

*New York Harbor, 1946:*  
“Here Goes the Jewish Navy!”

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The day after I was discharged from the U.S. Army, Leon Ari Lashner came to me and said there was a delegation from Palestine that needed my help. We walked to the New York headquarters of the Jewish Agency, where I met Ze'ev “Danny” Shind of the Haganah. He briefly described what he intended to do: establish a company to purchase and refurbish boats for use in “illegal” immigration activities in Palestine. He had problems, both minor and major. Even opening a bank account was proving problematic.

I said, “Come.”

We took the subway to the Delancey Street Station on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, and entered a branch of a bank I knew. I knew the manager, a Mr. Green, from before the war. I told Green that the man with me wanted to open an account.

“What is it all about?” he asked.

“Believe me,” I said, “it’s better you don’t know, in case you get investigated.”

He objected that he couldn’t open an account unless someone introduced him. I told him the man’s name was Mr. Eastman, the cause was worthwhile, and that someday he would be proud of the part he played.

He then asked Mr. Eastman to come to the bank the next day to introduce the members of the firm, so the account could be opened formally. The next day, the account was duly opened, with a note appended to the effect that no information was to be given out without his—Green’s—approval.

When we got outside, I told Danny: "There you are. Now leave me alone." But there was more, and before I knew it, I was deeply involved. One day, Danny told me he was negotiating to buy two corvette-class ships. (They would eventually be called the *Wedgewood* and the *Haganah*.) He asked if I would help close the deal.

The owner of the ships was in the jewelry business, and had an office in the Empire State Building. He had bought the ships as war surplus from the U.S. government, and was eager to sell. But he didn't know how.

He asked Danny whom he represented. Danny, who usually sat with his mouth and eyes closed, opened both and said: "The Jewish people."

The man, who was Jewish, asked no more questions. He reduced the price, and we quickly finalized the purchase. Now I thought I could get on with things. I had been out of the army for several days already, and was ready to go to work.

But another question came up: What to do with the boats? They needed repair in dry-dock. The man who sold them to us might have known jewelry, but he didn't know ships.

We asked around for a Jewish-owned shipping firm, and ended up downtown, near Wall Street, at the American Shipping Company. We spoke to Morris Ginsburg, the younger brother, and explained to him frankly what we meant to do. On the spot, he decided to help us. He went to the shipyard, checked prices, checked quality. Without him, I doubt whether those boats could have crossed the Atlantic.

The night the ships sailed, there was an odd incident. We had moved the ships from one shipyard to another, and they were now in Staten Island. The captain of one of them, a Jewish boy named Lichtman, disappeared. We found him drunk at about 2:00 a.m. I slapped his face and locked him up on board until the ships sailed.

I was standing on top deck when the tugboats arrived. The tug captain shouted: "Here goes the Jewish Navy!" And all that time, we had thought everything was top secret. It was no wonder the secret got out, though. Danny had brought a number of people to the docks, people connected with the Jewish industrialist Rudolph Sonneborn, others who had helped us, given money and so on, to cultivate them and get them more involved. With Cadillacs coming to the wharf, nobody could have kept the operation a secret. If the FBI had ever seriously looked into the matter, they would have had no problem uncovering the whole scheme.

I. F. Stone, a respected journalist, became very interested in our project and wanted to accompany the men across the Atlantic. I advised him not to. There was no way to tell how long the crossing would take. Instead, he flew to Europe and boarded the *Wedgewood* there, along with the "illegal" immigrants.

Ironically, I hadn't served with the Navy during the war, but with the water division of the Army. Still, I had learned something about ships. Perhaps the most important thing I knew was that there was no way a ship in the condition ours was in would reach her destination without full cooperation from

the crew. They had to know the importance of the mission. We had to give them more than just the bare necessities. Since we could provide no luxuries, we had to give them a sense of purpose. They had to feel they were part of one devoted team. We knew London was pressing Washington not to allow boats to be sent from America to help us.

With all the various companies we had established, names became something of a game. One time, I had just come back from Panama, where I was trying to get back two ships the British had confiscated. We needed to register some new companies. Our attorney asked me for some names. I said to give first priority to F.B. Shipping. The initials, I explained, stood for Fanny Barnett, whose husband owned the Hotel Fourteen where our Palestinian hush-hush men used to stay. In actuality, they were in honor of England and its prime minister, Ernest Bevin. They stood for "F—— Britain" and "F—— Bevin."

Another time, Ehud Avriel of the Jewish Agency and I were called at 6:00 a.m. to meet with Shaul Avigur, the commander of the entire "illegal" immigration operation. Ehud was dog-tired. He had been getting calls all night from Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Romania, and he was fed up. Ehud told Shaul that he and I had to leave—we had a meeting with "the Colonel." Shaul didn't dare ask which colonel. We went to a cafe and ordered some drinks.

Ehud toasted, "F—— Britain."

I replied, "F—— Bevin." From that day on, we always signed our telegrams to each other "F.B." No matter what the last name was, there was no doubt as to the identity of the sender. And the two largest ships in the Aliyah Bet fleet, *Pan York* and *Pan Crescent*, were owned and operated by F.B. Shipping Co.

We had two European embarkation points for Palestine. The one in Marseilles was run by Shmarya "Rudy" Hatzameret from Kibbutz Beit Hashita; the one in Italy was run by Yehuda Arazi, a born underground man.

I remember one operation in which we were transporting a group of youngsters to a boat that was to leave for Palestine the next day. The night was cold and damp. I was helping the children onto a truck when I saw a little girl shivering in the night. She didn't even have a sweater.

"Are you cold?" I asked.

"How could anybody be cold on a night like this?" she replied.

The big, corvette-style ships that we brought from the United States created a revolution in the "illegal" immigration. Instead of several hundred immigrants, we could think about transporting several thousand at a time. But that meant a great deal of planing. None of the boats was meant for carrying passengers—most were either former warships, fruit boats, or cargo ships. They had to be prepped for human beings: kitchens had to be installed, sanitary facilities provided, considerations for children and the elderly. When the Jewish Agency's aliyah workers in Europe saw our big boats, they wanted to load as many people as possible. Instead of beds, they hung

conceivable necessity for the voyage—soap, towels, flour, eggs—was a problem. The overriding consideration was how to take on the maximum number of people with the minimum amount of necessities.

Thinking about the revolution caused in “illegal” immigration by the arrival of the big ships, I recall an incident in Paris in 1946. In those days, except for restaurants that bought on the black market, most places served only rationed food. After June 29, 1946, the “Black Sabbath,” when the British rounded up most of the leaders of Jewish Palestine, those who escaped the dragnet had fled to Paris.

One night, several of us who were working on Aliyah Bet decided to treat ourselves to a good meal at a black market eatery. We must have been celebrating something. The eatery was empty except for a table at the far end. There sat David Ben-Gurion, David Remez, Eliezer Kaplan, and Moshe Sneh—practically the entire top leadership of the Jewish Agency, the Yishuv, and the Haganah. I think it was the birthday of Kaplan, the Jewish Agency treasurer. We kept our distance, sitting by the door.

A few minutes later, David Ben-Gurion walked over to me. He said that an English admiral had told him our tactics concerning “illegal” immigration were wrong. The admiral felt we should send many small boats, so the British navy could not cope and some might reach the shores of Palestine.

I told Ben-Gurion I thought the admiral was wrong and that he didn't know the facts. Ben-Gurion got angry and started shouting. He insisted that I see him to discuss the matter before he left for Switzerland. I told him I had to go back to the United States. He told me to do what I had to do there and then come back. I refused, saying the trip was too long. Then he really got angry and started giving me orders and raising his voice.

Moshe Sneh came to my rescue. He suggested that we meet the next day, and he would share my views on the matter with Ben-Gurion later. I don't know if he ever did.