

The Voyage of "Knesset Israel"

[Literally: the Gathering of Israel; Since 1948 – the Israeli Parliament]

This vessel was so named to emphasize the independence of the Jewish community of Palestine and the formal institutions it had established. Her previous name had been "The Hebrew Rebel Organization", but the name was changed just one day prior to the vessel reaching Palestine; the heads of the political department of the Jewish Agency - Moshe Shertok (Sharet) and Golda Meirson (Meir), forced Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet to choose a name that was less antagonistic, as there was a trial going on at that time, judging the legality of deporting Ma'apilim to Cyprus. This vessel, one of the biggest the Palyam had ever had to deal with, was prepared for her voyage in the port of Bakar, Yugoslavia, by a team led by Benyamin Yerushalmi. He was helped by a group of about 300 German prisoners of war, on loan from the Yugoslav government. The Yugoslav authorities were very sympathetic to the cause of Aliya and the President of Yugoslavia - Josip Bros Tito - even visited the port while preparation of the vessel was ongoing.

A much smaller vessel called the "Abba Berdichev", (also known as "The Saint") accompanied the "Knesset Israel". Berdichev had parachuted to Yugoslavia in March 1944, but was caught and murdered by the Nazis. This vessel named after him was to transfer her Ma'apilim to the "Knesset Israel" near the shore of Palestine, and take the foreign crew of the



larger vessel back to Europe. This arrangement would save one ship and crew and its Palyamnikim from falling into the hands of the British. The commanders of these vessels were Binyamin Yerushalmi and Yossi Harel (pictured here), accompanied by Reuven Yatir and the Gideonim - Yoash (Chatto) Tzidon and Chaim Porat. An advisory committee of representatives from the various youth movements, headed by the leader of the Zionist Youth Organizaton - Yitzchak Artzi (the father of Shlomo), was formed to aid the Palyamnikim in their job, keeping order among the many Ma'apilim.

The vessels sailed from Bakar on November 5th 1946, carrying 3,445 Ma'apilim on "Knesset Israel" and 400 on the "Abba Berdichev". Four days later, both vessels were caught in a very severe storm in the Adriatic Sea, and the engine of the "Abba Berdichev" died. The vessel was pushed to the rocks on the coast and broke up. All the Ma'apilim managed to leave the boat safely and were taken aboard the "Knesset Israel", which now held 3,845 Ma'apilim. Eleven babies were born en route. Reaching the Dodecanese Islands twelve days later, she was forced to seek shelter in a God forsaken harbor, in the rocky Greek island Syrina. Binyamin Yerushalmi and most of the foreign crew were transferred to a small boat which had sailed from Piraeus to meet them¹. From that moment on, the vessel was operated by those Palyamnikim accompanying her, aided by a crew of Ma'apilim. Reuven Yatir became the captain and Yossi Harel (pictured here) became the commander of the ship.

On November 24th the vessel was intercepted by a British destroyer and was ordered to sail for Cyprus. She continued on her route to Palestine and was soon surrounded by three British destroyers. The vessel was led to Haifa and a plea was filed in the High Court against the removal of the Ma'apilim from the vessel and their deportation. Even before the matter came to court, the British began the transfer the passengers to the deportation ships. A severe fight broke out between the Ma'apilim and the British soldiers, in the course of which two Ma'apilim were killed. When tear gas penetrated the room where the babies were kept, Yossi Harel - the vessel commander - ordered the Ma'apilim to cease the struggle. All were deported to Cyprus.

(Compiled by Tzvi Ben Tzur)

¹ Binyamin was sent to take part in the Jewish Congress in Basel, Switzerland.



"Knesset Israel" near Haifa



"Knesset Israel" drawn by the artist Shmuel Katz, who was a Ma'apil on board