

## Exodus 1947,

An "illegal immigration" ship that became the symbol of the struggle for the right of free Jewish immigration into Palestine.

Zionist policy, as it came to be formulated in the fall of 1945, regarded the Holocaust survivors and the displaced persons in Europe as the major force in the political struggle for the establishment of a Jewish state and for the continuation of Aliya Bet ("illegal" immigration) - the major arena of the struggle at the time. In November 1946 the Mosad Le-Aliya Bet, the main Aliya Bet agency, acquired an American ship, the President Garfield. Originally an excursion ship for cruises in rivers and coastal waters, the President Garfield during the war had been converted to serve navy requirements. It had room for 4,000 passengers and was the largest ship ever used by the Mosad up until then. By organizing this voyage, the Mosad people sought to relieve the pressure by the Jewish displaced persons in Germany to leave the camps, and also to launch an "illegal immigration" operation, unprecedented in size, that would be covered by the media and draw the attention of the members of the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), then visiting Palestine on a fact-finding mission.

In early July 1947, within seven days, 4,500 Jewish refugees, equipped with a Colombian collective-transit visa, were moved from camps in Germany to the south of France. There they boarded the President Garfield, lying at anchor in the old port of Sete, near Marseilles. With discreet help from cabinet members of the French Socialist government and the French security agencies who supported the Jewish and Zionist cause (help that caused a sharp confrontation in the cabinet with the ministers who supported the British position), this logistically complicated operation was launched, with far-reaching political implications.

On July 11, at dawn, the ship departed for the shores of Palestine. Once it was on the high seas, the ship changed its name to Exodus 1947. The 4,500

"illegal" immigrants aboard the ship, made up of organized groups and individual refugees, maintained impressive internal discipline throughout the voyage, despite the overcrowding and shortages from which they suffered. During the voyage the ship was under the surveillance of the British fleet, and even before it had entered Palestine's territorial waters, British destroyers closed in on Exodus 1947 and forced it to proceed to the Haifa port. There, the British used force to remove the passengers from the ship; the refugees offered strong resistance, and in the ensuing clash three Jews were killed and many were wounded.

On July 20 the Exodus 1947 refugees were put on board three British deportation vessels, which were to take them back to their port of departure in France. This was an innovation in British policy; since August 1946, "illegal" immigrants who were apprehended had been deported to Cyprus. On this occasion, the British decided to take the Jewish refugees back to the country that had enabled them to leave the Continent, hoping thereby to prevent that country from giving further aid to the Zionist struggle.

Emil Sandstrom, the Swedish judge who was chairman of UNSCOP, with two other members of the committee, was present in the Haifa port when British soldiers were dragging the resisting Jewish refugees on board the deportation ships. One of the two other members, in an on-the-spot opinion, said that the scene they were witnessing was the most convincing evidence that had yet been brought before the committee of the need for a Jewish national home. The report presented to the United Nations by the committee in September 1947, recommending that the British Mandate be terminated and a Jewish state be established in a part of Palestine, did indeed reflect the impact of the Exodus affair and of the post-Holocaust situation of the displaced Jews of Europe.

For an entire month, the three British deportation vessels lay at anchor off Port-de-Bouc, a French port in the Mediterranean. The thousands of Jewish refugees aboard the ship suffered from incredibly overcrowded conditions,

poor sanitary arrangements, and the scorching summer heat. The French authorities refused to accede to the British demand that they force the refugees to land in France, but they offered asylum to any refugee who wanted to stay in France. The Mosad people on board and the leaders of the organized and well-disciplined groups among the passengers arranged for all of the thousands of Holocaust survivors to go on a hunger strike and thereby rivet world attention to their plight. Finally the British, at the proposal of Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, decided that the refugees would be taken back to the camps in Germany - a decision that raised the anger even of United States President Harry S. Truman and Secretary of State George Marshall, who, while trying to help the Jewish refugees, had until then stayed out of the Exodus affair.

Among the Zionist leaders a sharp debate developed as to how the affair should be resolved. When it first became known that Exodus refugees might be sent back to Germany, Chaim Weizmann and others felt that it would be preferable for the refugees to disembark in France. David Ben-Gurion, however, was adamantly opposed, and insisted that the Zionist Executive adopt a unanimous stand rejecting all proposals that might wreck or weaken the strategy on which the Zionist struggle was based.

On September 8, 1947, British troops in the port of Hamburg, Germany, forcibly removed the refugees from the ship. Each refugee was dragged off the ship by a team of steel-helmeted soldiers, in full view of the hundreds of newspapermen from all over the world who were covering the event. The refugees, for the most part, stayed in the camps in Germany for over a year, and reached Israel only after the state was established, the last arriving in 1949. The Exodus 1947 episode was the climax of the drama of the "illegal immigration" to Palestine, and even while it was being enacted, it turned into a test of strength between the British and the Jews of Palestine.