

Aliya Bet During WW II: The Episode of the Vessel "Lili"

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During the first eight months of 1939, 31 vessels of Ma'apilim sailed from Europe, most of them from the Black Sea. Two of these vessels sank while en route. Nevertheless, this was a period of great activity for Aliya Bet, in comparison to the preceding four and a half years - since the start of Aliya Bet, with the voyage of the "Velos" in July 1934, to the end of 1938 - in which only 19 vessels, all comparatively small, arrived in Palestine.

The outbreak of WW II and its spread to the countries with outlets to the Mediterranean put an end to this increase. Most of Aliya Bet and "Af Al Pi" activists had to return to their homes, causing a drastic decrease in Aliya. During the first four and a half years of WW II, from September 1939 until March 1944, only 16 Aliya vessels left from the Black Sea ports. Three of them sunk en route, one of them was "Struma", which was sunk by a Soviet submarine in February 1942.

Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet regarded neutral Turkey as a window from which it could peek into conquered Europe; it kept a small mission in Istanbul. During 1941 the Mossad purchased a vessel named "Lili", a yacht with an auxiliary motor, to be used to transfer Ma'apilim who had reached Turkey - to Palestine. After it was purchased, the Danish flag was removed from its mast and the Mossad tried to find a neutral country who would allow the yacht to sail under its flag, but ran into difficulty. As a result, Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet could not use her to transfer some of the Ma'apilim from the "Struma", before she was forced back to the Black Sea.

Only in the spring of 1943 the Mossad managed to convince the Turkish Government to allow the "Lili" to move from Istanbul to the port of Mersin, using a foreign crew. The Mossad intended to use this southern port as a jump-off point for Palestine, since at that time the British banned the use of trains for transferring Holocaust survivors from Turkey to Palestine. The matter of a flag seemed on the verge of finding a solution, as "Atid" company in Haifa was ready to list the "Lili" as a vessel on its roster, bearing a Palestinian flag. The deal was that "Atid" would use the vessel for its own legal cargo transportation, while allowing Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet to use it for its illegal activities, as well.

With the news of the catastrophe that had befallen the Jews in Europe, the Jewish Agency set up a "Rescue Committee" in Turkey. This was a political entity which ensconced itself in Istanbul in early 1943. On April 1943 Shaul Meirov-Avigur, the head of Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet, set out for Istanbul, soon becoming the central and most influential character in the Aliya Bet movement, thanks to his personality, above and beyond his official position. Shortly following his arrival, the Mossad decided to send the "Lili" on its maiden voyage.

Two kibbutznikim were chosen for this voyage: one was Benyamin Wittenberg, a member of Kibbutz Ein Gev and a graduate of the first Palmach¹ course for launch commanders. The second was Gershon Marcus, a member of Kibbutz Glil-Yam, who happened to have experience with marine engines. We can assume that Benyamin, who was somewhat older than Gershon and had prior naval experience, was appointed commander of the vessel.

¹ At the end of 1943, with four courses accomplished, the Palmach marine Platoon was established. A year later it was promoted to a marine company named Palyam.

Gershon was added to the crew, whose chief engineer was Alfred Assar from the "Atid" company.

In early June 1943, Benyamin and Gershon were sent to Mersin by land, in order to prepare the "Lili" to take on passengers. The vessel was large enough to hold 200 Ma'apilim but the first shipment was of 30 Bulgarian refugees. In the beginning of July, the "Lili" set sail for Famagusta, Cyprus. The Ma'apilim were placed on shore and further preparations were made, before continuing to Haifa, to settle the Palestinian registration and raise its flag.

On August 21st 1943, "Lili" sailed for Haifa. At night, as she approached off Acre, she was attacked by an Italian submarine and sank quickly. Some of the crew, which included eight Serbs and Greeks and the three Jews went down with the vessel. Others managed to get into two lifeboats, which were discovered by a British vessel three days after the sinking. Only two Serb sailors were alive on the boats by then. These men were brought to Haifa and reported to the Mossad officials the fate of the vessel and the crew.

Benyamin and Gershon were recognized as fallen members of the Palmach/Palyam.

Benyamin Hermoni (Wittenberg)



commander of the "Lili".

Born in Berlin in 1916. Came to Palestine in 1935 and was one of the founders of kibbutz Ein Gev. He worked at fishing. He was convinced that seamen would be necessary in order to save the Jews of Europe; he convinced the kibbutz of the necessity for seamen and was relieved of his duties in May 1942, allowed to devote himself to the sea. At the end of 1942 he sailed for several months on a vessel of the "Atid" company and at the start of 1943 he participated in the first Palmach course for launch commanders at Sdot Yam-Caesarea. When this course was over, Benyamin was drafted by Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet and appointed

Gershon Marcus



Born in Berlin, 1920. Came to Palestine in 1937 and joined kibbutz Gili-Yam in 1939. At the same time he completed a course in mechanics at the technical school affiliated with the Haifa Technion. During the years 1940-1941 he participated in naval courses of the Hagana, a similar framework to that from which the "23 Seamen who went down at sea" were chosen. With the permission of his kibbutz, he joined the British unit created to defend the port of Haifa, where he served for about a year. In 1943 Gershon was drafted by Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet to serve on the "Lili".

Blessed be their memory!



Tuesday, June 14th 2005

To Yehuda Ben Tzur, Shalom;

In the name of the family I wish to thank you and Yoske with all my heart, for all the effort and work that you both applied in order to commemorate the memory of our uncle, Benyamin Wittenberg-Hermoni and his companion, Gershon Marcus. The reward for a "Mitzva" is a

Mitzva, and our thanks are but a small and modest addition which you and Yoske Rom deserve. Really, a very hearty thank you.

I ask myself sometimes what is so important in the matter of commemoration. After all we are all doomed to depart from this earth and when we leave the memory of the commemorated leaves with us. Is that not so? No, that is not so! The fact that the story is written and permanently inscribed is assurance that the story and its characters are there in the public eye. It is there for all who wish to see it and remember and that is what will keep the memory alive. In our own family we will pass the memory on within our own framework and when our children and grand-children grow up, we will send them to the Internet and to the Palmach/Palyam site. Thank you once again and I shall inform Beni and I shall contact Gershon's family to notify them of what you have done.

Yehuda you have succeeded in arousing my emotions. Truly, my sincerest thanks.
Yosef Hermoni

In Kibbutz Ein Gev a memorial was erected on the pier of the anchorage "In Memory of Benyamin Wittenberg". In November 2010 we broached the subject of the upkeep of this site which had begun to fall into disrepair. Some pieces of the mosaic had fallen off. We spoke to some of the members of the kibbutz and we spoke to the director of memorial sites in the Prime Minister's office.

The letter exchange with the director:

Mr Pinsker,

Attached is a description of a hardly known episode, in the course of which two members of the Palyam were the first to lose their lives, when they were part of the crew of the vessel "Lili". A memorial was erected on the pier of Kibbutz Ein Gev to the memory of Benyamin Wittenberg-Hermoni, the commander of this vessel (See photo).

I recently pointed out to some members of the kibbutz that this memorial is in need of repair, as some of the mosaic stones have fallen off.

Yours truly,
Yehuda Ben Tzur
Palyam site, www.palyam.org



November 2010,
Yehuda Ben Tzur, Shalom;

It is difficult to describe the emotions that are involved in a commemoration; there are so many to commemorate, who are no longer with us. At any rate, I and my family wish to offer you our heartfelt thanks for your efforts in commemorating the Palyam and its fallen, among them Benyamin Wittenberg- Hermoni, who was one of the founders of kibbutz Ein Gev. This commemoration has filtered down to my grandchildren, who swallow every word that was written regarding Benyamin's mission, including your last letter to the ombudsman of Kibbutz Ein Gev. In the name of all of us, Thank you!

Benyamin Hermoni
(Son of Benyamin Wittenberg-Hermoni.)

