

Charles Weiss

Volunteer from the U S A
Crew of the "Hatikva" and the "Pans"

**This is the Way it Was****Aboard the "Trade Winds" and the "Pan Crescent"
("Hatikva" and "Atzma'ut")**

I was born in Philadelphia in 1928 and was at college when I enlisted in 1947 for service in Aliya Bet aboard the "SS Trade Winds", later the "Hatikva", and then the "Pan Crescent", later the "Atzma'ut". I had just finished my sophomore year at Harvard in the winter of 1947. It was a peculiar time for me. I had been too young for the War, and the thousands of GI's on campus gave me the feeling of having been left out of a tremendously important, once-in-a-lifetime event. They had taken part in this great crusade against the forces of evil and I had spent those years sheltered in the insular safety of the United States.

One evening a Boston lawyer by the name of Eddie Parsons (then and now a member of Kibbutz Kfar Blum) addressed Jewish students at a Hillel House meeting on campus. He gave a thinly disguised recruiting call for the Hagana. Come to Palestine and serve for a year with the underground Jewish defense force was the message. I took him up on his invitation to come and talk about it, and I remember a long evening in the kitchen of his home in Brookline being introduced to a whole new, for me, set of issues. The British, our allies in the war against Hitler, were the villains. They stood between the pitiful remnants of European Jewry and a future in the Promised Land. You would be serving in the Hagana, which was determined to change this situation. And by the way, on the way to Palestine, you would be taking some of those very same displaced persons through the British blockade.

As Eddie told it, the heroic role awaiting a young idealist not-yet turned 19 was irresistible. I got my orders. I was to report to some wharf in the port of Baltimore and go aboard the "SS Trade Winds". This tiny ship (600 tons, 205 feet long) had been built for the Spanish-American War. Overnight, I became a fireman/ water tender on a ship flying the Honduran flag, with false Honduran seaman's papers to match. Our first port of call was Lisbon, where we were supposed to outfit the ship to accommodate Ma'apilim. It was all very hush-hush. British spies were reputed to be everywhere. We thought we had a credible cover story – the ship was really a freighter and the shelving being installed below decks was for bananas. For some reason the Portuguese had trouble believing that this antiquated tub would ever serve any commercial purpose, and it did not take the British seamen in the patrol boat that tied up at the same mooring long to catch on. We were already being tracked when we sailed through Gibraltar three weeks later on our way to Italy.

We picked up our people on successive, moonless nights within sight of the flickering lights of La Spezia, in northern Italy. Each one was an adventure. On the first night we were cruising close inshore, totally blacked out, when suddenly a bright flame flared up on the beach, and we could make out the shape of a Magen David in fire. That was the signal. A large rubber raft with an outboard motor pulled up alongside and quickly left for shore, paying out three long ropes as it scooted away. Large inflatable rafts, each one carrying about 40 people, were ferried out to the ship, a stalwart Palyam type propelling them through the water hand to hand along the ropes which had been secured on the shore. In an operation that took all of 20 minutes, we loaded about 700 hundred Ma'apilim, and they scurried quickly down below. There was no signal the next night. In the pitch-black darkness we suddenly made out what seemed like large shadows gliding silently nearby. Three fishing boats tied up to port, starboard and stern. Without a word hundreds of mysterious figures tumbled out onto the deck and were quickly shown where they were to bunk. Now we had over 1400 people on board and were setting out for Eretz Israel.

This was the first time I had come directly in contact with the people who lived through the atrocities I had seen on newsreels and read about in the papers. How do you relate to them? My Yiddish was rudimentary. How do you communicate? Whether I liked it or not, I was a knight in shining armor, an American who had cast his lot with them, and had to somehow overcome that reticence and make contact as human beings. One way was a function of our situation. If only to give the people something to do, every member of the crew was assigned an assistant - or even two - to help out with his chores. The second day we were under way, a 16 year old boy who had lost his family in Czechoslovakia showed up in the fire room and indicated that he was my helper. His name was Antak. The four hours on duty with eight hour intervals left a lot of time to talk. I taught him the drill - how to change and clean the burners, check the water level, maintain steam pressure - and then tried to find out what he had been through.

It was hard going. He clearly wanted to be friends, but at some point I always sensed that I was a total stranger. Because I had never lived what he had gone through. Antak would hold back and change the topic to life aboard the ship. Conditions were harsh. The Mediterranean is hot in May, and water was rationed to one liter a day. Food was all monotonously canned - meat, vegetables, syrupy fruit. The latrines were built along the railings, above the sea, but for the first few days, as we made our way through the Greek islands, the people were allowed on deck only after dark. We still thought the ship had not yet been spotted by the British.

All services, from food distribution to filing complaints, were handled by political representatives, i.e., the titular head of the Mizrachi or Shomer Hatzair or Mapai contingent. That's how the people were chosen for the ship and that's how control was maintained at sea. My assistant Antak belonged to Betar and was suitably militant when it came to what we would do to the British marines if they tried to board the "Hatikva". One bright sunny day, about three days' sail from

Palestine, a British reconnaissance plane circled slowly overhead. We could make out the photographer in the bubble in the rear of the plane. Our cover was blown and we set about creating obstacles for the British destroyers we knew would appear shortly. For three days we feverishly fashioned four-sided pyramids out of angle iron and welded them to the hull. The young men were given crash courses in KAPAP, the art of wielding a length of broom handle as a weapon.

Morale was high as the British flotilla first appeared on the horizon and then gradually drew closer. We could see land off in the distance (it was Lebanon but the Ma'apilim were sure that it was Palestine). Everyone was itching for the fight. When the marines boarded us it was almost an anti-climax. Inside of minutes they had secured the bridge and were waiting for the tear gas down below to bring the engine crew out on deck. One thing we had done in the engine room was disable the engines. We had to be towed into Haifa, but by evening, all of us had been transferred to Empire class troop ships bound for Cyprus. Antak was not with us. He had ventured too close to one of the machines, had lost a finger in the fighting and had been sent to hospital.

The crew bunked together in our own two tents, spending the day playing cards, lying around and generally wasting time. We were in the zimmerlager near Famagusta and were regularly allowed to go to the beach under guard and go into the water. These dips were the only bath any of us got. In spite of this, I developed a bad skin infection, and after six weeks, was put on a boat to Palestine ahead of the rest of the crew. It was late June and July. Wrapped up in bandages from head to toe, I waited to get better so that I could ship out again. The week after the "Exodus 1947" limped into Haifa with 4500 people on board, I was given Dutch travel documents bearing my picture and put aboard a Greek freighter back to Marseilles.

My next assignment was aboard the Pan Crescent and the Pan York. These were two real ships, 6000 ton fruit carriers that had been designed to carry real bananas. We were going to take this load of DPs from Eastern Europe, and it made sense to outfit the ships in the Rumanian port of Constanza, on the Black Sea. We spent the autumn of 1947 there, and my recollection of the war-battered city consists of gloomy, overcast days and dimly lit streets at night. There was one consolation however: the local Jewish community. The presence of a group of Jewish sailors was a lodestone for local Jews, and we were feted far beyond what our hosts could afford. The prospect of leaving Rumania for Palestine was a heady tonic, particularly after the UN adopted the Partition Resolution on November 29th.

Just as we were about to sail, the Government stepped in and said we could not board Rumanian Jews in Rumania. The same Jews from all over the country who had been preparing and packing for the journey for weeks and were told they would have to go by train to a central assembly point, the Bulgarian Black Sea port of Burgas. The two ships tied up at Burgas and waited. On the second day, a long freight train pulled up on the wharf with a foot of snow on the roof of

each car. The people tumbled out, each with their 20 kg. bag of effects. They kept coming and coming, then another train pulled in, and they kept coming. This went on for three days. About 15000 Jews were bunked down, four high in the cavernous holds of the two ships. Big blowers kept the frigid December air moving and breathable. For lack of space the only times the people were supposed to get out of their bunk was for meals or to go to the latrine. Fortunately, the seas were quiet, but even so, seasickness in those cramped quarters became a highly infectious disease.

Just beyond Gallipoli we encountered our naval escort, a British cruiser and six destroyers. While the UN had already voted for the partition of Palestine and a sovereign Jewish State was only a matter of time, there were those among us who wanted to do the heroic Aliya Bet thing, to sail on to Palestine and dare the British to attack us. In the end less foolish heads prevailed. Rather than risk the safety of the city-at-sea, we agreed with the British commander that we would sail directly to Cyprus.

In some ways, being back in the refugee camp in Cyprus was like coming home. I was familiar with the drill and remembered to pack as few clothes as possible and stuff my rucksack with a truly valuable commodity, toilet paper. Then, inside a day or two I found my old friends: the people from the "Hatikva". They had been there since May and really knew the ropes.

"Hatikva"



"Atzma'ut"

