



## **From Slavery to Freedom (For The Second Time)**

*by Aryeh Malkin*

*This article is dedicated to the men and women of the Palmach/ Palyam, those who died and those still living, who gave years of their lives in the service of their people.*



Over three thousand years after Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt to the Land of Israel, the Jews of Europe found themselves once more enslaved, by Nazi Germany. Six million were killed in the extermination camps, many more were enslaved and worked in camps and in factories throughout Europe, serving the Nazi military machine, which ground their lives out of them as they worked.

This time there was no Moses, nor miracles or plagues that could save the Jews. It took the armies of the Allies, the US army, the Russian army as well as those of Great Britain and France to bring Nazi Germany to her knees and save all of humanity from destruction, including European Jewry.

What happened to many of the Jews who survived the Holocaust? Where did they go? Who led them to freedom? How was this done? This is a story that has not been publicized very much, although it is a fascinating and remarkable one. Since I was lucky enough to play a very small part in this great adventure, I would like to tell you about it.

**Who am I?** I am Leon (Aryeh) Malkin, born in The Bronx, New York in 1921. I served in the US Army for three and a half years, two of which were in Europe as part of the First Army, which went from the Normandy Beachhead to the middle of Germany. It was there, near the city of Kassel where I first encountered the Holocaust survivors. This was a major shock, as one could easily notice their terrible physical and mental condition. To me, they looked like human beings, deprived of their humanity and I could only imagine what they had gone through – and survived – based on how they were when I first saw them.

When I returned to the USA after the war was over, I was determined to help save these Holocaust survivors by going to Palestine and helping to build a homeland for them and for myself. I believed the Jews had the right to a country of their own, where they would not be second class citizens. To rephrase that idea, let me say that I did not want to leave the USA because it was not good to me; I just thought it more important to help my people achieve their own Homeland. My part in this story is minute, but because of my participation I was able to see how the whole operation worked.

**Who were the survivors and what became of them?** The survivors were Jews who survived the extermination camps, where six million of our brethren were murdered. When the Allies won Second World War, people wandered from the extermination camps and the labor camps back to their home towns, to see if they could find other members of their family. In most cases they found no one. They also saw that their neighbors in the Ukraine, Poland, Hungary and other countries were rather surprised to see they survived, and did not welcome them. Their houses were occupied by others or destroyed. Europe had become one vast graveyard, a place that did not want them, nor did they want to remain there. No country was willing to accept the Jews; not the USA, not Great Britain, nor any other country. Only the small Jewish enclave in Palestine wanted desperately to have them. However, the British, who held the League of Nations mandate for Palestine, published a White Paper, which limited immigration to 1,500 people per month. This amount was ridiculous in view of the hundreds of thousands of Jews who wished to leave Europe.

**What did the Jews of Palestine do to help the survivors?** In order to get a more comprehensive picture, we need to go back to the period of the WW-II. The Jews from Palestine helped Great Britain during the war by forming the **Jewish Brigade**, which fought under the command of the British against the Nazis. The Jews had also formed an underground army whose aim was to protect Jewish settlements in Palestine against attack from the Arabs. This army was called the **Hagana**. The Hagana was under the command of the Jewish Agency (David ben Gurion was chairman), which was an arm of the World Zionist Organization. The Hagana, aided by the British, created a special guerilla commando unit, the **Palmach**, which was to help defend the country. In July 1942, Rommel's Africa Corps reached El Alamein in Egypt and posed a serious threat to the region. When the British Eighth Army defeated the Germans, removing the threat of invasion, the British stopped helping the Palmach. From that time onward, the Palmach directed its battle against the British.

Once the Nazis had been defeated, the Jewish Settlements in Palestine (hereafter – **the Yishuv**) turned its attention to getting the Holocaust survivors from Europe to Palestine. During the war, this had been carried out on a very small scale, using small vessels which took tens- sometimes even several hundreds of survivors - to Palestine. After the war, larger vessels were sought that took many hundreds of people across the Mediterranean Sea, from ports in southern Europe to Palestine. Sometimes these vessels were able to break the British blockade and land their passengers onto a beach. These were then quickly transferred to nearby Jewish settlements and soon absorbed into the country.

This operation of bringing Holocaust survivors into Palestine “illegally” - in the eyes of the British Mandatory Government and its White Paper - was called **Aliya Bet** [illegal immigration]. The process of getting the survivors to a port from inland Europe, taking care of all their needs at the port, preparing a ship to accommodate them and

bringing a vessel from Europe to Palestine – all this called for an organization and funds. The organization was **Ha'Mossad Le'Aliya Bet** [the institution for illegal immigration], (hereafter – the Mossad). The Director of the Mossad was Shaul (Meirov) Avigur, a member of Kvutzat Kineret, who set up his headquarters in Paris.

Ha'Mossad worked on several fronts: one group of men and women, went to the inland cities of Europe, where there had been large concentrations of Jews before the war, such as Vilna, Warsaw, Kiev, Budapest, etc., gathered the Jews and led large groups of them across borders. This mass migration was called **Ha'Bricha** [the escape]. Usually, this transfer was carried out with no legal papers of any kind, and often this had to be done by subterfuge and stealth. Tens of thousands of people made this difficult journey, by foot, by train, by truck, and often by a combination of them all – but they made it. They made it because they saw Palestine as the only bright star in their future. Palestine offered them the hope for a new life and a new beginning.

A group of Israelis worked setting up and running the camps near the Mediterranean ports, in Marseilles, France, Taranto and Bari, Italy and others. These camps housed the survivors and provided food, shelter, health care, child care (there were so many orphans), taught Hebrew and trade skills, etc. Although I have covered this subject in one short sentence, the reader may well imagine the tremendous amount of work that had to be done with the Holocaust survivors, in order to improve their health as well as their self-esteem, and to set them on a course for a more positive future.

A third arm of Ha'**Mossad** was the **Palyam**. The **Palmach** had foreseen the need for training seamen who would be able to move ships at sea and transport survivors, once the war was over. In 1943 it set aside one company which became its naval unit, named **Palyam**. It soon grew from one company to several battalions. These men and women were sent to Europe and they were the ones who ran the camps near the ports of the Mediterranean, prepared the ships to carry the survivors, and commanded and ran the ships. They also had their own signal corps, called the **Gideonim**, as well as a signal code. These men and women who were active in the Bricha, in setting up the camps near the port cities of the Mediterranean, in preparing and manning the vessels were all young Israelis who gave up their jobs or their studies, putting their own lives 'on hold' for several years, in order to help their European brothers get back on their feet and bring them to Palestine.

A fourth arm of Ha'**Mossad** was the transport company. Palmachnikim [members of the Palmach] who had been in the transport companies of the Jewish Brigade of the British Army were ordered to leave the army and report to Milan, Italy. They stole 20 trucks from the British Army and set up a fictitious British Army Transport Company, which was called **TTG** (this acronym stood for the brazen 'Kiss My Ass Business Company', as translated from a mixture of Yiddish and Arabic). It had its own number, insignia and officers and it used 'official' stationery of its own manufacture.

The soldiers of this unit wore their British Army uniforms and drove their trucks from depot to British depot, loading what they needed to feed and provide for the survivors in the camps near the port cities and on their expected crossing of the Mediterranean to Palestine.

The following is an excerpt from the story: "*In the Footsteps of Shavit*" by Avrum Shavit, one of the members of this transport company:

*"In Milan we had a garage and in it were twenty trucks that we had stolen from the British Army. All the papers for the vehicles were false. In order to get foodstuffs we would make up a convoy with false papers and go to one of the big army depots and get whatever we needed.*

*We all had our army uniforms and we would act perfectly at home. We had our own storehouses and we would load up at the British army depot and unload at ours. Gasoline was very expensive so we decided to try our luck at an American depot. Every day we would travel 300 km carrying empty barrels and false papers. At first the Americans didn't understand what we wanted but after a while they just fell into the routine and we would appear every day and fill up the barrels.*

*One day we arrived at an American base from which we got a variety of goods. Usually we were greeted warmly but this time they looked at us as if they thought that we were getting gasoline in order to sell it on the Black market. They brought us to their colonel.*

*We soon noticed that the colonel was Jewish and we told him of the poor survivors who were at our (and their) mercy in the camps. When he heard that he started to cry and then he loaded up five trucks and told us that we could go to any depot in his jurisdiction to get what we needed."*

When vessels were procured from European countries, they were usually leased together with their captain and crew. A French vessel would have a French captain, and an Italian vessel an Italian captain etc. Only a few men of the **Palyam** would sail with the survivors; one would be the commander who was in charge of the voyage and instructed the captain as to where to sail. Another was overseer for the needs of the passengers and a third was the communications person who kept radio contact with Palestine or with other vessels. The holds of the ships would be arranged with bunks, that allowed for a maximum number of people with a minimum amount of room for each, for the journey that would take from one to two weeks. (An exception was one vessel that sailed from Sweden to Palestine, a voyage that took about a month).

While still in the camps, the passengers were divided into groups and assigned leaders. The group leader would get and distribute the food and the water for his group. A queue was necessary for going to the toilet and even for allowing people to get fresh air on deck. This trip was no vacation, the conditions were very very poor,

as many were often seasick and the vomit and the foul air in the holds made everything worse. Having endured the hardship of labor camps or an extermination camps, and putting up with the harsh conditions on the vessels, the refugees won the admiration of the Palyamnikim, who saw them as the real heroes of these trips. They did not complain and endured the hardship with understanding and hope. They who had gone through such terrible suffering for years at the hands of the Nazis were still willing to undergo more hardship on this voyage to Palestine, in order to begin a new life in a new land, their Homeland.

**Yossi Harel**, the Palyam commander of the heroic vessel **Exodus**, described his first meeting with young orphans of the Holocaust:

*“One camp housed orphans of the Holocaust and when I arrived there the camp leader arranged a lineup so that I could see how the children had prepared for the voyage, the date of departure of which was still a secret. When a whistle was blown, all the children, who were between the age of 5 – 15 years old ran and stood in line. I walked down the line and studied them and they looked at me as if I was a giant. They were looking at me as if I was the last thing on earth that they could believe in and trust.*

*Suddenly it struck me what Aliya Bet really meant! This was what was left of six million people. This was my responsibility – to lead them safely and soundly to Eretz Israel. I saw this job as something that was holy, and there was nothing in the world that I would not do for them.*

*When I saw them I was also convinced that nothing could stop us. Upon my return to the ship the only image that remained embedded in me was the look in those children’s eyes.”*

**The Jews of the United States:** In 1946 Ha’Mossad decided to step up the pressure on the British, by purchasing larger ships that could carry more passengers. Such ships could best be purchased in the USA, which was left with a huge surplus of vessels, once WW-II had come to an end. The British kept underground agents in all of the port cities of the Mediterranean, seeking to block the sailing of the Mossad vessels. In addition, they used their naval vessels - now relieved of war duty - to blockade the coast of Palestine more effectively.

Everything done in the States had to be done with the utmost secrecy. Ha’Mossad did not want the British agents to know its new plans. Also, the USA supported the British White Paper policy, because Britain had the legal mandate; the USA was the first to declare an arms embargo to the Middle East. Ha’Mossad got around this problem by calling on the Jewish Zionist Youth Movements for their support. This call went to **Ha’bonim** [the builders] and **Ha’Shomer Ha’Tzair** [the young guard] youth movements and the call was answered. Young men and women, like myself, who had been in the US Army or Navy or the Merchant Marine volunteered to participate. Some were only one or two months out of the service, others perhaps for as long as

six months, yet many volunteered. At first, Ha'Mossad bought two Canadian corvettes through a "front" American company, and Israeli leaders of the abovementioned movements mobilized the manpower needed for these two vessels. (I was one of them. I was discharged from the army in November 1945 and signed on to a corvette a month later, in December 1945). We were all sworn loyalty to the Hagana and were sworn into its ranks by its Commander-in-Chief, who later became the first Commander-in-Chief of the Israeli Defense Force - **IDF** - Yaakov Dori.

The corvette that was the first to leave from the USA was the Beauharnois, later renamed by the Hagana – **The Josiah Wedgwood**. This was the ship on which I sailed as a deckhand/ helmsman, which left the USA on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1946. Almost the whole crew was from the American Zionist youth movements and almost all were ex-GI's. The officers were also Jewish and this was probably the first all-Jewish crew in 2000 years. The Hagana then purchased a series of vessels that were to carry thousands of survivors each. These ships were outfitted and sent to Europe as quickly as possible. The stream of survivors became so large, there was no room in the Atlit detention camp in Palestine and the British began using Cyprus as a base for large detention camps. As these ships sailed and more sailors were needed to man them, the Hagana started to use Jewish ex-army or navy men as sailors who were not from the youth movements.

In all, there were about 250 volunteers from America and they were known as **MACHAL** [volunteers from the Diaspora] working on Hagana vessels. These ships that left from the USA picked up close to 32,000 Holocaust survivors in Europe, en-route to Palestine. This amounts to about half of a total of 75,000 that the Hagana shipped to Palestine from the end of WW II in May 1945 until the creation of the State of Israel in May 1948. It is interesting to read what a French Holocaust survivor who sailed to Palestine on the Exodus wrote in his diary about these American volunteers:

*"When I began to write in the diary I described the excellent organization of our vessel. The longer I am here the greater I appreciate what has been done. The kitchens give out food on time and all the jobs are done by trained people. One can only admire those who are doing all these things on the ship. This is such a tremendous enterprise! They took a ship that was almost worthless and made it seagoing. Can one imagine how much work and how much money had to be put into such a transformation? Once all has been prepared, the ship crosses the ocean and ends up in a French or Italian port. That doesn't seem very much but do you know how powerful British influence is in this region? This required a Herculean effort. I want to tell you again that this ship was not built to cross the ocean, it is a shallow river boat which would never hold up in a storm. However, we are in no danger as this is not the season for storms. But the crew that crossed the Atlantic with her showed great courage in doing so. Had there been a storm and the ship did sink the crew would have gone down – they knew this when they left port. The crew knew this, so*

*imagine what idealism they have. They are risking their lives to help their sisters and brothers, isn't that the true meaning of heroism?*

**The American Jews and Procurement:** Buying and refitting vessels required a good deal of money. It was also quite obvious to all that immediately upon the creation of the State of Israel, she would face armed Arab resistance. The new nation would be desperately in need of weapons, small and large, on land, sea and air. There was an embargo on arms to the Middle East. Money was needed for all of these. Here again, American Jewry came to the aid of their Israeli brethren. In 1945, Ben Gurion - as chairman of the Jewish Agency - visited the USA; he was invited to a meeting of wealthy American Jews, who gathered in the home of Rudolph Sonneborn. It was on this occasion that the Sonneborn Committee was founded, which became the financial arm of the American Jewish community in support of the war preparations of the State-to-be. A warehouse was bought in the Bronx, New York City, where weapons that were gathered from the American Jewish ex-army men and others, as well as arms that were procured from surplus army supplies were gathered, packed and shipped under false identification to Palestine, for the use of the Hagana/ Israeli army-to-be.

We now can see that there were two separate units working clandestinely in the States; one for the procurement of ships and seamen, the other for the procurement of weapons. Both of these units were supported by the Sonneborn committee, without which they would have been strapped for cash. The book by Leonard Slater, *"The Pledge"*, gives a detailed account of the above. We must appreciate the fact that Jews who took part in raising funds for the war effort in Palestine, aware, yet - choosing to ignore the US government imposed embargo, were following a conscientious sense of duty, thus taking a serious legal risk, violating the law.

As for non-Jews, we must also give due credit to a good number of them, who were so impressed by the plight of the Holocaust survivors that they identified with the creation of the State of Israel and the necessary support of the immigration of Jews to their Homeland. They became personally active in helping achieve these aims. Among these there was one who served as captain on a Hagana ship and was even deported to the Cyprus camps as a prisoner, and several seamen who served on Hagana vessels. Numerous others helped in procuring weapons for shipment to Palestine. There were also a goodly number of European non-Jews who participated in the Aliya Bet movement or gave it their support in various ways. The Jewish people are indebted to these brave good men.

**Cyprus:** The British held tens of thousands of Holocaust survivors in detention camps in Cyprus. Among these thousands there were many young people. The Palyam and Palmach sent men to live in the camps with the survivors and trained close to 10,000 in para-military training, so that they could be easily absorbed into the Israeli army-in-preparation, prior to independence. Radio equipment was also

smuggled into the camps via underground tunnels that were dug from the camps to the beaches, so that men and equipment could be transported from Cyprus to Palestine and back, becoming a unique shuttle service. On several occasions, explosives were smuggled and were used to blow up the British deportation ships.

All of this underground work was done on a voluntary basis, for which people received their expenses but no one was paid a salary. No one received fame or glory, because almost everyone had a pseudonym, a nickname. No one held a rank and there were no generals nor colonels; people had assignments and responsibilities. As one of these young, brave and modest men said: "We did what we did because that was what was needed at that time." (Yochai Ben-Nun, who built and commanded the 13<sup>th</sup> Flotila [the Israeli Navy Commando outfit] and was later Commander-in-Chief of the Israeli Navy.)

**The State of Israel:** With the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel on May 14<sup>th</sup> 1948 came the invasion of the newborn country by five armies of the surrounding Arab countries, as well as a local "Liberation Army" under the command of Fawzi Kaukagi. An Israeli Army had to come into being to meet the enemy and the only nucleus for this army was the Palmach. It defended Jerusalem, the Negev and the North and wherever an attack came from. One could safely say: Had there been no Palmach there would not have been an Israel! Israel was also attacked from the sea by the Egyptian navy, so an Israeli navy was absolutely necessary. The Palyam transferred en-masse to the Israeli navy and its men became the officers of the navy. Ships that had formerly carried survivors were quickly refitted as naval vessels, that soon succeeded in driving the Egyptian navy away from the shores of the new country.

The famous Israeli poet of that tumultuous period, Natan Alterman, summed up the matter beautifully in his poem: "*The Silver Platter*", which honors these young men and women of the Palmach/ Palyam, who gave new life to the Holocaust survivors and laid the solid basis for the creation of the State of Israel. This poem concludes:..

*"...Then the nation asked in awesome wonder,  
Asked: "Who are you?" and the two, standing silently  
Replied: "We are the silver platter  
Upon which we give you The Jewish State.  
They said this and then fell in silence...  
The rest is told in the history of Israel."*





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