

Captain Rudolph Patzert (RIP)

Captain of the "Geula"

Sailed with her from the USA to Palestine

Deported with the Ma'apilim to Cyprus

Born 10 January 1911 – Died 1 December 2000

Written by his wife: Terry Patzert

**This is the Way it Was**

Rudy was a modest man, from a humble family. Our son described him as kind, brave and full of fun, and like the rest of us, no saint. His parents raised him to be a person of integrity, with the character to face life and the issues of his day. He was one of the generation who answered the call to place service to country and to humanity before personal gain. Rudy participated fully in his times and throughout his life spoke out against the many injustices of society. Having the opportunity to serve in the Aliya Bet was one of the high points of Rudy's life, something of an epiphany, an experience that moved him deeply and was to stay with him.

Rudy was born in Queens, New York, in a neighborhood near the Steinway piano factory. There, his father had a small 'mom and pop' general store. His parents, whom I never had the good fortune to know, had married late in life and he was an only child, the apple of their eyes. During our marriage, I sometimes teased him about behaving like an 'only child'. His mother always made him feel that he could accomplish anything he wanted to, and he was never afraid to try. When his mother's health was affected by the influenza epidemic, the family moved to Fruitland Park, Florida, near Leesburg for the better climate. During the Depression, when work was scarce in Central Florida, the family eked out a living with a small orange grove. Rudy worked for 50 cents a day picking watermelon in the fields.

In Florida, Rudy joined the Boy Scouts where his scout leader, Orville Davis, later to become Superintendent of Schools, was an important influence in his life. Rudy loved the Scouts and was always of becoming an Eagle Scout. In 1928 Rudy was one of a group of Eagle Scouts nominated to accompany Admiral Richard Byrd on his exploration of the South Pole. Admiral Byrd was his first hero, although Admiral Byrd did not select him. Rudy hitch-hiked to New York to meet the crew and to see the "City of New York", Byrd's ship. the romance and adventure of the sea captivated Rudy and at the age of 17, he started his career as a seaman. For him, going to sea was not just a job, he truly loved and respected the power of the great oceans.

During those years Rudy joined and became active in the National Maritime Union, and later the Masters, Mates and Pilots. As one of the early union members he walked many a picket line. Aboard the SS Washington he sailed to Germany in the 30's where, as he wrote in his book, "Running the Palestine Blockade," "I saw the emerging face of Hitlerism. A young and inexperienced sailor, I was shocked by what I witnessed but did not yet understand its

significance". However, at the request of German friends he managed to smuggle ashore copies of the 'Brown Book' which carried news of imprisonment, executions and resistance against Hitler. Like many sailors, Rudy became an anti-fascist. When WW II broke out, he immediately answered the government's call to re-enlist in the Merchant Marine, where he served for the whole war and beyond and earned his Captain's commission. As he finally learned about the Holocaust, his now confirmed anti-fascist views made him feel that the rescue of the Jewish refugees and the establishment of the State of Israel were among the unfinished tasks of WW II.

When Paul Shulman asked Rudy to become Captain of the "Paducah", Rudy was ready and excited. Originally he signed on to take the ship to Bayonne and then return to the US. Not being Jewish, Rudy did not know much about the Hagana or the Aliya Bet, but as he became more involved in the voyage and learned of the issues, he felt committed to continue when the Hagana representatives asked him to take the ship the rest of the way. As all of the volunteers know, this became a voyage longer and more challenging than he could have imagined. Through every step of the voyage British intelligence and the British navy dogged the ship and made every attempt to cripple and stop the "Paducah". The determination of the crew and the Hagana finally overcame the British attacks and the "Paducah" was able to pick up its passengers in Varna. In Bayonne Rudy met and then had the opportunity to work with Moka Limon of the Hagana, who became another of his heroes. Moka was later to become Admiral of the Israeli Navy.

The most poignant moment of the "Paducah"'s voyage for Rudy was when the passengers, children, came aboard. In his book he writes, "They were children, small children, 5 and 6 and 7 year olds, squat figures dressed fantastically in the cast-off clothing of adults, which made them look strangely old, an effect heightened by their solemn little faces, at once child-like and not child-like at all, but touched with fear and tiredness and sorrows usually known only by the old. The first of the kids reached the gangway where one of the crew was stationed. A tot, he bulged widely under the layers of rags and odds and ends of clothing wrapped about him, and he wore an old cap so many sizes too large that it almost covered his head and ears and neck. As he shuffled up the gangway with childish difficulty, the sailor, with a sound that was half laugh and half sob, scooped him up in his arms and clasped him fiercely to his breast."

After the capture of the "Paducah", Rudy was interned in Cyprus with the rest of the crew and passengers. There, he got to know and visit with many of the adults and children who were refugees. The rest of the story we all know. It was a dream come true for Rudy, when the Naval Institute Press decided to publish his account of the voyage of the "Paducah" in 1994. The reunion and meeting at the U S Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC were exciting for all of us. Now the story of the Aliya Bet is there for all to read. In 1997 Rudy was one of the four men and women honored by the Simon Wiesenthal Institute in Los Angeles for their efforts to rescue victims of the Holocaust.

Rudy returned home to work as a printer. From 1969 until his retirement he returned to sea and worked in the offshore oil industry as Captain of exploration ships, a job he enjoyed and that took us to far-flung corners of the world. In 1978 he read in a local newspaper that the veterans of the Aliya Bet were having a 40th reunion in Israel. We immediately decided to attend and there Rudy was happily reunited with members of his crew, whom he had not seen in 40 years.

Rudy reformed friendship with many members of the "Paducah" crew, especially those on the West Coast, Eli Bergman, Syd Abrams, Bailey Neider and their families. Rudy was proud to know them and happy to count them as his friends. We often think of those men who are no longer with us, including Rudy. Shalom. They lived good, worthwhile lives and we are proud of them.

