Mercy Ship: A Memoir of the Ben Hecht

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"BRITANNIA WAIVES THE RULE," scoffed the headline of the mid-March 1947 advertisement in the liberal New York daily evening paper *PM*. "British Jail American Seamen in Palestine. Who is Breaking What Law?" The advertisement explained that the "American crew of the ship *Ben Hecht* … are jailed in Palestine…. These very men, of all faiths, fought alongside the British in World War II. Still fighting for freedom, they ran the *Ben Hecht* through the Royal Navy's illegal Palestine blockade." They were arrested for "'Aiding and abetting illegal immigration'—the British say." The advertisement asked, "Did the *Ben Hecht* crew violate [an] international pact" or "slam the gates of Palestine, violating the world's mandate?" The answer was that "[t]he only 'law' in Palestine is British might," against which the *Ben Hecht* crew "volunteered in the American tradition." Today they are in jail—prisoners of war in the post-war world."

My grandfather Henry ("Hank") Mandel (1920–2015) was one of those *Ben Hecht* crew members imprisoned in the British Empire's undeclared war against the Jewish people before the establishment of the State of Israel. His story and that of the *Ben Hecht* are told in my recently published book *Without Permission: Conversations, Letters, and Memoirs of Henry Mandel* (Cherry Orchard Books 2021). Mandel went from being a yeshiva boy to becoming an American Merchant Mariner during World War II, a crewman aboard the Jewish "illegal" immigrant ship *Abril* / *Ben Hecht* , a detainee in Acre Fortress, a technician in a covert Haganah armament plant in lower Manhattan, and a volunteer for the Israeli Army during the 1948 Israeli War of Independence. He provides a unique illuminating perspective on the creation of a Jewish state. He and his comrades struggled for a refuge for the survivors of the Holocaust where they could rebuild their lives in personal and national freedom.

Growing up in the 1990s, I knew my Grandpa Hy had done something special, but it was hard for me to explain exactly why. His story did not fit into the paradigms I had learned about the heroes of

his generation from television or school programs about the Holocaust. Moral courage in a world gone by is hard to understand and harder to emulate. He was not a survivor, in contrast to the grandparents of many of my contemporaries. He had not been a soldier in World War II, and his service in boiler rooms under the water lines of Merchant Marine vessels toward the end of the war and in the immediate post-war period, despite the dangers or lurking German submarines and floating mines, did not qualify him for benefits under the GI bill or points in civil service exams during his career as a Department of Defense and New York City Department of Health civil servant specializing in procurements. He had not become a rabbi, served as an Army chaplain, or led congregations, unlike some of his classmates who in high school had been no more learned than he. He served as a foreign volunteer in the young Israeli Army during the Israeli War of Independence, but he had not seen combat, and he had returned to America rather than settling in Israel.

Spurred by my grandfather's death in 2015, *Without Permission: Conversations, Letters, and Memoirs of Henry Mandel* is the product of my efforts to better understand my grandfather's story and to discover its lessons for today. The book melds personal narratives of the *Ben Hecht* crew, historical background, and analysis that complements Mandel's recollections preserved in the book.

My grandfather habitually told the stories he found most meaningful about his life in bits and pieces as asides, during Shabbat walks, car rides, or on the stoop when his grandchildren were released early from school on Fridays. His mother, whose maiden name was Chana Reisner, was born in Bratislava (Pressburg), then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and spoke German and Hungarian. Her father had sold cattle to kosher butchers but had died in 1917 during the influenza pandemic. The family moved to Vienna and lived in the heavily Jewish Herminengasse neighborhood. One day a young man with a handsome beard and *peyot* (sidelocks) knocked on the door looking for the daughter of the "Widow Rosner." It was Abraham Mandel, who had been raised in Ulanov in Galicia, had studied in the Galante yeshiva in Hungary, and had received ordination to be a ritual slaughterer. Chana's mother quickly deduced that the young stranger had received directions to the wrong address in a meeting set up by a marriage broker, and not having enough money to hire a marriage broker for Chana or being privy to any knowledge about Abraham, introduced him to Chana. They hit it off and soon married. Leo, Henry (called Hymie by his family then), and Dora were born in Vienna; Rebecca Esther was born in Gouverneur in upstate New York, where Abraham slaughtered cattle until a serious sledding accident, and then Goldie, Morris, and Malka Tziporah followed once the family settled in The Bronx.

The *Ben Hecht* was not my grandfather's first clandestine adventure. As a young boy, my grandfather and his older brother Leo used to take off their yarmulkes and attach themselves to groups of Catholic parochial school classes being admitted into baseball games at the Polo Grounds, home of the Giants. Giants' owner Charles Stoneham's son Horace Stoneham, who would inherit the team and eventually move it to San Francisco, was at the time working in the ticketing office. One day Horace stopped the brothers and denied them entry, remarking that "Your *tzitzit* are showing." In 1936, when my grandfather graduated from Talmudical Academy high school, he was offered a half scholarship to continue on at Yeshiva College. He declined, not wanting to financially burden his family at a time his father could not even afford to buy a daily Yiddish paper. After leaving yeshiva at age 15, his first job was ditch digging for a Works Progress Administration project. The former yeshiva student was at a loss until a kindly older Italian man showed him how to wield a shovel. Looking back, Mandel was sure that his father would have somehow come up with the tuition. But, characteristically reflecting on the past optimistically, he felt the hard labor of his youth had built up his strength, and because he shifted to office work as he grew older his body had not been worn down.

On his first day working in a Brooklyn Navy Yard machine shop, the foreman discovered there were now two workers with the first name Henry. The foreman declared there could be only one Henry

in his shop. When the first Henry in the shop declared “My name is Henry,” my grandfather said he would be called Hank in his easy-going way, a name that stuck at sea and at work for the rest of his life. His beliefs gave him the security to not stand on ceremony. Mandel would explain to his daughters he had never legally changed his name from Heinreich, noting serving in the Israeli army was not so legal either, and as a Vienna-born naturalized citizen, he had taken his chances by serving Israel in violation of American statutes in an era when many citizenships were forfeited, and security clearances revoked, due to suspected disloyalty. He went by his Hebrew name Chaim in the Israeli Army, which perhaps was the name to which he most closely identified.

Serving aboard Merchant Marine vessels broadened Mandel’s horizons, both in understanding the world and the diversity within the Jewish people, while remaining steadfast to his own identity. When working on a Merchant Marine ship in New York, a member of the crew, Henry Chan, introduced himself as the new messman. Chan, who had lost his rent money gambling, asked to borrow $10 so he could retrieve his luggage from his landlady. Mandel, who had been bringing a sandwich for lunch and eating supper at home while the ship was in port to eat kosher as much as he could, thought a messman was always a nice friend to have, and lent Chan the cash. The evening the ship went to sea, with his last sandwich already consumed, Mandel went into the ship’s mess for the first time with his cap on so he could recite a blessing before eating. An Able Bodied Seaman said “Hey, take your hat off. I told you to take your hat off when you are eating. Where I come from, we take our hats off when we eat.” Mandel looked at him and said “Where I come from we put our hats on when we eat.” At that moment Henry Chan came into the mess hall and the Seaman said “Henry, don’t feed that man until he takes off his cap.” Chan replied, “You know, this is my mess hall, and I feed whomever I want to feed. Now, if that man wants to wear his cap, he can wear his cap. If you don’t like it, you can leave the mess hall.” Chan, despite his last name, wasn’t Chinese. He had a dark complexion. As the ship shuttled in the Mediterranean, Mandel noticed that he spoke Italian in Italy, and on the next stop in Greece, he would speak Greek. As Passover approached Mandel told Chan “Henry, I am not going to be coming into the mess hall for the next eight days, but what I would like you to do is in the morning I will come by and give me six raw eggs.” Mandel intended to boil them in the engine room and eat them along with some *matzos* he had picked up in Greece for all of his meals during the holiday. Chan said, “Well, can’t you have anything else, how about coffee?” Mandel said “No.” “I will give you a brand-new can,” countered Chan. “No, I don’t want the coffee,” Mandel replied. Annoyed, Chan remarked, “You know, my parents were the most Orthodox people in Turkey. We used to drink coffee on Passover.” Mandel had no idea that Chan was even Jewish. Later on in life, when he and my Grandma Libby visited on holidays, he often prayed at the nearby beautiful Syrian Sephardic Beth Torah Congregation, explaining that the essential prayers of the Sephardic and Ashkenazic rites were the same.

In early 1946, Mandel was serving aboard a United States Merchant Marine ship where he and a crewmate, radio operator David Kaplan, with the shared experience of traditional Jewish educations, read about how Holocaust survivors were trying to enter the land of Israel via boat in defiance of Great Britain’s edict declaring such immigration into the country illegal. They agreed that whoever would learn first of a Jewish immigrant ship they could join would tell the other. Mandel, upon returning to his parents’ apartment in The Bronx, was approached by a Mr. Green, who had grown up in the shtetl of Plonsk with his cousin David Gruen (who later changed his name to David Ben-Gurion) and whose daughters were friendly with Mandel’s sisters. He told Mandel there was such a ship looking for sailors. Mr. Green directed Mandel to the offices of the American League for a Free Palestine, which was led by Peter Bergson in Washington, D.C. Mandel sent a telegram to Kaplan, who had been at sea in an oil tanker off of the coast of Venezuela, and Kaplan returned to join him.

Bergson, whose real name was Hillel Kook, had led a group of Irgun Zvai Leumi activists, loosely known as the Bergson Boys, who had during the war sought to stir the American public,

Congress, and President Roosevelt to help refugees and to save Jews during the Holocaust. The Bergson Boys, which operated under different names, was now trying to raise funds and to influence the American public to support an independent Jewish state. The noted playwright and screenwriter Ben Hecht had lent his biting pen on behalf of the Bergson's Boys' efforts during World War II in advertisements paid for by the Bergson Group's small donors, including one that ironically declared, when the American government blocked the payment of bribes to allies of the Nazis who might spare Jews in exchange for currency and materials, there was "For Sale to Humanity 70,000 Jews, Guaranteed Human Beings at $50 a Piece." In 1944, with the Irgun engaged in an underground armed revolt in Palestine, the Bergson Boys had formed the League, to influence the American public, especially members of Congress, and to collect funds for the Irgun. In 1946, Hecht wrote the Broadway play *A Flag Is Born* to raise funds for the League, which featured a Holocaust survivor character played by a young Marlon Brando who travels to Palestine to fight for Jewish independence. The Brando character rhetorically asked where American Jews had been during the Holocaust.

The Bergson Boys devoted the funds raised by the play, which amounted to almost the totality of their financial resources, to purchase and retrofit a ship to transport Jewish displaced persons to Palestine. The Bergson Boys set up the Tyre Shipping Company as a shell company to hold "nominal title" for a ship. The *Abril* was a worn down, rusty 753-ton former yacht. It was built by the Krupp company in Keil, Germany in 1930. It was initially named *Agrosy* and was renamed, *Vita*, *Abril*, and then served as the USS *Cythera* (PY 31) as a coastal patrol vessel during World War II. Tyre purchased it from the United States government for $36,400 (the next bid was $36,000, indicating that the bidders were trying to keep the price low for the Bergson Boys). The ship's retrofit in the Gowanus Canal cost over $100,000.

The M.S. (Merchant Ship) *Abril*, which was to become famous under its underground name M.S. *Ben Hecht*, was the only Jewish illegal immigrant ship not sponsored by the Mossad Aliyah Bet associated with the Haganah, the establishment Jewish Agency's pre-state underground army, to transport illegal immigrants to Palestine after the close of World War II until the establishment of the State of Israel. Menachem Begin, the commander of the Irgun in Palestine, complained that Bergson felt that the cost of purchasing and sailing an illegal immigration ship was not justified because the Haganah, with much greater resources, had undertaken a large-scale illegal immigrant ship program as its primary method of challenging British rule. Begin argued that the League should devote its funds to buy arms for the Irgun, and not divert any funds towards operations intended to garner publicity. Bergson placed much greater importance to securing the support of the American public for a Jewish state. Moreover, he felt that the Haganah's Mossad LeAliyah Bet, which was organizing and sailing illegal immigration ships clandestinely, could be pressed to expand its operations on a much greater scale if it were spurred by the publicity garnered by a competitor. The plan was for the ship to closely approach the Palestine coast where small boats would ferry the passengers to shore, allowing the ship to return with other passengers on another journey. It was hoped that the ship would avoid detection due to diversionary attacks by the Irgun on British installations.

After Mandel learned that the League was looking for a crew, he was told to meet with Abraham (Abrasha) Stavsky. Stavsky had been convicted of the assassination of labor Zionist Chaim Arlosoroff on a Tel Aviv beach in 1933, but the conviction and sentence of death by hanging had been reversed due to lack of collaboration after Chief Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook had publicly declared "I can attest, on the basis of my inner conscience, that Abraham Stavsky is innocent of the murder charge." In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Stavsky had shepherded thousands of Jews fleeing the Nazis in small boats to refuge in Palestine as part of operations organized by the Revisionist movement and the Irgun. Mandel later recalled that Stavsky "said he was looking for an American crew to man their ship the M.S. *Abril* (which was later changed to M.S. *Ben Hecht*). Up until that time the crew of Aliyah Bet ships, when captured, would mingle with the passengers and the British would not arrest

any crewman." However, if captured, the crew of the *Ben Hecht* would not conceal themselves. "The intention with the M.S. *Ben Hecht*," Stavsky explained to Mandel, "was that if the ship was captured the American crew would remain to be arrested by the British. Because of the publicity they could not intern Americans in Cyprus or Eritrea. There would have to be a public trial where the Americans would be charged with 'Aiding and Abetting Illegal Immigration.'" The crew would insist on a trial in which the British policy of forbidding Jewish immigration would be assailed as a breach of the League of Nations mandate to create a Jewish home in Palestine. Stavsky told Mandel that "the defense would be that the immigration was legal and that the British were given the Mandate to make Palestine a homeland for the Jewish people. This would show the English in a very unfavorable light before the entire world and would hasten the exit of the British from Palestine."

The ship was to be manned by a volunteer crew of American citizens (including some sailors whose families received a stipend, and two Norwegian engineers paid for their services but who shared in the crew's travails). Mandel wrote later that he volunteered because "I was a Zionist, and I also felt that it was my duty to help my fellow Jews." Mandel reflected 50 years after his *Ben Hecht* voyage that "[i]f I were Irish I would be proud to be Irish. If I were Italian, I would be proud to be Italian. But I am not, I am Jewish" he said with a smile. "And I am proud to be a Jew." Hyman Robert ("Bob") Levitan, who would navigate the *Ben Hecht* across the Atlantic to the shores of Palestine, had felt helpless as the Nazis rose to power as "an impotent little Jewish kid in Brooklyn," and jumped at the opportunity to volunteer to help "the Jews that came out of the concentration camps…. They had no place to go, they had no place to live." Crew members were not necessarily associated with any particular ideology but who were animated by a desire to help Holocaust survivors flee the land where their families were murdered. Several of the crew members were not Jews. Walter Cushenberry, a professional maritime chef, had been convinced by the League that Palestine was the only place to build homes for the displaced Jews of Europe. Cushenberry was influenced by the message of his union, the National Maritime Union (NMU) "that regardless of race or creed there should be no discrimination on ships….So frankly, I do think it's my business." Subsequent to his imprisonment in Acre Prison, he would recount that "after talking to those guys in prison and learning the truth" that "[t]he only way it's gonna be stopped is for us to try and go and give them their freedom." Cushenberry, an African American, explained in a soft whisper "I happen to know just what freedom means, you know."

Mandel served as second engineer and oiler in the engine room and an electrician and plumber aboard the undermanned *Ben Hecht*. After enduring severe storms and rough seas in the mid-winter crossing of the Atlantic, on January 10, 1947, the *Ben Hecht* arrived six days behind schedule in Port de Bouc, a small port near Marseille, France. Despite the misgivings of the Irgun leadership in Palestine, Irgun operatives in France aided in the practical work of preparing the illegal immigrant ship. Yehoshua HaCohen-Brandeis recalled that when the *Ben Hecht* arrived in France, he and Elyahu Lankin (who had escaped from a British prison camp in Eritrea and had had been appointed head of Irgun operations in Europe), Eri Jabotinsky (the son of Revisionist Zionist movement founder Ze'ev Jabotinsky), and Abraham Stavsky, who was the group's expert on illegal immigration ship construction, organized the preparation of the vessel for the immigrants: HaCohen-Brandeis later recalled that Stavsky

> decided this ship had room for 600 people. There were three bedrooms, one or two restrooms, and an engine room. But there was a big deck. And he began to design. He designed to install planks extending out over the sea …to expand the deck. At the end of these planks, he set up a small shack without a roof and without a bottom, like a telephone booth. He built like eight booths like these. These were the outhouses…. According to the design, all the men needed to stay on the deck—"which ever way," by standing, by sitting, by lying down. In the rooms below, it was necessary that only sick women or sick men would descend; that would be the infirmary. And thus about 600 people were able to travel in that ship—if you call her a ship.

When he at first had heard that Stavsky planned to transport 600 on the *Ben Hecht,* HaCohen-Brandeis thought that Stavsky "was not serious. I did not know whether to call him an expert or something worse. But he was correct. He knew his trade." Stavsky had previously fit equivalent numbers of illegal immigrant passengers into smaller ship spaces. The international nature of the expected passengers is captured by the multi-lingual signage on the twin outhouses for men and women constructed extending from the deck, though one suspects that the translation into Norwegian reflected the whimsy of the crew rather than necessity:

WOMEN	MEN
FRAUEN	MENNER
DAMES	ERDJEL
ASZONYOK	EMBEREK
MUJERES	HOMBRES
ENSA	HERRER
DAMER	

Irgun operative HaCohen-Brandeis chose eight young Betar youth group members and trained them in using guns and hand grenades and in a deserted wooded area near Marseilles. But Bergson Boys leader Yitzhak Ben-Ami instructed the crew and passengers to resist only passively the British if the Royal Navy seized the *Ben Hecht* so casualties would be avoided. Betar leader Gideon Abramowitz instructed the trainees to throw their weapons into the sea upon contact with the British to avoid bloodshed. Eliyahu Lankin and the Bergson Boy leadership were concerned that the *Ben Hecht* passengers would be in particular danger if there was any resistance due to the ship's connection to the Irgun. British intelligence had monitored the *Ben Hecht* since its retrofitting in New York and believed that the vessel would fiercely resist capture even more violently than recent Haganah ships, which had sought to defend themselves with heavy objects and clubs.

The great majority of the *Ben Hecht*'s passengers began their journey from Displaced Persons (DP) camps in the American-occupied zone in Germany. Note the strange nomenclature: they were no longer considered refugees deserving of sanctuary by the victorious Allied powers because World War II was over. They were merely displaced people unwilling to go back to their countries of origin. On February 28, 1947, the immigrants arrived in Marseille. Mandel noted the day that refugees boarded the ship "was a very touching moment…. They came out of Europe which to them was a slaughter house, and these people had lived to see many of the members of their family slaughtered, some of them actually saw them, others it was they just disappeared. And here they were being on a ship to go to the Land of Israel." On Saturday, March 1, 1947, the *Ben Hecht* left Port-de-Bouc with 600 immigrant passengers and 27 crew members. The *Ben Hecht's* captain had been dismissed after the crew complained of his drunkenness, and Levitan served as the senior officer on board for the ship's trip from France to Palestine. Moshe Schwartz and Simcha Berlin were in charge of the passengers as Betar escorts. Most of the passengers were connected to the Revisionist movement, but there were also

Orthodox passengers associated with Agudath Yisroel. Some of the passengers "were in a very pitiful state," Mandel recalled, and "had not recovered from the concentration camps and the work camps which they had been in during the war." A few Russian Jews "were big, strong, compared to the others" because they had been adequately fed in the Red Army. A group of Tunisian Jews who were members of Betar planned to form a Kibbutz once they arrived in the Land of Israel. There were five pregnant women on board. A couple were married during the trip because the couple feared they would be separated if the British captured the boat. The Rabbi who presided over the ceremony explained that the cup donated by Messman Jeno Berkovits would be shattered "in order to perpetuate the memory of the destruction of Solomon's Temple and remind the Jews that they live in dispersion." A 17-year-old French citizen, Henrietta Goldenberg was traveling to reunite and marry her fiancé Bart Stroe of Tel-Aviv, whom she had met while he served as a Jewish volunteer in the British Army.

An hour after sunrise the morning after the ship left Port-de-Bouc, the piston oil-pump rod of the ship's port engine forward pierced a hole in a crankcase. The *Ben Hecht* was in a narrow channel between an uncleared minefield. The starboard engine had malfunctioned during the earlier trip to France, and if it failed again the ship would drift into the minefield. Upon being radioed the news that the port engine was wrecked, Jabotinsky consulted with his Bergson Boys colleagues and ordered the ship to return. Levitan, however, reasoned it was just as dangerous to return as to go forward and asked the engineers if the engine could be repaired at sea. Chief Engineer Haakom Lilliby, First Assistant Engineer Erling Sorensen, and First Assistant Engineer Louis Brettschneider, assisted by Mandel, worked for 24 hours straight to hammer repurposed deck plates to patch the engine. (Brettschneider had been recruited by Mandel.) These emergency repairs rendered the engine only operable at a reduced speed, which delayed the arrival of the ship near Palestinian waters by a day longer than the seven planned. The Irgun originally planned attacks on British installations to divert attention from the anticipated arrival of the *Ben Hecht* on a Friday night. However, the ship now could not meet that timetable. To their frustration, radio operators Kaplan and Edward "Eddie" Styrak (a Polish American who later volunteered for the Israeli Air Transport Command), the Irgun on shore was not aware that the *Ben Hecht* was behind schedule, and the *Ben Hecht*'s crew was not aware of updated information about the Irgun's plans, which changed the time table of the attacks to Saturday night. Somewhat mysteriously, the Betar escorts did know of the Irgun's change in plans, but apparently did not share that information with the American crew.

The *Ben Hecht* was spotted by two British Lancaster patrol bomber airplanes at 10:40 am on Saturday, March 8, 1947. The Royal Navy destroyer HMS *Chieftain* came in sight of the *Ben Hecht* at 12:15 pm. The HMS *Chevron* arrived at 2:15 pm on the starboard side of the *Ben Hecht.* The *Ben Hecht* requested food and water supplies, and the Royal Navy destroyers warned her not to enter Palestinian waters. A British destroyer signaled "What ship? Where bound?" and received the reply that the name of the ship was the *Abril* and that the destination was Arica, Chile on the Pacific coast of South America. That answer belied *Ben Hecht*'s current course, which at that point was towards the direction of the Strait of Gibraltar, away from the Suez Canal, to confuse the British.

The path of the *Ben Hecht* was blocked by the British destroyers at 4:30 pm, as twilight approached, over 10 nautical miles from the coast line of Palestine, well within international waters as defined by Great Britain's interpretation of international maritime law. The Betar members trained by the Irgun ultimately followed the instructions of the Betar escorts and threw their weapons into the sea before they boarded. With only one day's food supply remaining for the passengers, Levitan felt he had no choice but to turn 90 degrees and head toward the coast. Once again, a British destroyer signaled asking for the ship's name and destination, and the response was that it was the merchant vessel *Abril* heading to Chile in South America, even though the ship was heading straight to Palestine rather than either to Gibraltar or the Suez Canal. Surrounded by the British naval vessels, the Betar escorts hoisted the Zionist flag aboard the *Ben Hecht* and led the passengers in singing the Zionist anthem, Hatikvah,

and the Zionist Revisionist Party's hymn. The Royal Navy destroyer *Chieftain* then went beside the *Ben Hecht* and landed a boarding party of thirty two officers and men and rammed the *Ben Hecht*. Thirty boarders then jumped onto the *Ben Hecht*'s deck from the HMS *Chevron*, and another 20 boarded from the HMS *Chivalrous*. In addition to these three destroyers, HMS *St Bride's Bay* was also in the British force following the *Ben Hecht*. The hundred British armed marines, laden with tear gas grenades, batons, and javelins then jumped on the deck, some using water hoses, and soon gained control over the *Ben Hecht*.

The passengers were imprisoned below deck and all the crew were kept under guard in a corner of the bridge. After approximately an hour, the ship was secured. "Many of our passengers were in tears and worse, some threatening to jump overboard," Kaplan recalled. Jacques Méry, a French journalist aboard since the ship's departure from Port-de-Bouc and who wrote a book about his experiences, *Laissez passer mon people* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1947), left the deck among the passengers because he could not "stand the tears that run on the bony faces of men." The boarding party was prepared for combat, but once they took control and there was no fighting, the British sailors and marines relaxed to a degree and treated the crew and passengers in a relatively friendly manner.

The Royal Navy's official history of its campaign to blockade and intercept Jewish immigration to Palestine claimed that the British boarding parties encountered no opposition, and that the boarding parties were offered fudge and tomato soup by the American crew from a modern galley. Mandel, however, insisted that

> [w]hile we did not resist (another story in itself) we did not cooperate with the English. We disconnected the auxiliary motor to the rudder, and when the British took over the wheel it took two men to steer ("Those Jewboys must be bloody strong" was one comment by a wheelman.) We didn't have a "modern cookhouse" and we did not serve the British anything. They commandeered what they wanted, but they could not have had tomato soup, as there wasn't any aboard and our passengers and our own crew were never served tomato soup.

The same *New York Times* article that reported in passing the arrival without "advance notice" of the *Abril* / *Ben Hecht* and its capture "without a struggle," gave pride of place to eight attacks in Tel Aviv and along the coast of Palestine on that Saturday night, March 8, 1947, which could have served as diversionary attacks to distract attention from the *Ben Hecht*'s approach to the coast. The ship's crew was not informed of the change in plan, and the ship had approached the coast and been intercepted before the 8:15 pm start time of those attacks. In those attacks, which included one on Citrus House, the British operational headquarters in Tel Aviv and the cutting off of Tel Aviv's electricity, five Jews, an Arab woman, and one British soldier were killed, and approximately 50 Jews, British soldiers, and Arabs were wounded. The Jews and an Arab woman killed were passers-by, uninvolved in the attacks, shot in indiscriminate firing by British troops.

In the wee hours of the morning of March 9, 1947, the *Ben Hecht* was towed into Haifa Harbor, and the British 88th Red Devils Paratrooper Division, known as the *Kalonniyot* (Poppies) among the Jews in Palestine after their red berets, treated the Jewish immigrants roughly and beat them when forcing them into deportation ships *Empire Shelter*, *Empire Rival*, and the *Empire Rest* for transit to prison camps in Cyprus. Journalist I. F. Stone witnessed the deportation of the *Ben Hecht* passengers, and described the "weary, the dirty, the sleepy-eyed, the long suffering, some shambling through, some walking with defiant erectness and slow gait, others anxious to avoid trouble; men, women and some

small children. They moved along one by one, driven human cattle to who, these shouts, shoves and quick squirts with powder [DDT disinfectant] were but one more in a familiar series to be endured, though this time at the very brink of Eretz Israel."

"We were taken off," crew member David Kaplan later remembered, "and we were put into—not gently—into Haifa lockup." Twenty crew members of the *Abril/Ben Hecht* appeared before Haifa Criminal Court Chief Magistrate Effendi Shadi Kahlil in Haifa lockup, who remanded the *Ben Hecht* sailors into prison on the charge of aiding and abetting 600 immigrants to enter in an illegal manner into the territorial waters of Palestine.

The indicted crew members were sent to Acre Prison. As remanded prisoners, they were housed outside the main prison separate from the convicted prisoners. They were allowed contact with permanent prisoners who were members of the Irgun Zvai Leumi and the more radical Lehi (Stern Group) underground movements. When the *Ben Hecht* crew arrived in Acre, the Irgun was frantically planning a breakout from the prison to save Dov Gruner and three other condemned men from execution. Gruner had refused to appeal his sentence because to do so would have implicitly recognized the right of his British captor to impose their rule. Levitan had a small camera, and Kaplan had film, hidden in luggage, and not detected or confiscated by the British. The personal belongings of the *Ben Hecht* crew had not been thrown overboard by the British sailors, as was typically done, probably because they had not physically resisted arrest. Eitan Livni, the senior Irgun prisoner, asked Levitan to photograph prisoners, who unbeknownst to Levitan, had been selected to break out. Levitan was allowed into the main prison complex under the pretense of a visit for a shower, carrying the camera and film under a towel. He photographed multiple Irgun and Lechi prisoners in each shot to save film. Matiyahu Shmulevitz, a Lechi member whose death sentence had been commuted, asked for the film after Levitan took the pictures, without explanation. The photos were then smuggled out of the prison and used to prepare fake identification papers, which were necessary if the escapees were to evade capture after the breakout.

The *Ben Hecht* crew were also, as Mandel later wrote,

> permitted to enter the regular prison for Shabbat services when a Rabbi would come in. One of the Irgun prisoners asked me if I had any electric batteries. Among my other duties aboard ship I served as Electrician and I had a box with about a dozen batteries with me. We were searched by the English before we were permitted to join the prisoners. I put three batteries in the bottom of each shoe and hobbled in. The British searched me but did not have me remove my shoes and I brought in the batteries. I did this twice and brought in a dozen batteries.

While the *Ben Hecht* crew awaited trial in Acre Prison, a publicity campaign was waged to bring attention to the injustice. Mandel's youngest sister, Malka Tziporah, remembers her parents as being intensely distressed. Esther Kaplan, the mother of *Ben Hecht* radioman David Kaplan lobbied congressmen. Congressman John D. Dingell of Michigan, on March 20, 1947, in a speech on the floor of the House Representatives, said that:

> The civilized nations of the world clearly set forth in the League of Nations Mandate their intent that Palestine become a Hebrew homeland. Britain concurred in that intent and eagerly accepted the Mandate. She has, in fact, been extremely loath to relinquish the powers the

> Mandate gave her and is unbecomingly assiduous in extending those powers…. The freedom of the seas has a long history in American interest from the shores of Tripoli to Leyte Gulf. I should not like to see that freedom abandoned under circumstances in which every precept of law, honor, and humanity asserts its dignity.

To avoid further negative publicity, the British decided that the *Ben Hecht* sailors would be expelled from Palestine. Mandel later explained that "the English realized that bringing us to trial would further reveal their perfidy to the entire world and to our great disappointment, released us without trial and expelled us from Palestine. However, there was much publicity about the arrest of Americans opposing the British, and the incident served its purpose." The exiled *Ben Hecht* crew were warned that if they returned on another illegal immigrant ship, they could be sentenced to an eight-year prison term under British law.

(Ignoring that warning, Walter "Heavy" Greaves, the ship's third mate and bosun, a Gentile who had survived the sinking of three ships during the war and a man who was looked to for guidance in a crisis, again tried to run the British blockade on the Aliyah Bet ship *Paducah*, later renamed Geula [Redemption] by the Haganah. Demonstrating the non-ideological character of the crew, his *Ben Hecht* shipmates David Gutmann, Lou Brettschneider, and Louis Binder joined him on the *Paducah.* Upon the capture of the *Paducah*, Greaves would eventually be detected and imprisoned in Cyprus with captured Jewish refugees for close to two years. The other *Paducah* disguised themselves as refugees, and the Haganah arranged for their escape. Binder eventually became a member of Congregation Shearith Israel. Rabbi Marc D. Angel oversaw the conversion of his wife, Franja, a daughter of University of Chicago President Robert Maynard Hutchins, who Rabbi Angel remembers as an amazing human being. Sadly, both died at a young age; Franja first and then Lou shortly thereafter. Both are buried in the cemetery of Shearith Israel. Their daughter was adopted by a couple who knew the Binders from American Veterans of Israel organization.)

The *Ben Hecht* sailors were expelled from Palestine on March 30, 1947, and were brought in irons unto the *Marine Carp*, which had a regular route between Palestine and New York. Mandel joined the crew of the *Marine Carp* when the ship became short-handed in Alexandria. To his surprise, Mandel's former messman Henry Chan was also a member of the *Marine Carp*'s crew. On April 16, 1947, while the *Marine Carp* was still at sea on route to New York, Dov Gruner and three other members of the Jewish resistance, who the Irgun were desperately attempting to free when the *Ben Hecht* crew were in Acre, were executed by the British in Acre Prison. Over 50 years later, Mandel would write that "on May 4, 1947 the Irgun, in one of its finest moments, blew out the side of Acre prison and many prisoners escaped. I feel proud that I have even the smallest part in this action." The League promised an "Armada of Mercy Ships" to follow up on the *Ben Hecht*. Instead, the Irgun insisted that the next ship organized by the Begson Group, the *Altalena*, carry arms. Stavsky tried to recruit Mandel for that trip too, but he already was engaged in setting up a secret Haganah bazooka shell plant in lower Manhattan that was reassembled in Israel with his assistance as a foreign volunteer in the new Israeli Defense Forces. Instead, Mandel suggested a friend, who was killed in a terrible fratricidal tragedy along with Stavsky by troops loyal to the new Israeli government, which feared a possible coup when the *Altalena* tried to land in Tel Aviv.

In an age in which the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish is constantly questioned, I hope my grandfather's story and the tale of the *Ben Hecht* can help remind us, that despite imperfections, Israel is a moral and humanitarian enterprise. Even in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, the survivors were left to rot without a home. It took the bravery of the survivors who challenged that fate, and the sacrifices of so many, to build a country where refugees could rebuild their lives in freedom

and allow their dynamism to contribute so much to the well-being of the world.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Judith Tydor Baumel, *The"Bergson Boys" and the Origins of Contemporary Zionist Militancy*, Translated from the Hebrew by Dena Ordan with a Foreword by Moshe Arens (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005).

Rafael Medoff, *Militant Zionism in America: The Rise and Impact of the Jabotinsky Movement in the United States, 1926–1948* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press 2002).

Rafael Medoff, "Sailor's role in the birth of Israel", *The Jewish Star*, May 1, 2009 / 7 Iyar 5769, available at https://www.thejewishstar.com/stories/sailors-role-in-the-birth-of-israel,758?

Rafael Medoff, "The Bergson Group, Voyage of the Ben Hecht", Part 8 of the "Bergson Group, A History of Photographs", available at http://new.wymaninstitute.org/2017/01/the-bergson-group-voyage-of-the-ben-hecht/.

Rafael Medoff, "The S.S. Ben Hecht: a Jewish refugee ship that changed history," *Midstream* Nov. 1, 2008).

Rafael Medoff, "Zionists helped defeat segregation in Baltimore – opinion" (The Jerusalem Post, January, 12, 2022), available at https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-692340.