

The Voyage of “Arba Cheruyot” [Four Freedoms]

The vessel's name is taken from a speech by U.S President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in January 1941, about the four essential freedoms of the 'Free World:' Freedom of speech, freedom of every person to worship God in his own way, freedom from want and freedom from fear.

The vessel was prepared for departure to Eretz Israel at Porto Venero, Italy. The vessel commander was Palyam member Fabi Gever. The 'Gideoni' (radio operator) was Eli Zohar. An additional escort was Palyam member Peter Hoffman. The vessel had previously participated in an Aliya Bet mission under the name 'Dov Hoz.' 'Four Freedoms' sailed from the Italian port of Boca di Magra on August 23rd 1946, with 1,024 immigrants on board. With Yehuda Arazi's initiative, the American journalist, Claire Neikind, joined mission anonymously and later published a booklet about her journey. The vessel slipped away from the port as soon as all immigrants were on board yet unsettled, so as not to risk an early detection by the British.



Some of the immigrants fell sick by the hard conditions on board the vessel, but Ha'mossad Le'Aliya Bet rejected the commander's request for an early arrival at the shore by day. 'Four Freedoms' was scheduled to arrive at Shefayim shore; but on September 2nd, a British reconnaissance aircraft spotted it 40 miles away from the Tel-Aviv shores. Three destroyers surrounded the vessel, and about 20 soldiers boarded it using scare shots and water hoses to cover them. The immigrants had divided themselves into three fronts. The bow force was headed by Eli Zohar; the deck force was headed by Peter Hoffman and Fabi Gever stood at the navigation bridge and ran the resistance from there. The soldiers who boarded the vessel were driven away by the forceful immigrants' resistance, who threw cans at them and threw some of their weapons to sea. Another group of soldiers raided the vessel and subdued the immigrants after a three-hour brawl. During the clash, 'Four Freedoms' neared the shore, and twelve immigrants were allowed to jump overboard and try to swim to the shore. Two of them made it, but the rest were captured by the British. When the confrontation was over, the British provided medical assistance to the injured as well as the sick ones on board. 13 of the injured immigrants needed hospitalization. The humanitarian attitude shown by the British at that stage, as well as the immigrants' great exhaustion, convinced the vessel commander, Fabi Gever, to give up on another struggle during the actual deportation.

On September 3rd, the immigrants were transferred onto the 'Empire Haywood' deportation ship, and were taken to the Caraolos detention camp in Cyprus. The escorts intermingled with the immigrants and arrived in Cyprus with them. According to an order they received from Italy upon departure, they smuggled fuel in canteens which they carried on them to set the detention camp in Cyprus on fire. But the fire was never set because of opposition in Israel. Over time, the escorts escaped the detention camp. 'Four Freedoms' was the first Aliya Bet vessel to resist its detention at sea.

(Compiled by Tzvi Ben-Tzur)