

Eliyahu Bergman

Volunteer from the USA on the "Geulah" and "Tirat Tzvi"

This is the Way it Was

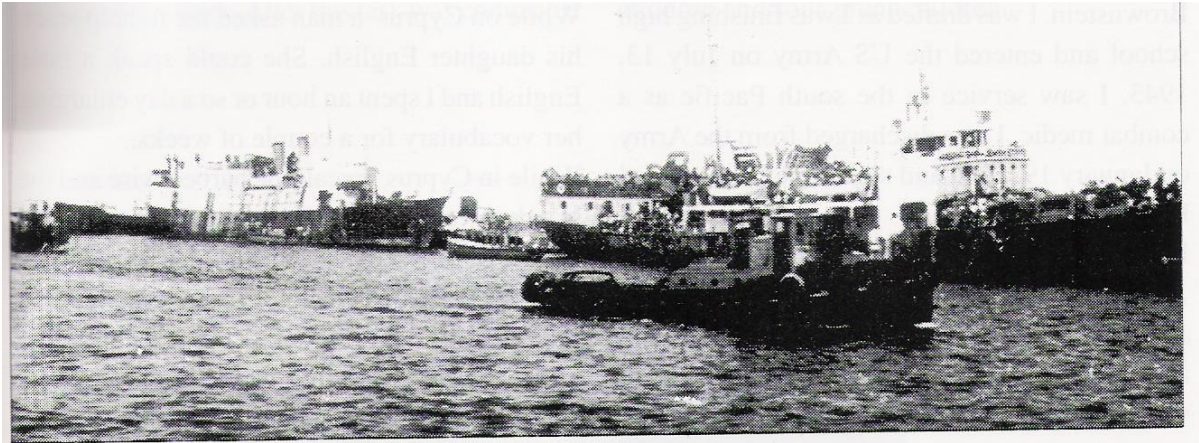
I was one of the "Seattle Three" – the others were Bailey Nieder and Syd Abrams – who enlisted in Aliya Bet and served on the "Paducah/ Geulah". We joined for many of the same reasons. As for me, it started with a Zionist home background. My parents were active and committed Zionists at a time when an independent Jewish State was not the Number One commitment in the American Jewish community. During the WW II years in which I was maturing there were several issues that highlighted my Jewish identity and disposed me to the Zionist concept. There was the desperate plight of the European Jews; the need for rescue and refuge; a gradual awareness of the Holocaust, although we had no idea of its extent; and WW II itself which represented an action to destroy fascism.

Beyond its response to these issues, Zionism provided a welcome alternative to other models of Jewish identity, and a means to share and communicate them. It was a secular model; it left religion and observance to individual preferences; it provided a forum in which to communicate and understand the contemporary issues that were relevant and critical. These early experiences set me on the track to "Paducah". As WW II was climaxing I accelerated high school to provide for a year in college before I was draft-eligible. Like so many of my peers I wanted to get into it while it was still going on. But the war ended at the end of my first year in college, and I was not drafted until after my second year. My army service was cut short by the rapid reduction of the army and discharge of all the draftees.

During the previous year I had become aware of Aliya Bet through press coverage of the American participation in it through I. F. (Izzy) Stone's PM pieces on his trip aboard "Hagana" which were later published in a volume called "Underground to Palestine". Like other peers, I was frustrated by not being there on time for action in WW II. I was concerned with an unfinished agenda from the war in which I might be able to participate. I was committed to the early creation of a Jewish State, and the unrestricted entry to Palestine of Jewish survivors from Europe. Aliya Bet appeared to be an option. I had the motivation to serve and also the military training which demands discipline and cooperation. From my growing up Years on Puget Sound I knew that it did not require genius qualifications to become a sailor.

Meanwhile, Bailey and Syd did the necessary intelligence and detective work to locate the contacts and offer our services while I still was in the army. We were accepted and joined the "Paducah". After "Paducah" service I returned to Europe for more duty and was directed to Italy where I joined "Vivara/ Tirat Tzvi" for one of the final voyages of Aliya Bet. The American and Canadian Aliya Bet sailors assembled in Israel for reunions in 1987 (40th) and 1998 (50th) and in reflecting on our service we discovered an almost universal consensus that was

expressed by "Exodus" First Mate Bernie Marks in a very poignant moment during a Public Broadcasting Service documentary video on "Exodus" aired in 1999. He observed that for us service in Aliya Bet was the proudest undertaking of our lives. We went on to successful lives and careers, but nothing has matched Aliya Bet.



On the left: the ship "GEULA" (with 1388 immigrants); On the right: the ship "The Jewish State" (with 2664 immigrants) in the "Pier of Tears" dock at Haifa