

Pnina Gelbard Engelman

Pnina is the only daughter of Felix / Ephraim and Liza Gelbard, born in Russia on June 20, 1945, after her father fled Poland during World War II. Pnina, immigrated to Israel for the first time on the Exodus when she was only two years old.

Recently, when she presented the certificate of the Exodus Camp in Germany, Pnina could be completed a section in her historical sequence.



The certificate states that it was issued in the Am-Stau refugee camp. This means that the Gelbard family was expelled by the British from Haifa on the Empire-Rivel deportation ship.

From the port of Hamburg, the immigrants arrived at the Am-Stau refugee camp at the beginning of September 1947. In late October and November 1947 they were transferred to a winter camp near the village of Sengwarden near the town of Wilhelmshaven.

The family immigrated to Israel for the second time and settled in Jaffa, after the UN resolution on November 29, 1947, for the end of the British mandate in Palestine and the establishing the State of Israel. Ephraim worked in the Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality and Lisa took care of everyone at WIZO.

The story of the Gelbard family's immigration is very similar to the story of other Jewish families who fled from the Nazis and their helpers to Russia and Central Asia during World War II.

At May 1945, the end of World War II. 15 million refugees wander around Europe and North Africa, trying to return to the homes and countries from which they were uprooted and deported during the war.

Among the largest refugee groups were 360,000 Jews recently released from the Nazi concentration camps. Their world is in upheaval. Their homes have been demolished, and those not destroyed have been taken by local populations more favored by the Nazis, such as the Poles, Ukrainians, Romanians, etc. These people prevented the Jews' return to their occupied homes.

Thus, while millions of other refugees headed east to their pre-war countries, the Jews from Eastern Europe headed west to the American Occupation Zones, and south to the Mediterranean shore, headed for the Land of Israel.

On the other hand, the Jewish leadership in the Land of Israel saw the Holocaust survivors as an important resource for the soon to be founded Jewish state.

The main mission of the Jewish organizations, in addition to finding the children who were scattered throughout Europe, was to provide them with a pioneering Zionist education, teach them Hebrew, train them in agriculture and other crafts and prepare them for Aliyah – homecoming to the Land of Israel.

With the population explosion in the DP camps in the American Occupation Zones, the situation reached crisis proportions, even among the strongest group of residents, members of the pioneering youth movements. Their cynicism grew, along with their distance from the pioneering ethos. This crisis situation required drastic action by the Jewish leadership in the Land of Israel to rekindle hope in the hearts of camp residents.

Rumors spread throughout the DP camps of what American journals described as a "Mass Exodus" prepared by the Jewish leadership in the Land of Israel using a giant ship to evacuate the DPs in the camps. These rumors were realized at the end of June 1947. The call went out for thousands of DPs to make their way to the city of Marseilles, on the Mediterranean shores of southern France. At the same time, the American ship "President Warfield" reached the port of Sète, west of Marseilles.

4,554 Displaced Persons sailed on the "President Warfield", renamed "Exodus 1947", as it approached the Land of Israel. Most of these immigrants came from DP camps in Germany. They were joined by Jewish groups from North Africa, France, and Britain.

British Navy escorts the Exodus with five destroyers under the command of the light cruiser 'Ajax'. Along the Libyan shores two more vessels, minesweepers, come to escort too. The Exodus commander and the captain feel the moment of combat is nearing.

'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 the Exodus decks. 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.

The immigrants hurl food preserves on the Marines. The British answered with jets of ice cold water. A number of soldiers try to climb aboard and fall into the water between the two vessels. Two destroyers on both sides of 'Exodus' hurtle forward savagely and ram it 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. '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, water continuing to penetrate through the breaches. At 06:00 hours the British send over medical help. The fight lasts for about Two hours and twenty minutes.

According to the new policy of refoulement enacted by the British against Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel, the passengers of the Exodus were deported in three internment ships the "Empire Rival", "Runnymede Park" and "Ocean Vigour" to Port de Bouc, France. When they refused to disembark there, they were taken by the British to the British Occupation Zone in Germany, to Hamburg. The internment ships reached Hamburg between 7-9 of September, 1947.

The internees were forcefully offloaded from the ships, when their residence holds were flooded with sea water. From there they were taken in trains with barred windows to the Am-Stau and Pöppendorf DP camps, in the British Occupation Zone north of *Lübeck*.

The 2,717 internees of the ships "Runnymede Park" and "Ocean Vigour" crowded into the 70 Nissen huts. Most people slept two to a bed, and in 3-4 storey bunk beds. The 14 larger huts designed for 60 people housed 130 internees each. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire fences with guard towers.

Conditions in Am-Stau Camp were slightly better. 1,484 internees from the "Empire Rival" were brought to the camp. They were housed in wooden barracks. Each room contained 16 people in 2-storey bunk beds.

After over two months in route, on land and at sea, they reached the internment camps with no possessions other than the worn clothes on their backs.

None could survive the German winter in the Am-Stau and Pöppendorf Camps, considering the living conditions and the improvised accommodations there. The British suggested to the camp secretariats to transfer the residents to alternate camps, much more suited to winter living. These alternate camps were Emden (near Aurich), and Sengwarden (near Wilhelmshaven). The residents of Pöppendorf DP camp transferred to Emden and the residents of Am-Stau DP camp transferred to Sengwarden.

The EXSODUS Odyssey, the stubborn struggle of the refugees of the Holocaust to reach the Land of Israel at any cost, in the course of a physical struggle, endangering human life, under inhuman conditions and their refusal to get out of the ships of deportation in France and anywhere other than the Land of Israel was the main reason for the UN resolution of November 29, 1947 to end the British Mandate in the Land of Israel And the decision to establish the State of Israel.

Family photo album



Father Felix / Ephraim



Two years old, PNINA



Mother Liza



Mother Liza plays on the mandolin



Ephraim and Liza at the fountain in Jaffa



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The Engelman family, Pnina, Eli, the children, grandchildren and granddaughters