

The Voyage of the "Rafiah"

During the whole Aliya Bet operation, following the end of World War II, there were only two vessels of Ma'apilim that went down at sea. The "Rafiah" was one of them, and the only one in which lives were lost by drowning at sea. (The other vessel was the "Abba Berdichev", which sailed from Bakar, Yugoslavia, with the "Knesset Yisrael", and all of her Ma'apilim were safely transferred to the sister vessel.) The "Rafiah" received its name from the British prison camp, in which the leaders of the Yishuv were incarcerated on "Black Saturday".

The 'Rafiah' sailed from Bakar, Yugoslavia, on November 26th 1946, carrying 785 Ma'apilim. Her commander was Gad Lasker (pictured here), accompanied by Tzvi Teitel, David Baumgarten-Bustanai and the Gideoni - Avraham Lichovski. The captain and crew were Greek.



From the onset, the vessel had to deal with very rough seas. For this reason the captain searched for safe harbor near the barren island of Syrna, one of the Dodecanese islands. He tried to cast anchor during the night of December 7th-8th, but failed and the vessel ran afoul on the rocks. Water penetrated the holds quickly and in less than an hour, the vessel went down. Most of the Ma'apilim managed to reach land safely, but eight of them drowned and eleven were injured. (There were claims regarding more missing persons, but they could not be proven).

Avraham Lichovski, the Gideoni, managed to rescue the vessel's wireless and contacted Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet. The Mossad, through the Jewish Agency, contacted the British Navy, requesting its help, because it was feared that with no immediate supply of food, fresh water and shelter, the situation could become disastrous. On their third day on the island, a British plane dropped food, clothes, blankets and medical supplies to the survivors. On the fourth day, a Greek destroyer showed up and took aboard the Greek crew and 21 survivors, who were sick or injured. The British destroyers "Chevron" and "Providence" then came along, and on December 13th the rest of the survivors and the Palyamnikim were rescued aboard these ships and taken to the Cyprus detention camps. The drowned were buried on the island, and only in 1972 were their remains brought to Israel, for burial.

(Compiled by Tzvi Ben-Tzur)



Survivors on board the British vessel "Providence"



The "Rafiah" under water