

The Voyage of “Ha’Ma’apil Ha’Almoni” [The unknown immigrant]

This vessel was named after the Ma’apil Herbert Laser (RIP), who had been killed a week earlier in a clash with the British, when the vessel “LaNegev” arrived at Haifa. Herbert Laser was referred to as the unknown immigrant, because at the time of his death and his funeral his name was not yet known. The name was given to this vessel only on the last day of its voyage. Before that it had been called “Hagana-Cherut” (Hebrew: Defense-Freedom). This name was then dropped, because it suggested a co-operation between the Hagana, (the underground movement of the large majority of the Yishuv) and the “Etzel” (the underground movement of the Revisionists).

This vessel had been purchased in Sweden, where it had operated as a passenger carrier under the name “San Miguel”. On December 31st, 1946 she sailed from Sweden to Marseilles without Ma’apilim, with Yossele Dror aboard as its commander and the Gideoni - Reuven Oren.

Preparations for carrying Ma’apilim were started in Sweden and completed in Marseilles. Before she left Marseilles, Shaul Biber, a palmachnik, joined the team accompanying the Ma’apilim. The vessel left from the small port of Set on February 3rd, carrying 794 Ma’apilim. Among them was a group of youths from Morocco. The voyage went smoothly until February 14th, when the vessel was discovered by a British scout plane. On the following day, two British destroyers appeared and followed her for another day, when they both attacked and boarded her after a short but fierce encounter. During this engagement the British made free use of tear gas and water hoses, and a number of Ma’apilim were injured. The vessel was towed to Haifa and the Ma’apilim were deported to Cyprus. Some Ma’apilim and the Gideoni - Reuven Oren managed to evade deportation by hiding in a secret compartment that had been prepared exactly for that purpose.

שרטון

There are two anecdotes related to this vessel. The first is sad: When she sailed she was accompanied by a sister ship called the San Basil, under the command of Werner Salomon and the Gideoni Shlomo (Hanzi) Rosen. Unfortunately, this vessel hit a reef and as a result - could not participate further in the Aliya Bet project. The second anecdote is of a happier nature: Before the vessel left Sweden, it had been anchored next to a Polish yacht that served as a training vessel for the Polish navy. The Polish-Jewish cadet, Edward Wishnevski went AWOL and jumped from the vessel. He climbed aboard the San Miguel and became ‘de facto’ a member of its crew. In later days he changed his last name to Sharon and was a commander of a frigate in the Israeli navy.

(Compiled by Tzvi Ben-Tzur)

