

**Eugene D. Alexander**

Volunteer from the USA on the "Chaim Arlosoroff"

**This is the Way it Was**

My name is Eugene D. Alexander (Gene) and my Aliya Bet name was Mickey, sometimes Mickey Mouse. The Ma'apilim said that I looked like a movie star. I said jokingly "Yeah, Mickey Mouse". It stuck. I guess I was one of the least likely to end up in the Palyam. Both of my parents came from orthodox households and reacted very negatively to religion, any religion. They both ended up as atheists. We never celebrated Jewish holidays and I wasn't Bar Mitzvahed. In fact I'm still not quite sure what the Jewish holidays are, and I never lived in a Jewish community. Strangely, I have always felt Jewish. Probably because I've always had a sense of Jewish culture and as my cousin of similar persuasion says: "I'll be a Jew until the last anti-Semite dies". It looks like this will take a long time because there are still some anti-Neanderthals around.

I was born in Orange, New Jersey on 29 August 1924 and spent my early years in New Jersey. My mother became very ill and I spent two years in children's homes before my father and I came to New York City. The depression years were very difficult and I remember that at times we were very limited in the kind of food we ate, but there was always enough. I went to high school in New York and had a semester of college before, as a somewhat naïve and bewildered 17 year old, I found myself at the U S Merchant Marine Academy in May, 1942. They moved things very fast in those days. Three months preliminary training and I was on a ship as a cadet for sea training. Before I knew it we went through the Panama Canal, around Cape Horn to Durban, South Africa and finally on to Port Tufik in Egypt. The round-about way was to avoid submarines. It took better than a week to unload cargo.

It was during this time that I met my first Israelis, except they were called Palestinians at the time. They, we, and some Aussies, partied together. To me, at that time they were all Brits, And I thought the Jewish guys were a lot like the Aussies and I liked them both. Back around South Africa, up the coast of South America, with a few stops at ports to pick up cargo, and back to New York. To our surprise we found that we had been reported missing. Seems that the ships going through the Mozambique Channel a half day before us and a half day after us had both been sunk, and they must have thought that we had been sunk also.

Ten months more at the Academy and I am a 19 year old ensign in the US Navy, assigned to an attack transport in the Pacific. I was at the invasions of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. A Kami Kazi missed us by 12 feet in Okinawa and the Japanese Fleet chased us during a storm. Sometime in late 1946 I was discharged from the service as a Lieutenant (jg).

At that time I didn't have much direction and my sense of meaning was very disturbed when I discovered that some American Corporations had plants in Germany and were involved in both sides during the War. I guess they were

hedging their bets but this seemed to me to be a bit too much hedging, to say the least.

Anyway, I'm sitting on the beach in Long island telling this gal that I have a 1<sup>st</sup> engineer's license in marine engineering, and had three years of sea experience. Next thing I know, about a week later, some guy calls me up from the Yeshiva in New York City and asks me to come for an interview. They sure worked fast. They knew almost as much of my background as I did. They asked me if I would be willing to participate in Aliya Bet, except it wasn't called that. I don't remember what they called it. At least here was something I could do that had some meaning. Next thing I know I'm down in Baltimore looking at this old tub of a Coast Guard cutter. The old rust bucket didn't even look seaworthy. Well somehow we got her to Marseilles through one of the worst Atlantic storms in years. We retrofitted the "Ulua" in Marseilles. I became quite fond of the other members of the crew which consisted of Americans, Canadians, Israelis and Basques from Spain.

Soon we are in Trellerborg picking up 700 people from Sweden, mostly women. Most had been rescued from concentration camps in Germany. I was to get to know and to like these young women and become quite horrified by some of the stories they told. The one that sticks with me the most (and not the most horrible) is about these two sisters, they were 14 and 16, locked in a cattle car in the middle of winter. One girl's body became frozen and stuck to the side of the car. The other girl used her body to warm and unstuck her sister's body.

Well, we took the ship down the coast of France, went through a storm during which we passed a British naval vessel that was carrying the British Queen and during which the Portuguese Navy went back to port because they thought the storm was too dangerous. We had a bunch of seasick passengers, to say the least. Hadn't these people gone through enough already? After we repaired some engine problems off the coast of North Africa, we ended up in the boot of Italy and picked up another 600 or more people. I mean, we had more than 1,300 people on this tiny vessel. Hell, the Queen Mary only carried about 2,000 passengers. Rumor had it the American Jewish Mafia contacted the Italian Mafia to help make arrangements for this transfer.

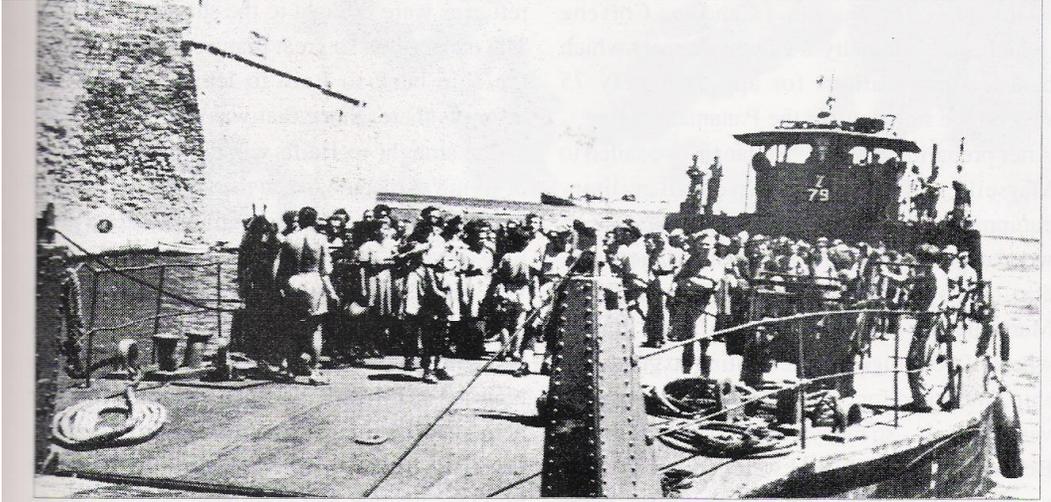
We made it to Haifa where the British rammed and beached us. I wasn't too keen on fighting the British, particularly, teen aged kids. Besides, the British were U S allies during WW II. At one point I was knocked unconscious and later found myself standing over a downed British soldier keeping the angry Ma'apilim from beating him. Onto a British transport vessel. My head became infected and I became delirious. With some sulfa drugs and a few stitches, from a British doctor aboard the transport, and I recovered. A couple of months on Cyprus where I got to know many of the Ma'apilim on a more personal level. Having seen how the Americans treated Japanese prisoners, I must say that the British treated us rather decently. Two months in Cyprus and then sent to Atlit. With the help of the Hagana I escaped in a truck loaded with orange crates.

Two months in a kibbutz and I almost stayed in Israel. I have only tender memories of kibbutz life. A Dutch passport and a boat trip and I am back in Marseilles and assigned to another vessel. This time an old United Fruit with the biggest steam piston engine I'd ever seen. The chief engineer, Phil, (he has an Israeli name now), was the same as on the "Ulua" and he remains one of my closest friends. To make a long story short, we took the "Pan York" to Constanza, Romania, where I was switched to the "Pan Crescent". We worked for two months getting those over-aged vessels ready. We got about 7,500 people on each of the two ships. I still can't believe that. They don't get that many people on those modern cruise ships that are a couple of football fields long.

Of course the British wouldn't let us get near Palestine this time. They sent a cruiser after us and we had to go directly to Cyprus. Good thing. When the passengers got up on deck the ship listed to the side where they congregated. We were in no condition for a confrontation. I think we doubled the population in the Cyprus camps. This time I didn't go to the camps but stayed on board keeping the ship in sailing condition. I did get permission to go back to the camps to see my old friends. Again, with Hagana help, I went to Palestine (soon to become Israel). A few weeks on kibbutz and then back to France and back to the U S A.

During these two years I again found meaning in life. After sharing what the Ma'apilim went through, especially the kids, and seeing them face life with little cynicism I figured there was still some hope for humanity. I'm less sure now after seeing the holocaust in Rwanda, Indonesia and the former Yugoslavia. They are not as bad as what the Germans did to the Jews and to the Gypsies, but they are working at it. Don't humans ever learn? Will the Israelis and Palesdtinians ever find a peaceful way of living together. I mean that they are going to have to learn to live together.

Well, back in the US. A BS with a concentration in Marine Engineering. A need to do something more directly involved with humans. A BS, MA, PhD in psychology. Working as a psychologist in a hospital, as a school psychologist, as a Director of a Mental Health Clinic, and finally as a University Professor. Retired and back to work part time as a geriatric psychologist in nursing homes. Several marriages, six kids, mostly adopted. Five grandchildren. Developed my own spiritual beliefs, somewhat close to Buddhism though I believe there is some kind of ineffable consciousness underlying the universe. Still terribly worried about both the Israelis and the Palestinians. In fact, I am worried about the way all humanity is headed. We have too much hate for each other, too little compassion for each other and too little concern for ecological balance. Keep it up and we might just be able to do ourselves in.



In the landing Craft from the deportation ship to Famagusta port in Cyprus