleep. The boat started its engine and left the quay at 05:00 hours on Friday, July 11, 1947 without a pilot.

### **Complications**

One of the ropes fell into the water and became entangled in the screw. A sailor had to dive under the boat in order to untangle it. A short while later the boat became stuck on the sandy bottom of the shallow harbor and also collided with the pier. Hard work had to be done until the boat succeeded to leave Sete harbor on Friday morning at 06:30 hours.

As soon as the 'President' reached the open sea she was spotted by the British Navy; this came as no surprise since it was impossible to completely hide her outfitting. The destroyer 'HMS Mermaid' began to escort the 'President' from the moment she reached the Mediterranean.

### **Conditions on board.**

A strict discipline was enforced. 150 responsible persons were designed to go to the kitchens and bring each two pails of food for 30 persons. Food was varied and of 3,000 calories per person and per day: biscuits, canned meat, cheese and fishes. Four times daily water, tea and coffee were distributed. Washing was to be done only with sea water. The

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<sup>7</sup> Yitzhak 'Ike' Rabinowitz

pallets were terrible, especially the lower ones where there were three tiers one above the other.

### My Sailing Diary

I wrote my **diary** meticulously in a copybook, to serve as memory of these days. I drew the map of the cruise that is going, later, to figure in Derogy's book 'La Loi du Retour'. Most of the time I stayed close to our leader Mordechai Rojzman and did my best to translate his words from Yiddish to English and French when he needed to address the British Commander on board, Colonel Gregson or French government officials. These were also moments when I could come up on the deck to breathe some fresh air.

#### Saturday, July 12

Another warship closes in on us. Two aircraft from her deck fly about 20 meters above us and photograph our boat continuously. At noon a destroyer closes in at starboard to about 50 meters and hails us by megaphone: "Do you carry illegal immigrants to Palestine?". Since we do not reply the destroyer takes up position about two miles to stern.

Our progress is intentionally slow - about 12 to 13 knots - in order not reveal the maximum speed our boat is able to develop. At midnight we advance our watches one hour. The sea is calm.

The captain calls through the p.a. system and orders us not to step out on the main deck whenever a plane flies above us. The main point is to stay calm.

In the afternoon hours the boat sails by Pantelleria island in the Sicily straights. The sea is getting higher. During the night a baby is born - one more passenger on board.

#### Sunday, July 13

An American freighter closes in to salute us. A British destroyer makes a courtesy visit on her board. Another baby is born. At noon the boat sails near Malta.

During the night two more British vessels come to escort us: destroyer R36 and cruiser 'Ajax'<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Light Cruiser Ajax was the unit that engaged the German Battleship Graf Spee at the mouth of River Plate on December 13, 1939. See W.S. Churchill, WWII, "The Gathering Storm", pp. 517 - 523

Monday, July 14

Loudspeakers play the French hymn, 'La Marseillaise', in honor of the French Independence Day. The boat stops in her tracks because of engine trouble. It is a hot day and there is no breeze. Sewage pipes are blocked. Daily water ration is down to half a liter per person.

The captain signals home: "4.515 passengers, 36 crew; 4 life-boats for 37 persons each, 3 big rafts, 43 dinghies for 25 persons, 10 rubber boats for 10 persons".

In the evening we are at the height of Crete.

Tuesday, July 15

The ship's new name is announced on loudspeakers: "Exodus 1947". Passengers prepare placards<sup>9</sup> and national flags.

The young mother who gave birth on Monday passes away. The boat stops its engine at 18:00 hours while her young body is lowered into the waves. The baby is given to a young mother suckling a child.

Wednesday, July 16 - Operation 'Igloo'

Now the British Navy escorts us with five destroyers under the command of the light cruiser 'Ajax'. Along the Libyan shores two more vessels, minesweepers, come to escort us. Our commander and our captain feel the moment of combat is nearing. At 02:00 hours begins the destruction of documents and passports. Since 01:00 hours the boat sails along the Egyptian shores.

'Ajax' comes near us four times in order to impress us with her power and try to persuade the leaders of 'Exodus' and her passengers, by hailing us, in English, Polish, German and a sort of Yiddish, to stop our progress toward the shores of Palestine and surrender to the British forces until 05:00 hours. Captain Ike tries to turn the boat about, into the open sea., but the British block our path.

'Exodus' blasts her siren to signal her distress. The British fire flares and tear gas in order to blind crew and defenders. British Marines, armed and wearing gas masks, board our A' deck. Among the passengers are dead and wounded. The suddenness of the attack surprises the 1,500 defenders. Only 800 of them are able in the noise and disorder to reach their defensive stations.

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<sup>9</sup> "1917 Balfour Declaration – 1947 Cyprus" - "Soldiers we go home! Why don't you?"

The immigrants hurl food preserves on the Marines. We are answered with jets of ice cold water . A number of soldiers try to climb aboard and fall into the water between the two vessels. The fight lasts for about twenty minutes that seem like an eternity to me.

To destroyers on both sides of 'Exodus' hurtle forward savagely and ram us with their bows in order to force us to change direction. Some defenders lose their balance under the choc. The Navy sizes this moment and destroyer R19, 'Childers', throws a boarding bridge on the 'Exodus's deck. About twenty Marines succeed to get a hold on the main deck. The other destroyer, 'Chieftain', rams the other side of 'Exodus'; on C' deck appear two breaches about 70 cm above the water line.

A few moments before the ramming I succeed to extricate Rivka from her bunk that was just where the breach appeared and bring her to the upper deck.

Eight British Marines succeed to reach the 'Exodus's command bridge. They haul Bill Bernstein<sup>10</sup> out from the bridge and club him unconscious. Captain Ike disconnects the main steering wheel and tries to pilot the boat from the engine room. The surrounded Marines on the bridge make use of their sub-machine guns. There are casualties. Zvi Jakubovich, a fifteen year old orphan is killed from a head wound. Another attempt by the British to board 'Exodus' is shunned: when one of the soldier tries to use his hand gun, one of the defenders drops a life raft on the soldiers. Reverend Grauel<sup>11</sup>, wrapped in a US flag, tries to save the surrounded British soldiers on the command bridge from lynch and persuades them to lay down their weapons. Meanwhile there are 146 wounded, some of them severely, and sick among us,. Three defenders are killed, five are dying. Twenty British soldiers are taken prisoners, most of them wounded.

'Exodus' is rammed seven times. There are breaches of 12 meters on one side and 5 meters of the other side. Water begins to penetrate the hold and passengers panic. 2.000 passengers splash in rising water. The boat still proceeds under her own power in a general northwards direction toward Haifa. She is now 25 miles off shore and attacked by six destroyers.

On Thursday, July 18 at 03:30 hours, the fighting subsides and surrender talks begin. At the end 'Exodus' stops in her tracks, deadly damaged,

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<sup>10</sup> A volunteer American sailor who died later of his wounds.

<sup>11</sup> The Reverend John Grauel of Worcester, Massachusetts, volunteered aboard 'President' in Baltimore.

water continuing to penetrate through the breaches. At 06:00 hours the British send over medical help.

Escorted by British vessels the boat sails on at 13 knots under her own power towards Haifa. She berths there at 16:30 hours.

### **Haifa and transfer to the prison ships**

#### **Thursday and Friday, July 18 and 19**

When 'Exodus' berths in Haifa the town is put under strict curfew. Spontaneously the immigrants break out in the 'Hatikva' hymn.

Soldiers of the 6<sup>th</sup> Paratrooper Brigade<sup>12</sup> form a 'reception committee' for the immigrants. Three killed defenders are brought down first, after them 47 wounded and sick, together with their families. They are brought respectively to Haifa hospitals and Atlit detention camp. The other immigrants are handed out flyers in four languages asking them to disembark in an orderly fashion and to board three ships going to bring them to Cyprus. The disembarkation goes on until 01:00 hours on July 19.

There is resistance to the enforced disembarkation. Soldiers use their truncheons and injure a number of immigrants; among them a nurse by the name of Sima who is brought down on a stretcher, her head bandaged.

On the pier a body search takes place; people are sprayed with DDT in groups of ten, men and women alternately. The few belongings – a rucksack per person – are left on the pier. We are told "they will be returned to us in Cyprus in another 17 to 24 hours".

Immediately after the disinfections begins the boarding of 4,493 immigrants - by the counting of the British - into barbed wire and iron bars cages set up in the holds and decks of the three deportation ships<sup>13</sup>. Because of the body searches and disinfections families have become separated. The British authorities allow the representatives of the United Nations<sup>14</sup> to watch the transfer of the 'illegal immigrants' to the deportation ships. Rumors spread among the immigrants that we are going to be deported to camps in Cyprus.

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<sup>12</sup> In Palestine they are called 'Poppies' - for the color of their berets

<sup>13</sup> Liberty Ships that broke the German embargo on Britain in WWII: 'Empire Rival', 'Ocean Vigor' and 'Runnymede Park'; 1,500 immigrants are embarked on each boat.

<sup>14</sup> Emil Sandström and Vladimir Simic from the UN Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP).



Rivka and I board the last ship, the ‘Runnymede Park’, that serves as a kind of flag-ship of the convoy. Friends<sup>15</sup> from our ‘agricultural training’ group are boarding the ‘Empire Rival’.

### Friday, July 20

Boarding the deportation ships is completed by 05:30 hours. The ships leave Haifa port between 06:00 and 06:30 hours. On board ‘Empire Rival’, paratroopers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade - called the ‘Poppies’ - guard the prisoners. ‘Ocean Vigor ‘ and ‘Runnymede Park’ are guarded by soldiers of the 87<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Royal Gunners. Lt. Colonel Gregson<sup>16</sup> is given the overall command of the escort. The immigrants-prisoners make an effort to pad the cold steel floor of their cages with clothing - the lucky ones with a blanket - and settle down. About 1,600 men and women lay down on the very floor of the hold measuring 18 by 20 meters.

### Skipping Cyprus

From a Greek sailor of the ship’s crew we learn that this night or at the latest next morning we shall reach Cyprus. 24 hours later, when the ship does not reach Cyprus, we feel we have been cheated. Instead of sailing North-West to Cyprus, the ship now sails due South-West - as far as we can make out from the shadows cast by the sun.

The three prison ships are escorted by the light cruiser ‘Ajax’, two destroyers and three mine-sweepers. Our ‘flotilla’ sails on westwards, getting farther and farther away from the Eastern Mediterranean shores and Cyprus.

### Sunday, July 21

Food is distributed to the prisoners: carrot and potato soup, 4 biscuits and tea; in the evening we receive a spoonful of jam for three and a meat preserve for 20 persons. We stand in line to obtain a little yellowish drinking water. Sea water is used for washing and in the toilets.

Commanders of ‘Exodus’ stole aboard our ship in Haifa. They name Mordechai Rojzman, one of the leaders of the ‘Shomer Hatzair’<sup>17</sup> movement in the refugee camps in Germany, to contact the commanding officer of the expulsion forces, Lt. Colonel Gregson. From among the

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<sup>15</sup> Miriam Levy (she was killed in a suicide bomber attack in Jerusalem on June 11, 2003), Lily Hershkovitz and Mado Langenauer of the ‘Hachshara’ near Perigueux in France; as well as Albert Catarivas, brother-in-law of Leonard Bundheim, a friend from Lyons in France.

<sup>16</sup> Lt. Col. MI, commanding the 87<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Royal Gunners.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Hashomer Hatzair’ (Young Pioneers) is a Zionist socialist movement, struggling for immigration and settlement in a two nation - Jewish and Arab - Palestine.

immigrants aboard 'Runnymede Park' I am chosen to serve as interpreter between Mordechai's and the British officer.

### **Expulsion to France**

The commander of the British forces lets us know that we are going to be expelled to France.

In the night between July 21 and 22, London announces officially that as a result of talks between Britain and France and agreements signed last March, illegal immigrants will be returned to the port of their departure.

Days go by and nothing happens. On Saturday, July 26 we sail along Pantelleria island.

On July 28 we are already 20 days at sea since we boarded the expulsion-prison ships in Haifa "for a short 18 hours sailing".

### **Port-de-Bouc**<sup>18</sup>

The French government decides on Friday, July 25 that the three expulsion-prison ships shall drop anchor at the small crude oil harbor, Port-de-Bouc. The French propose that we disembark and obtain permission to stay on in France or can refuse to leave the ships.

### **Monday, July 29**

The deportation-prison ships enter French territorial waters through the narrow Port-de-Bouc channel. The ships are supposed to drop anchor in the harbor by 04:00 hours but reach it only at 07:00 hours. The British units are not allowed to approach the French coast and remain outside the four miles limit.

### **Meanwhile In Palestine**

On the morning of July 29, three 'Etzel'<sup>19</sup> fighters were executed by hanging in the fortress of Acre.

### **"Stay put!"**

A motorboat with 'Haganah'<sup>20</sup> people, reporters and photographers aboard tries to approach 'Runnymede Park, but French coast guards sent

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<sup>18</sup> A little harbor town on the Golf de Fos, about 25 km West of Marseilles

<sup>19</sup> Etzel (**Irgun** Zvai Leumi) signifies 'National Military Organization', a militant Zionist underground group, active chiefly during the period of British control of Palestine

<sup>20</sup> **Haganah** signifies 'Defense'; a paramilitary Jewish organization in Palestine. Its members fought with the British in WWII. In 1948 it formed the nucleus of the Israeli Army.

it back to harbor. Other boats appear and hail us by megaphones: “Stay on! Don’t disembark!”

At noon a number of motorboats come back with ‘Haganah’ people and hail us again: “Stay on! – The Jewish community in Palestine will do everything to bring you back home!”

Apprehensive of a terrorist act by Jewish underground organizations the British remove two of the prison ships to a distance of ten miles from shore.

### **French immigration authorities and Haganah activities**

At 08:00 hours boats of French Health and Government Services approach us. The British decide the visit will start with ‘Runnymede Park’ where there are most sick women and children. French officials and attendants come on board to meet Colonel Gregson.

The Bouches du Rhone department Prefect<sup>21</sup> asks permission to read the immigrants a message of the French government declaring that: “persons disembarking will be offered asylum in France”.

The immigrants refuse to listen to the message in the presence of the British. The Prefect comes down into the hold and reads his message. Chanan Yaakobi translates the Prefect’s message into Hebrew but negates it, by adding in Hebrew on his own content: “No need for this”. The immigrants’ delegate replies and thanks France for the generous offer of asylum, but that nevertheless it has been decided not to accept the offer and the immigrants will stay on aboard the ships. The immigrants complain to the Prefect of lack of food and water. The French decide to leave on board a number of doctors and translators.

### **Activities on the Port-de-Bouc quays**

Newspaper reporters stay on, hungry for news, as well as relatives and friends of the immigrants; among them Azriel and Berthe Herskovitz’ parents. The father declares that he will not do anything to persuade his children to disembark

The number of immigrants as reported by the French authorities is as follows:

Runnymede Park: 1,504 persons - of them 556 men, 10 of them sick; 543 women, 100 of them sick; 405 children.

OceanVigor: 1,489 persons - 657 men; 573 women, 15 of them sick; 405 children.

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<sup>21</sup> François Collaveri, Préfet des Bouches du Rhône

Empire Rival: 1,526 persons - 629 men; 606 women, 5 of them sick; 29 children.

Rivka and I are in the 'Runnymede Park's second prison cage. There are 17 groups in there, with a total of 870 immigrants. The responsible leaders, Zvi Catzenelson nicknamed Miri and Mordechai Rojzman, organize a defensive committee.

Tuesday, July 27

### **Evacuation of the sick**

The Foreigners Police Authorities in Port-de-Bouc register only 29 disembarking people, three of them with severe health problems. Five persons, among them three American sailors, who volunteered aboard 'Exodus', are evacuated from 'Runnymede Park' by French Health Service boats. Among the disembarking persons a good friend of mine from the Lyon days, Oscar Reich, who suffers from an intestine infection.

### **Communications and provisions**

Immigrants throw from time to time messages overboard; motor boats collect them and bring them ashore. In bread sent from shore are hidden mail and messages.

Days go by. Under the cover of bringing provisions aboard, several tentatives are made to smuggle representatives of Zionist Organizations aboard. On July 31, 'Scandy', a 'Palmah'<sup>22</sup> man, emissary from the Aliya B' Institute, succeeds to infiltrate 'Runnymede Park'.

Saturday, August 2

### **Britain is obstinate**

The British captain tells Mordechai Rojzman that there is no question of going back to Palestine or Cyprus and quells any of our illusions on this point. He suggests the immigrants should disembark and accept the French invitation to receive them. As a result the immigrants brake out spontaneously in the 'Hatikwa' hymn.

'Reuters' writes on August 3 that the "immigrants aboard 'Runnymede Park' are in good health, receive sufficient food and are well dressed. They even receive baskets of fresh fruit and vegetables. British soldiers also receive assistance from the French". The French authorities deny that the situation is not so pastoral and that the majority of the immigrants are not interested in obtaining refuge in France.

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<sup>22</sup> Acronym of 'Plugot Machatz', 'Striking Forces' of the Haganah

Monday, August 4

A strong wind blows and the ships begin to roll on the waves. There are rumors the immigrants will be brought to Kenya, to Tobruk or to Hamburg. Ten immigrants, members of two families, disembark; they are cat-called 'British informers'.

A kind of school is opened for the immigrants' children to learn Hebrew. Poetry is read at a cultural evening organized in the cages.

On August 5. a Geneva Red Cross physician, doctor Roland Marti, comes aboard 'Runnymede Park'.

'Runnymede Park' sails on August 6 to Marseilles-l'Etaque coaling station to take on 500 tons of coal and 100 tons drinking water.

August 7 and 8

Dr. Moshe Sne (Kleinbaum), head of the Jewish Agency's political department, sails around the three prison ships and hails us. From the deck of 'Runnymede Park' his figure is recognized but we were unable to distinguish his words. The dispensary nurse translates us his word into Yiddish.

Saturday, August 9

The immigrants are now already 38 days in the cages of the prison ships, of them 20 days in Port-de-Bouc harbor. Only 138 immigrants, out of 4,400, have disembarked and taken up the French offer of asylum. In addition to three envoys from Aliya B' Institute smuggled aboard, three babies are born and more births are expected; there are fifty pregnant women aboard. By British law every baby born aboard a British ship is considered a British citizen.

Rain is pouring and immigrants who sleep on deck come down into the holds; in consequence there is extreme crowding .

We have a problem of obtaining fresh supplies, such as tomatoes.

Sunday, July 10

News from the other ships is brought to us by the roving dentist. Four children are born on the other ships. On our ship are 65 pregnant women, 25 of them in their ninth month of pregnancy. There are 49 children

under the age of three; 90 under the age of ten. Rivka is in her third month of pregnancy.

#### Monday, August 11

One baby is born. Quarrels and disputes break out in the shower stalls.

#### Friday, August 15

Lt. Colonel Gregson is called for consultations in London. Rain pours down all day long and water infiltrates the prison holds. Mordechai asks the Colonel to intervene, but his request for opening up another hold for the 300 immigrants sleeping on deck is refused. The Colonel declares that there is enough space on shore. Mordechai proposes that he should be put under arrest, but even then the immigrants will refuse to disembark.

#### Saturday, August 16

Mordechai Rojzman addresses the immigrants: "The battle is not over with 'Exodus', we are just pioneers." The British interfere with whistles to disrupt Mordechai's address. Mordechai's replies: "There will be a day when you will have to take us into account. We are destined to succeed. Justice is with these who have no choice."

A puppet show is organized. A list of 1,300 personal belongings, that have been brought aboard in Haifa and not yet distributed, is established; among them belongings of the late volunteer sailor Bernstein, killed in the fight aboard 'Exodus' on July 16.

#### Sunday, August 17

Colonel Gregson is in London. The immigrants-prisoners on all three deportation ships organize simultaneously a hunger strike. A vocal choir is organized, banners, slogans and leaflets are prepared.

After disembarking thirty more immigrants, there remain on board 1,394 men and women. A sick man has a brawl with a soldier who insults him "Rotten Jew". We demand of the captain to transfer the soldier.

#### Monday, August 18, 1947

On my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday a hunger strike between midnight and 20:00 hours is declared. The hunger strike takes places simultaneously on the three ships. The order to strike is transmitted from one of the responsible persons aboard 'Empire Rival'. The hunger strike is to protest the continuous presence of the ships in French territorial waters as well as the

confiscation and destruction of every Hebrew publication, including prayer books, by order of Colonel Gregson.

Launches are turned back to harbor without discharging food provisions. The hunger strike is total; only pregnant women are exempted of it.

### Wednesday, August 19

Colonel Gregson is back from London.

He is presented with a complaint that soldiers throw cigarette butts and fruit peels into the prison holds.

### **Leaving Port-de-Bouc for the British Occupation Zone in Germany**

#### Thursday, August 21

Strafford Smith, director of the Middle East department in the Colonial Office, tells Berl Locker, representative of the Jewish Agency in Europe, that if the immigrants do not disembark by 18:00 hours the ships will leave for the British Zone in Germany and on arrival there the immigrants will be forcefully disembarked.

Strafford Smith adds that the soldiers will not be armed with rifles and will only carry truncheons. Jews will not be interned in the former concentration camp Bergen Belsen.

Berl Locker refuses to accept the ultimatum.

#### Friday, August 22

The immigrants do neither respond to Strafford Smith' ultimatum nor the French government proposal to accept asylum we receive through the vice-Prefect of the Bouches-du-Rhône department.

The British authorities tell the vice-Prefect that the ships will weigh anchor at 18:00 hours and sail to Hamburg in Germany with a stopover in Gibraltar.

25 tons of food is received by the three prison ships. Inside the food, parts of a radio receiver are smuggled on board, to be put together by radio hams among us. Through the radio receiver we know what goes on in Palestine and in the world. Explosives, to be used in case of need, are also smuggled aboard.

Outside the harbor, the sea heaves with a storm.

At 16:00 hours a delegation of authorized newspaper reporters is admitted on board to talk with the immigrants. The answer to their questions is uniform: "We do not want to disembark, neither in France nor in Germany. We want to go only to Israel". Franz Boyd, a British reporter

from Reuters is authorized to stay on board 'Runnymede Park on our way Westwards and North.

During the 25 days of our stay in Port-de-Bouc since July 29, 138 persons and about 40 sick babies have disembarked. 12 babies were born aboard the ships.

'Runnymede Park' weighs both anchors and sails out in the lead into the open sea. At this very instant the immigrants break out spontaneously in the hymn, 'Hatikwa'.

Outside the French territorial waters wait the cruiser 'Phoebe' and two mine-sweepers. On the radio we hear that the British intend to disembark us in Hamburg in Germany and there we shall be taken into custody in two camps in the region. The British insist that in no way will they ask the German police to keep order.

### **Gibraltar**

Tuesday, August 26

In the first light of dawn the Rock of Gibraltar reveals itself to us. Gibraltar sits on the entrance to the Atlantic Ocean and defends the access into the Mediterranean. Representatives from the Jewish community of Gibraltar approach in motor boats and identify themselves with us, the immigrants and prisoners of their own free will. They send us cigarettes, fruit, raincoats and boxes full of clothing and blankets. From the community we also receive pocket books; we were only very few to read English and enjoy the books. A copy of 'Vanity Fair' fell into my hands. Hungrily I read it from cover to cover since I had nothing else to do and it made me forget the steel plates of our prison cages' floor.

The ships take on coal. During the night our anchorage is floodlit by very strong projectors and around us depth charges explode continuously in order to prevent Jewish frogmen to sabotage the ships.

Wednesday, August 27

We are replete and in good mood. We joke about the funny manners of some immigrants; in particular a couple we nickname 'The Crackers'. They were a couple of Hungarians who collect all day long dry crackers we are given and nibble on them constantly. Later I understood that this part of a hunger symptom they acquired in the concentration camp. There are tailors who sew all day long trousers and coats from US Army blankets.



Friday, August 29

The three prison ships take to sea between 07:00 and 09:00 hours. The heavens are covered with thick clouds. The ships heave in the rising sea. Most passengers are sea sick and vomit.

**The Gulf of Biscay**Monday, September 1

In the middle of the gulf, facing the Western coasts of Portugal and Spain, a baby dies in birth aboard 'Ocean Vigor'. The convoy stops in the middle of the ocean. For the duration of committing of the small body to the waves sailors and soldiers on board and on the escort ships stand at attention and flags are flown at half mast.

Rivka is in her fourth month of pregnancy. She does not complain and takes care of herself as best as she can in these circumstances. We are afraid of what is going to happen to us when we come to Hamburg and force will be used on us to make us disembark, as the British made it clear.

Thursday, September 4

We are at the height of Hastings in England. The sea is calmer now. Food rations are diminished: 32 grams margarine, 95 grams biscuits per person per day; at noon we get some soup and in the evening noodles and corned beef.

**German shores.**Saturday, September 6

The ships come to a stop and lie at anchor one behind the other at about 08:00 hours. Vision is nul because of the fog. The shore is about 15 km away. Miri, Mordechay and Scandy confer about the best and uncompromising behavior, in 'Haganah' tradition, that should be applied: passive resistance, avoiding fatalities and making the authorities promise the 'Exodus' immigrants be given priority to be brought back to Palestine.

At 19:00 hours 'Ocean Vigor' weighs anchor and enters slowly into the Elbe estuary towards Hamburg Cuxhaven harbor.

### **Operation ‘Oasis’**

Sunday, September 7

There is a storm over the Elbe estuary. Only ‘Ocean Vigor’ sails up the river. The British brought to the port 25,000 soldiers of the ‘Desert Rats’<sup>23</sup>, among them Poles from the Anders Army, with armored cars. Because of bad weather operation ‘Oasis’ is postponed.

Inspector Peter Seaman presents the commander of the operation his letter of resignation to protest against the conditions under the which the immigrants are brought to Germany.

### **Evacuation of ‘Ocean Vigor’**

On the evening tide ‘Ocean Vigor’ is tied to mole 29 of Hamburg harbor. She is strictly guarded by about 1,500 British soldiers. The command of the immigrants put out a directive: “Nobody is to move and shall wait for the British soldiers to take you one by one from the cages to the quay.”

Monday, September 8

The evacuation of ‘Ocean Vigor’ begins at 06:00 hours. The operation is over by 10:30 hours. Immigrants were bludgeoned and injured. The exhausted immigrants are brought in three trains to Pöppendorf camp, North of Travemünde near Lübeck.

‘Empire Rival’ is tied to mole 29 at 17:00 hours.

Tuesday, September 9

### **Evacuation of ‘Empire Rival’.**

The evacuation begins at 06:00 hours and starts in order. By 08:00 hours 1,482 immigrants are evacuated. Actually ‘Giora’ (Elchanan Vanchutzker) and ‘Gad’ (Micha Perlson) placed in the hold a home made bomb with a delaying device, from material smuggled on board in Port-de-Bouc.

The British are suspicious of the evacuation without resistance and make a search of the holds of the ship. Meanwhile Giora’s acid detonator is activated. The ‘Empire Rival’ immigrants are brought by three trains to Amstau camp, also near Lübeck. The transfer was quiet because of so called ‘good behavior’ of the immigrants disembarking without resistance from the ship.

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<sup>23</sup> Under the command of General Georges Surtess, commanding the ‘Sherwood Foresters

### **Evacuation of 'Runnymede Park'**

'Runnymede Park' was tied to the mole at 09:30 hours. At 10:00 we receive an ultimatum to disembark within one hour. Nobody moves. Colonel Gregson and his soldiers were replaced by special evacuation teams accompanied by Military Police. The British are in a hurry to finish the evacuation by 13:00 hours, otherwise there is no possibility to convey the immigrants to the distant camps.

By 11:20 hours MPs come aboard and prepare fire hoses. The objective is to douse the immigrants' cages with pressurized sea water until their surrender. The immigrants prepare for resistance. Mordechai Rojzman agrees to let pregnant women, among them Rivka, be evacuated; I am evacuated together with her.

Mordechai Rojzman's function as a leader is known to the British through the newspaperman Franz Boyd.

The immigrants do not evacuate and go on with their strike. The British exploit the moment when the immigrants stand up to sing the hymn and assault them with truncheons. They try to separate Rojzman and other Haganah leaders from the immigrants.

At 11:30 hours the British overcome the immigrants forcefully. Rojzman is injured, he face is bleeding and he and his colleagues are brought manacled on deck and down to the quay. At 12:15 hours the British begin to flood the main hold; the immigrants are forced to surrender, they are brought up from the cages and conveyed quickly to the trains waiting on the quay.

The evacuation of 'Runnymede Park' is over by 13:30 hours.

The British arrest 62 persons thought to be the leaders of the resistance in the ship. During the evacuation 17 men and 7 women were injured, as well as three British soldiers; many were unconscious from head wounds. By the British account the strongest resistance came from the 'Runnymede Park' immigrants.

Mordechai Rojzman is taken to the Naval Headquarters where a press conference is going to take place. The container of explosives discovered on board 'Empire Rival' is also brought to headquarters. Navy sappers succeed to neutralize the chemical detonator.

Suddenly at 15:44 hours an explosion is heard: it was the explosives container. The sappers did not discover a hidden second detonator pencil in it.

The 'Runnymede Park' immigrants are taken by train from Hamburg to Pöppendorf.

### **From Pöppendorf to Emden**

Thursday September 25

The French consul visits the camp and repeats the French government proposal to offer the 'Exodus 47' immigrants asylum. The British declare that if the immigrants refuse to accept the French offer it means they will stay on in the camps by their own free will and will receive the equivalent of 2,000 calories a day - the same ration given to the German population.

The immigrants are lodged in Nissan huts of the British army.

The British try to establish personal lists of the immigrants but encounter a refusal to identify themselves. The leadership of the immigrants takes photographs of all the immigrants and hands them out a nameless 'Exodus Certificate'.

In December 1947 the immigrants remaining in Pöppendorf are resettled in former German communication corps barracks