

The Voyage of the “Yehuda Halevi”

Yani Avidov suggested that Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet expand its activity to North Africa. The “Yehuda Halevi” was the first vessel to bring Ma'apilim from North Africa. It was named after the great Jewish poet and philosopher of the Middle-Ages, who lived in Spain during the 1100's. At the height of his career he decided to go to the Holy Land.



The vessel was prepared to take on immigrants in the port of Marseilles, France. The preparation of the vessel for the Ma'apilim was handled by Gideon (Geda) Shochat; the commander was Israel Chorev (Charakovski, pictured here), aided by Eitan Shaposhnik-Menuchin and the Gideoni - Yaakov Netzer (Melnitzer). The crew was mostly Spanish. Most of the Ma'apilim came from Morocco to Algeria, and were concentrated in a camp that was made to look like a vacation resort.

The vessel arrived in the early evening of May 10th 1946, at a coordinate not far from the military base of Tens, Algeria, and the Ma'apilim were brought from shore to ship by launch. The boarding process was interrupted by the French police and about 250 people, who were still on shore, were arrested. The vessel sailed out to sea with 399 Ma'apilim, who managed to board. She sailed to the harbor of Palermo, Sicily, to take on coal and continued on to Palestine in a rough sea, with a British destroyer on her tail. During this voyage a young girl sickened and died.

On May 31st, when the vessel had approached the shore of Palestine, it was surrounded by five British destroyers. Two of them butted the vessel and British soldiers boarded her immediately, using tear gas. The Palyamnikim on board managed to knock the engine out of commission, so the vessel had to be towed to Haifa. The Ma'apilim were deported to Cyprus.

(Compiled by Tzvi Ben-Tzur)

